



2003

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Recommended Citation

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Midrash: The Story Behind the Story

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Midrash: The Story Behind the Story*

Michael Carasik

TO START A PRESENTATION with the title *Midrash: The Story Behind the Story*, even at a place like Spertus College, requires some definition of the word *midrash*.

In his wonderful article "Two Introductions to Midrash,"¹ James Kugel, says of the "many recent works that seek to define midrash" that "since these studies have already not defined midrash in ample detail, there is little purpose in our not defining it again here."² But I think that he was being a little bit pessimistic, because in fact, Maimonides defined midrash for us in his *Guide of the Perplexed* (III, 45) in order to counter the opinions of two groups of people that Maimonides says do not understand midrash.

Maimonides argues that, with regards to midrash, people are divided into two classes. One group imagines that the sages have said what they said in the midrash in order to explain the meaning of the biblical text in question. By contrast, there is a second group that holds the midrashim in slight esteem and ridicules them, since to them it is clear that what a midrash says is *not* the meaning of the biblical text in question.

The first group strives to prove what they deem is the correctness of the midrashim; they defend them, and assert that they represent the true meaning of the texts and that they have the same status as a halakhic (legal) decision. Neither of the two groups understands that really the midrashim "have the character of poetical conceits whose meaning is not obscure for someone endowed with understanding."³ A *poetical conceit*. Not "conceit" in our sense of the adjective "conceited," but an idea or "conception" about the biblical text; moreover, one that is poetic, artistic. I accept this definition of midrash, but I find it most helpful to think of midrash as a *particular kind* of "poetical conceit"—the back story of the Bible.

What is a back story? The back story is what the creator of a painting, movie, play, or book, knows about the world that he or she has created that the rest of us do not know. In other words, if you see a painting where a woman is looking pensively out the

window, you do not know what she is looking at—much less what she is thinking about—but frequently (though not always), the painter does know. In the case of fiction, the author may have imagined details of a character's past, or of the world in which the story takes place, that never make it into the story.

Think about *The Hobbit* for a moment. The author of *The Hobbit*, J. R. R. Tolkien, created such an enormous back story for what was actually written on the page, he had so much information about that world, that eventually he could not keep it off the page and he had to end up writing *The Lord of the Rings*. Even *The Lord of the Rings* has an appendix in the back with more information about this world, the back story about the world in which *The Lord of the Rings* is written. In a sense, the back story of *The Hobbit* had a life of its own.

Midrash is like that; it is the back story of the Bible, the information about the biblical stories that we have not been given. If you think of the Bible as a movie, then midrash is the part of the Bible that landed on the cutting room floor. But there is one additional dimension to midrash that unused film footage does not have. It provides a “back story,” all right, but one that is written by someone other than the original creator. We have examples of this in contemporary literature as well. Think of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, a midrashic “back story” to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. There is a wonderful recent novel called *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, by Tracy Chevalier, that tells an imagined story behind the painting of that name by Vermeer.

Now the Bible is a book that has played such a significant role in Jewish culture for so long that in any particular case there may in fact be two, three, five, or more different midrashim, each providing a different explanation of what is happening in a particular biblical text. Some of the midrashim may even contradict each other. So there may be many back stories for each text. But I am going to try to demonstrate that each individual midrash—each “story behind the biblical story”—may itself be not just one story, but a series of stories on a number of different levels, that are nested further and further down.

* * *

Let us get started with the first level. How do you get to the back story at all? How do you get behind the front story in order to see the back story? What you do, and what the midrashists do all the time, is to fill in the gaps—what scholars like to call “surface irregularities”—in the biblical text. When you read through the text, it is reading smoothly when all of a sudden there is something that does not quite make sense, something that is a little bit unusual. Whenever that happens, you have something that requires, or seems to require, explanation. You have, as it were, a little gap in the text. The text says this and it says that, but you cannot quite see how they leaped over the gap to get from here to there. By writing midrash, you can plug that gap. You do so by walking through the gap and seeing, or imagining, what is behind the front story.

Now, on the macro level of biblical scholarship, modern biblical scholars fill in those gaps all the time. When 1 Kings 14:25 tells us, “In the fifth year of King Rehoboam, King Shishak of Egypt marched against Jerusalem,” there is a huge historical, political, and military gap in the story—a back story that the Bible does not provide for us. It is this kind of back story that modern biblical scholars try to provide. Midrash, however, most often does not fill in big gaps, but small gaps. Midrash reads the Bible very, very closely and carefully and finds a gap within a single verse—sometimes less than a verse—and fills in that gap. In at least one case that I can think of, there is a fabulous midrash as long as my arm built on a single letter in the biblical text.⁴ Midrash is not interested in trying to understand how the books of the Bible were written. Midrash instead wants to know how each verse of the Bible was written.

Now in order to give you an example of this kind of story behind the story, I first have to give you a story. The story I want to start with is from 1 Kings 3. I begin with this story partly because it is a story that I first learned from the Bible here at Spertus College, with Professor Rachel Dulin. I will never forget the moment when she opened my eyes to something that was going on in this story, one of my first baby steps as a biblical scholar. I also begin here because this is a story that you all know.

You all know the story, but my guess is that, like me, you did not know the story as it is written in the Bible.

The story is the story of how Solomon prayed to God after he succeeded his father David as king. He prayed to God for the wisdom to govern this, if I can add the adjective, ungovernable people of Israel. God promised him, because he asked not for wealth or power or any material things, but for wisdom, that He was going to give him the wisdom; and, as a bonus prize, he would also get all the wealth and the power and all those kinds of things.

The very first thing that Solomon does after being granted wisdom is to decide a remarkable case that no one else in the kingdom had the wisdom to figure out. Let me read it to you from 1 Kings 3.

¹⁶Later two prostitutes came to the king and stood before him. ¹⁷The first woman said, "Please, my lord! This woman and I live in the same house; and I gave birth to a child while she was in the house. ¹⁸On the third day after I was delivered, this woman also gave birth to a child. We were alone; there was no one else with us in the house, just the two of us in the house. ¹⁹During the night this woman's child died, because she lay on it. ²⁰She arose in the night and took my son from my side while your maidservant was asleep, and laid him in her bosom; and she laid her dead son in my bosom. ²¹When I arose in the morning to nurse my son, there he was, dead; but when I looked at him closely in the morning, it was not the son I had borne."

²²The other woman spoke up, "No, the live one is my son, and the dead one is yours!" But the first insisted, "No