Polysemy in Midrash

1. Genesis Rabbah 22:8

A: “Come,” said they, “let us divide the world.” One took the land and the other took the moveables. The former said, “the land you are standing on is mine,” while the latter retorted, “What you are wearing is mine.” One said “Strip”; the other retorted “Fly [off the ground].” Out of these quarrels, “Cain rose up against his brother Abel…” (Gen 4:8). About what did they quarrel?

B: R. Yehoshua of Siknin said in R. Levi’s name: Both took land and both took moveables, but about what did they quarrel? Once said, “The Temple must be built in my area,” while the other claimed, “It must be built in mine.” For it is written, “and it came to pass when they were in the field”: now field refers to the Temple, as you read, “Zion [i.e. the Temple] shall be plowed as a field” (Mich 3:12). Out of these quarrels, “Cain rose up against his brother Abel…”

C: R. Nehemiah objected: Had anything been announced about milk yet? But [if you wish to base the distinction on “remember” vs. “do”] let this verse teach us that God returned her to her youthful condition. [That would account for “remember”; then “do would refer to granting her the child itself.’

D: R. Abbahu said: [First] He made her respected by all, so that none should call her “barren woman” as per Gen 21:7. [Second] He made her respected by all, so that none should call her “barren woman” as per Gen 21:7.

E: R. Nehemiah said, “As He had said” means what He had said to her by means of an angel; “as He had spoken” [refers to] what was introduced by “spoke” [as perhaps Gen 15:18, introduced (15:1) by the root dbr, “speak”].

F: R. Yudan said: She lacked an ovary; God [fashioned an ovary for her and then gave her a son].

And Cain spoke unto Abel his brother…” (Gen 4:8). About what did they quarrel?

1. Genesis Rabbah 559-60

A: “And God remembered Sarah as He had said (Gen 21:1)” [refers to the promises of God] introduced [in the text] by [the verb] “say” [as, e.g., God’s promise in Gen 17:19]; “and God did for Sarah as He had spoken,” [refers to] what was introduced by “spoke” [as perhaps Gen 15:18, introduced (15:1) by the root dbr, “speak”].

B: R. Nehemiah said, “As He had said” means what He had said to her by means of an angel; “as He had spoken” means He Himself [i.e. Gen 18:10 vs. 17:16].

C: R. Yehuda said, “And God remembered Sarah” – to give her a son; “and God did for Sarah” – to bless her with milk [to nurse that son, as per Gen 21:7].

D: R. Nehemiah objected: Had anything been announced about milk yet? But [if you wish to base the distinction on “remember” vs. “do”] let this verse teach us that God returned her to her youthful condition. [That would account for “remember”; then “do would refer to granting her the child itself.’

E: R. Abbahu said: [First] He made her respected by all, so that none should call her “barren woman” [as presumably Hagar had in 16:4; then he gave her a son].

F: R. Yudan said: She lacked an ovary; God [first] fashioned an ovary for her [and then gave her a son].
Once God has spoken, but twice I have heard” (Ps 62:12).

It was taught in the School of R. Ishmael: “Behold, My word is like fire, declares God, and like a hammer that shatters rock” (Jer 23:29). Just as this hammer produces many sparks [when it strikes the rock], so a single verse has several meanings.

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4. Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 34a


דני רבוי השטנאים أنا: (המילים: הכ녜ים פצן פז, הוא פטיש שמחת כל יוצרות - את מקהש את אוזן الخميس.

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5. Babylonian Talmud, Hagiga 3a

Once God gave them, one leader (i.e. Moses) proclaimed them from the mouth of God of
all creation, blessed be He, as it is written, “And God spoke all these words” (Ex 20:1).

Therefore make your eat like the hopper and acquire a perceptive heart to understand the words of those who pronounce unclean and the words of those who pronounce clean, the words of those who prohibit and the words of those who permit, the words of those who declare unfit and the rods of those who declare fit.

6. תלמוד בבל משכת מנהית דף כמ עומד ב

Rab Judah said in the name of Rab, When Moses ascended on high he found the Holy One, blessed be He, engaged in affixing coronets to the letters. Said Moses, ‘Lord of the Universe, Who stays Your hand?’ He answered, ‘There will arise a man, at the end of man, at the end of generations, Akiba b. Joseph by name, who will expound upon each little heftes and hefts of laws’. ‘Lord of the Universe’, said Moses; ‘permit me to see him’. He replied, ‘Turn around’. Moses went and sat down behind eight rows [and listened to the discourses upon the law]. Not being able to follow their arguments he was ill at ease, but when they came to a certain subject and the disciples said to the master ‘Whence do you know it?’ and the latter replied ‘It is a law given unto Moses at Sinai’ he was comforted. Thereupon he returned to the Holy One, blessed be He, and said, ‘God of the Universe, You have such a man and You give the Torah by me!’ He replied, ‘Be silent, for such is My decree’. Then said Moses, ‘God of the Universe, You have shown me his Torah, show me his reward’. ‘Turn thee round’, said He; and Moses turned round and saw them weighing out his flesh at the market-stalls. ‘God of the Universe’, cried Moses, ‘such Torah, and such a reward!’ He replied, ‘Be silent, for such is My decree’.

7. Pesikta d’Rav Kahana, Bahodesh Ha-shelishi, Piska 12:25

Said Rabbi Yose bar Rabbi Hanina (ca. 250 CE): The Divine Word spoke to each and every person according to his capacity. And do not wonder at this. For when manna came down for Israel, each and every person tasted it according to his capacity – babies according to their capacity, young men according to their capacity, and old men according to their capacity... Now if each and every person tasted the manna according to his particular capacity, how much more so did each and every person hear the Divine Word according to his particular capacity. David said: “The voice of God is in strength” (Ps 29:4) – not “The voice of God in His strength” but “The voice of God is in strength” – of each and every person. The Holy One said to them: Do not be misled when you hear many voices, but know that it is I (alone): “I am the Lord your God” (Ex 20:2).