

# Lecture Notes: Torathon 2010

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## I) Midrash and Aggadah: Purpose and Definitions

- 1) Christian writer Sarah Perkins describes midrash as “fan fiction about the Bible.”
  - ◆ Aggadah: a telling, a legend, generally a story for a story’s sake, more in this category.
  - ◆ Midrash: derived from, an interpretation, an elucidation that is not in the original text
    - Midrash is generally text-based, there to resolve a problem unexplained by the *drash*, the plain meaning.
    - It is meant purely as an interpretation, to the point that it is said, “Anyone who reads midrash literally is an ignoramus.”
    - Unlike strict academic interpretation, midrashic interpretation has a cultural, theological context—it is there to place the text in a context, to develop an ethos, to assert a view of divinity.
    - Its purpose is not only to explain the text consistently, but to develop a unique culture around it.
    - It is there to keep the text alive and relevant as the times change, changing out reading of the words to reflect what they need to teach us.
- 2) Midrash addresses not what DID happen per se, but what *should* have happened.
  - ◆ Clarify Textual uncertainties, explaining why an odd word has been chosen or repeated
    - “Tachat ha-tapuach orrarticha,” becomes a story of giving birth in the wild, and is dovetailed together with other interesting images to provide a consistent picture of childbirth in nature, with God caring for and raising the infants.
    - Like all midrashim on Shir Ha-Shirim, this provides an alternate meaning of beauty, a statement of what can be beautiful and poetic in addition to eros alone.
  - ◆ Provide details where omitted, satisfying the curiosity of the student
    - Just how did Yosef resist Potiphar’s wife? What gave him the strength of character and the physical self-control to resist extreme sexual temptation?
    - A righteous example, e.g. a father’s face in the window (*Sotah* 36b).
    - Social discipline, say others. Picture yourself off of the Urim V’Tumim! (*Sotah*)
    - Supernatural intervention, say some with an extremely pessimistic view of masculine sexuality (*Sotah*).
  - ◆ Provide motives where absent, deepening our knowledge of Torah characters
    - Rachel must choose between her own happiness, and the ruin that will befall her sister under her father’s cruel scheme.
    - *Eichah Rabbah* visualizes her even under the bed, sacrificing both her pride and her privacy to ensure that Leah has the wedding she’s always wanted and that if she cannot enjoy Ya’akov as a husband, at least her sister can.
    - This comes up in the context of Rachel weeping for her people and explaining to God how one can still love a spouse one knows to be unfaithful.
  - ◆ Rectify moral, ethical, and legal issues so as to make sure that the reading of our sacred text provides a consistent picture of right and wrong, justice and injustice
- 3) Midrash is our Sages’ traditional form of dealing with discomfort.
  - ◆ This text offends me, disturbs me, or makes me doubt the inherent rightness of things.
  - ◆ It cannot have happened that way—and if it did, it shouldn’t have!
  - ◆ These sentiments have been around for millennia, and the traditional response to

them is not to fume and blaspheme, not to criticize the text or the outmoded attitudes of its writers, not to throw the whole thing in the trash and write a new, better book, but to say, “But that’s not ALL that happened. That’s not what *really* happened, not the way you’re reading it. You’re missing some important details,” and write a midrash to explain.

- ◆ Our Sages have used midrash even to contradict the plain meaning of the text, to promote what they think *ought* to have happened, righting the wronged, glorifying the underappreciated, degrading those for whom they had contempt, and bringing the text forward in time to address problems which they themselves saw in their own lives.
- ◆ Traditional midrash is a written record of what bothered Chaz”al, what made them uncomfortable and seemed to be in need of some serious explaining.
  - In that context, midrash tells us more about its authors than about the text itself.
  - By reading midrash, we ask, “What’s Bothering Our Sages?”
  - We may not agree with their method of resolving the problem—as times change, the proposed explanations may offend us more than the original text—but more often than not, we will agree with the questions that they were asking.

## II) **Hagar: The Marriage That Should Have Been**

- 1) The problem: reconciling the names
- 2) The *issue*: what SHOULD have happened
  - ◆ Avraham had no business marrying another wife when he had sent Hagar away
  - ◆ Yitzchak was sent to bring Keturah back
  - ◆ Reconciliation at Be’er Lechai-Ro’I
  - ◆ Chaz”al wish for reconciliation.

## III) **Yitzchak: How So Blind?**

- 1) The problem: too much redundancy
- 2) The *issue*: spiritual blindness
  - ◆ How can such a great mind make such a transparent mistake
  - ◆ Righteous-seeming vs. truly righteous
  - ◆ Mistaking the more flamboyant student for the more sincere student

## IV) **Vashti: Rectifying Injustice**

- 1) *Issue*: the removal of a modest, righteous woman to replace her with our heroine
  - ◆ Chaz”al note that in their experience, Babylonian noblewomen are seldom modest or righteous!
  - ◆ Bavli takes revenge for the abuse and humiliation of their wives and mothers in Babylonian markets and birthing chambers (*Avodah Zarah* 26a).
    - Gabriel intervenes if necessary to ensure proper end!
    - Chaz”al’s agenda: glorifying Jewish womanhood over non-Jewish womanhood, such that Esther makes a better queen anyway.
  - ◆ Yerushalmi makes the princess a martyr to her grandfather’s sins.
  - ◆ Hammer makes the queen a saint and a morning star.
    - Sources: aggadah of Ishtar and Na’amah.
    - Gabriel becomes reward rather than punishment.
    - Hammer’s agenda: glorifying independent womanhood, such that independent women are all rewarded in some fashion.

## V) **Tziporah: Classic and New**

- 1) Their problem: *yichus*

- ◆ Moshe's wife needs to be Jewish.
  - ◆ Moshe's father-in-law, if he is to be a black sheep, is to be the best little black sheep out there in the pasture.
- 2) My problem: abandonment
- ◆ All about Yitro: no family feeling at all.
  - ◆ Moshe has no inclination to reunite with his wife and shows no emotion at the reunion.

## VI) **Agag: The Problem and the Solution**

- 1) The problem: how the Agagites came about
- ◆ Tradition blames Shaul, but that doesn't provide details. (Goes to show, says my father.)
  - ◆ Obscure midrash says they turned into goats.
  - ◆ Tommy Tenney says there was an escaped female prisoner as well.
- 2) My agenda: communal responsibility
- ◆ The extreme consequences of Shaul's sin could have been averted by any one of three:
    - Bat-Ya'anah, who holds Shupha in contempt, makes her life a misery, then actively pushes her into harm's way.
    - Every other Jewish person in the camp, who make no room for a woman who is not serving in a reproductive or culinary capacity. Shupha has no friends, no mentors, no one who affirms her self-respect and makes her feel like she has something to live for other than the momentary pleasure that Agag tempts her with.
    - Avner: who allowed the unborn infant to leave the Jewish people in direct violation of Torah.
  - ◆ A kind word or deed by any one person in the camp towards this poor soul would have mitigated the severity of the decree.
  - ◆ Shupha has no true Torah to transmit to her willing and eager descendants: she knows only the stories, but not their meaning, knows the virtue of endogamy, but not what to look for in a spouse besides the checkmark for "religion."
  - ◆ The Jewish people seeded its greatest threat from within, the child of its own ostracized, its neglected, its wronged, its used.

## VII) **You may not like this. That's OK.**

- 1) Lots of people hate *The Red Tent*. Lots of people hate *Queenmaker*, myself among them. Lots of people are deeply offended by at least one interpretation in *Midrash Rabbah*, *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer*, *Sefer Aggadah*, or the Talmud.
- ◆ Like fan fiction, midrash is a catharsis for the author, his or her method of coping with the more disturbing elements of our tradition.
  - ◆ It can be dark, violent, or explicit, anachronistic or contradictory, espousing the values of the author far more than the pastoral nomads who inscribed the original scrolls.
- 2) The difference between true midrash and interpretive Biblical fiction is reverence for the written text and the values of our tradition, the love of the authors for what they are writing, despite the issues it raises for them, the commitment to resolving those issues within the framework of our ancient beliefs.
- ◆ It reflects a commitment to keeping the old text alive in a new time.
  - ◆ It teaches us what we can learn from the characters rather than just what happens to

- them.
- 3) Another modern midrash by Rabbi Hammer: Moshe was given the letters, Miriam the white space between them.
    - ◆ The prophet as an artist, to shape the positive space of the Torah by influencing the negative space around it
    - ◆ The prophet as a manipulator, directing the course of the river by shaping the river bed
  - 4) As we all engage in the mitzvah of Torah study, may we all add new paths along the side of that river. May each midrash be a tree along the riverbank, and each terrible rock be the start of a new rock garden.

## Midrashic Sources: Acculturating the Text

### ***Shir Ha-Shirim* 8:5**

**Under the apple tree I roused you; it was there your mother conceived you, there she who bore you conceived you.**

### ***Sotah* 11b**

When the time came for them to give birth, the Hebrew women said cast their gaze heavenward, and said to God: “I have done my part regarding what You said, ‘Be fertile and multiply,’ now You do Your part.” The women would go to the fields to prevent the Egyptians from killing their sons and would give birth under the apple trees, as it says (*Shir Ha-Shirim*. 8:5): “under the apple tree I roused you; it was there your mother conceived you, there she who bore you conceived you.” God would dispatch two angels from heaven above who would cleanse the infants, as a midwife cleanses the newborn. They then brought the infants two round stones, one of oil and the other of honey, and they fed them, as is said (*Deut.* 32:13): “He fed him honey from the crag, and oil from the flinty rock.” According to another tradition, the Holy One, blessed be He, Himself cared for the infants, as it is said (*Ezek.* 16:9–10): “I washed you in water [...] I clothed you with embroidered garments” (*Shemot Rabbah*, *Devarim Rabbah*).

When the Egyptians saw the Israelite women going to the fields to give birth, they would take stones and go to kill the infants. God performed a miracle, and the babies were swallowed by the earth. One tradition attests that the infants were swallowed in the field, to reappear far away, before being swallowed yet again and again, until the Egyptians tired and left. According to another tradition, the Egyptians would bring oxen and plow the ground in order to find the infants, but without success. After the danger had passed, the children would burst forth from the ground, like the plants of the field, as it is said (*Ezek.* 16:7): “I let you grow like the plants of the field; and you continued to grow up.” When they grew up, they returned to their homes in flocks, as the same verse says: “and you continued to grow up *ba-adi adayim*,” reading the latter phrase (literally, with the choicest adornments; usually translated, in the context of the verse, in the sense of “until you attained to womanhood”) as *be-edrei adarim*, “in flocks” (*Sh. Rabbah*; *Dev. Rabbah*).

How did they know they should go to their homes? God would enter with them. He would show each one his house, and tell him: Your father is named so-and-so, and your mother is named so-and-so. The child would ask her: “Don’t you remember that you gave birth to me in such-and-such a field on such-and-such a day, five months ago?” She would ask him: “And who raised you?” And the child would reply: “A young man with curly hair; none is as fair as he. Here, he is outside and he brought me here.” His mother would request: “Show him to me.” They would go out and search in all the lanes and alleys, but they could not find him (*Dev. Rabbah*).

### ***Bereshit 39:7-14 (Vayyeshev)***

**In the course of time, his master's wife cast her eyes on Yoseph and bid him, "Sleep with me." He adamantly refused.... She spoke to Yoseph every day, but he would not pay attention to her... One such day, [Yoseph] came to the house to do his business. None of the household staff was inside. She grabbed him by his cloak, ordering, "Sleep with me!" He ran away from her, leaving his cloak in her hand, and fled outside.**

#### ***Sotah 36b***

Rav and Shmuel differ in their interpretation: one says that he was in the house on business, the other that his "business" was hanky-panky.... Then he saw his father's face at the window, [as if] saying, "Your [righteous] brothers will be inscribed on the *ephod*; do you wish your name to be stricken from their midst and instead be called 'Friend of Loose Women?'"

### ***Bereshit 49:24 (Vayyechi—Yoseph's Blessing)***

**His resolution remained firm...**

#### ***Sotah 36b***

[So did a few other things!] He dug his hands into the ground, and his semen came out from between his fingernails, [diminishing his power to beget, though his brother's sons were to his credit].

### ***Bereshit 25:1 (Chayye Sarah)***

**And Avraham again took a wife, and her name was Keturah.**

#### ***Bereshit Rabbah 61:4***

Keturah is Hagar. Why is she called Keturah? For her deeds were [now] as pleasing as the ketoret.

### ***Bereshit 25:27-8 (Toldot)***

**As the boys grew up, Esav became a knowledgeable hunter, a man of the field, while Ya'akov was a simple man, sitting in the tents. Yitzchak loved Esav, for venison was on his palate, but Rivkah loved Ya'akov.**

#### ***Rashi on Toldot***

"As the boys grew up": So long as they were young, they were not distinguishable in their behavior and no one carefully discerned their natures. Once they reached thirteen years of age, this one turned to the study halls and the other turned to idolatry. "Knowledgeable hunter, *yodeya tzayid*"—*yodeya latzud*, a knowledgeable deceiver. Esav entrapped Yitzchak with his mouth by asking over-pious questions such as, "Ought one to take tithes from salt? Ought one to tithe straw?" in order to give his father the impression of meticulousness in mitzvot. "The tents"—the tents of Shem and Ever, the tents of Torah study. "Venison in his mouth": as the plain meaning. Its midrash, *tzayid b'fiv*, "venison on the palate," is rather, *tzad b'fiv*, "cunning with his mouth."

### ***Bereshit 29:23-5***

**It happened in the evening, that [Lavan] took his daughter Leah and brought her to Ya'akov, and he lay with her.... [But] in the morning, behold! it was Leah.**

### ***Yirmiyahu 31:15-17***

**Thus says the Lord, "A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted, because her children are no more." Thus says the Lord, "Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for your work will be rewarded," declares the LORD. "They will return from the land of the enemy. There is hope for your future."**

### ***Bava Batra 123a***

Ya'akov asked Rachel, "Will you marry me?" She replied to him, "Yes, but father is a sharper, and you will not be able [to hold your own against] him." "Wherein," he asked her, "does his sharp dealing lie?" "I have," she said, "a sister who is older than I, and he will not allow me to be married before her." Ya'akov rejoined, "I am his brother in sharp dealing!"... [Thereupon] he entrusted her [with certain identification] signals. While Leah was being led into [the bridal chamber], she thought, "My sister will now be disgraced,"—[having been wed and rejected—and so] she entrusted her [with] these very [signals]. And this accounts for the text, "And it came to pass in the morning that, behold, it was Leah," which seems to imply that until then she was not Leah! But, on account of the [identification] signals which Ya'akov had entrusted to Rachel, who had entrusted them to Leah, he knew not [who] she [was] until that moment.

### ***Eichah Rabbah 24***

Rachel jumped in before God and said, "Master of the Universe! it is known before You that Your servant Ya'aakov's love for me knew no bounds, and he worked for my father for seven years for me. When those seven years were completed and the time came for my marriage to my husband, my father advised exchanging me with my sister. This was exceedingly difficult for me, when I learned of this counsel. I informed Ya'akov, and I gave him a sign so that he could distinguish between me and my sister, so that my father would not be able to exchange me. After that I consoled myself, I suffered [to overcome] my desire and had compassion for my sister that she not suffer disgrace, and I gave her all the signs that I had given to my husband, so that he would think that she was Rachel. And this was not all—I went under the bed where he lay with my sister: he would speak with her, and I responded every time, while she remained silent, so that he would not recognize her voice. I acted kindly with her, I was not jealous of her, and I did not cause her to be shamed and disgraced. What am I, flesh and blood, dust and ashes, that I was not jealous of my rival wife, and that I did not allow her to be shamed and disgraced, but You, merciful living and eternal King, why were You jealous of idolatry that is of no import, and exiled my children who were slain by the sword, and allowed their enemies to do with them as they pleased?" God's mercy was immediately revealed, and He said, "For your sake, Rachel, I shall return Israel to their place—for there is a reward for your labor [...]. And there is hope for your future—declares the Lord: Your children shall return to their country."

## ***Esther 1:10-12***

**On the seventh day, when the king was merry with wine, he ordered... the seven eunuchs... to bring Vashti the Queen wearing a royal crown, to show the common people and noblemen her beauty, for she was very good-looking. Queen Vashti utterly refused to come at the king's command by the hand of the eunuchs, whereupon the king flew into a rage, and his wrath burnt within him.**

### ***Megillah 12a-b (Babylonia)***

This is measure for measure, as Vashti used to take Israelite maidens, and make them work nude, on Shabbat, so also it was decreed that she should be brought nude.... Rabbi Yosi bar Chanina said: This teaches that leprosy broke out on her. In a *braita*, it was taught that Gavriel came and fixed a tail on her.

### ***Esther Rabbah 3:14 (Israel)***

[Vashti] told him, “If they see me and think me beautiful, they will want to lie with me, and they will kill you. And if they see me and think me ugly, you will be disgraced because of me.” She hinted to him, but he did not take the hint; she aimed her barb at him, but he was not stung. She sent another message to him: “You were my father’s steward, and you were accustomed to have naked harlots come before you. Now that you have become king, you have not mended your degraded ways!” She hinted to him, but he did not take the hint; she aimed her barb at him, but he was not stung. She sent a third message to him: “You want me to come naked—even my father, when he judged litigants in a trial, would not judge them when they were naked!”

Achashverosh wanted to rebuild the Temple, but Vashti stayed his hand. She told him: “You wish to rebuild what my forefathers destroyed?” She was therefore punished by the loss of her crown.

### ***Sisters at Sinai, by Rabbi Jill Hammer (2004)***

“I have come to issue a challenge, “ [said the angel Gabriel. “A way to restore the self-respect that has been lost to you. A way to become more than the vain consort of a foolish king. A way to restore your freedom and even your happiness.” [*The angel Gabriel asks Vashti to go against her apparent best interests, reject her husband’s coarse command, and allow another Queen to be appointed in her place.*]

“I accept your challenge.... but I place a condition on my acceptance. Teach me the divine Name.... Leave something inside me besides my beauty, which when I use my voice against my husband, will no longer shield me.”

For the first time, Gabriel looked worried. “Only one Name has been entrusted to me. If I give it to you, there will be no Name for the Book of Esther.”

“Esther has her piety, her virtue, and her people!” I snapped. “I have none of those things.... You are asking me to give up everything I know. You must give up something as well.”

...No mortal loved me as well as Gabriel, who showed me the beauty of my soul.



## *Shemot 18*

Moshe's father-in-law, Yitro, priest of Midian, heard about all that God had done for Moshe and His people Israel when He brought Israel out of Egypt. **Yitro brought along Moshe' wife, Tzipporah**, after she had been sent away, and her two sons. The name of the [first] one was Gershon, because [Moshe] had declared, "I was a foreigner (ger) in a strange land." The name of the [other] one was Eliezer, because, "My father's God (El) was my Helper (Ezer), rescuing me from Pharaoh's sword." Yitro came together with [Moshe'] wife and sons to the desert, where Moshe was staying, near God's mountain.

He sent word to Moshe: 'I, your father-in-law Yitro, am on my way to you, along with your wife. **Her two sons are with her.**" Moshe went out to greet **his father-in-law**, bowing down low and kissing **him**. They asked about each other's welfare and went into the tent.

Moshe told his father-in-law about all that God had done to Pharaoh and Egypt for the sake of Israel, as well as all the frustrations they had encountered on the way, and [how] God had rescued them. Yitro expressed joy because of all the good that God had done for Israel, rescuing them from Egypt's power. He said, "Praised be God, who rescued you from the power of Egypt and Pharaoh - who liberated the people from Egypt's power. Now I know that God is the greatest of all deities. Through their very plots, He rose above them."

So Yitro made burnt offerings and sacrifices to God, and Aharon and all the elders of Yisrael came to eat bread with Moshe's father-in-law before God. \_\_\_\_\_?

## *Mechilta d'Rabbi Yishmael*

Rachav, Yitro, and Na'aman are the three great converts who joined Yisrael. It is claimed that there was not a single idol in all the world that Yitro did not worship, and therefore when he converted, he spoke from experience when he said, "Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods."

## *Shmuel Aleph 15*

Shmuel said to Shaul, "The Lord sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel; now therefore listen to the words of the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'I have noted what Amalek did to Israel in opposing them on the way when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.'"

So Shaul summoned the people and numbered them in Telaim, two hundred thousand men on foot, and ten thousand men of Judah. And Shaul came to the city of Amalek and lay in wait in the valley.... And Shaul defeated the Amalekites from Chavilah as far as Shur, which is east of Egypt. He took Agag the king of the Amalekites alive, and devoted to destruction all the people with the edge of the sword. But Shaul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fattened calves and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them. All that was despised and worthless they devoted to destruction.

The word of the Lord came to Shmuel: "I regret that I have made Shaul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments." And

Shmuel was angry, and he cried to the Lord all night. Shmuel rose early to meet Shaul in the morning. And it was told to Shmuel, "Shaul came to Carmel, and behold, he set up a monument for himself and turned and passed on and went down to Gilgal." So Shmuel came to Shaul, and Shaul said to him, "Blessed be you of the Lord. I have performed the Lord's commandment." Shmuel replied, "What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears and the lowing of the oxen that I hear?" Said Shaul, "They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice to the Lord your God, and the rest we have devoted to destruction." But Shmuel said to Shaul, "Stop! I will tell you what the Lord said to me this night." And he said to him, "Speak."

Shmuel declaimed, "Though you are but little in your own eyes, you are head of the all the tribes of Israel, and the Lord has anointed you king over Israel! The Lord sent you on a mission, saying, 'Go, devote to destruction the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are consumed.' Why did you not obey the voice of the Lord? Why did you pounce on the spoil, to do evil in the Lord's sight?" Shaul said to Shmuel, "I have obeyed the voice of the Lord. I have gone on the mission on which the Lord sent me. I brought Agag the king of Amalek, and I have devoted the Amalekites to destruction. But the people took of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the best of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the Lord your God in Gilgal."

But Shmuel responded, "Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as [bad as] the sin of witchcraft, and presumption is as [bad as] the crime of teraphim. Because you have dismissed the word of the Lord, he has also dismissed you as King!"

Shaul said to Shmuel, "I have sinned, for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice. Now therefore, please pardon my sin and return with me that I may worship the Lord." Shmuel said to Shaul, "I will not return with you. For you have dismissed the word of the Lord, and the Lord has dismissed you from being king over Israel." As Shmuel turned to go away, Shaul seized the wing of his robe, and it tore. And Shmuel said to him, "The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day and has given it to a comrade of yours, who is more worthy than you. And also the Glory of Israel will neither lie nor have regrets, for he is not a man, that he should have regrets." Then he said, "I have sinned; yet honor me now before the elders of my people and before Yisrael, and return with me, that I may bow before the Lord your God." So Shmuel turned back after Shaul, and Shaul bowed before the Lord.

Then Shmuel said, "Bring here to me Agag the king of the Amalekites." Agag came to him cheerfully; said Agag, "Surely the bitterness of death is past." Quoth Shmuel, "As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among women." And Shmuel hacked Agag to pieces before the Lord in Gilgal.

Then Shmuel went to Ramah, and Shaul went up to his house in Giv'at Shaul. Shmuel did not see Shaul again until the day of his death, but Shmuel grieved over Shaul. And the Lord regretted that he had made Shaul king over Israel.

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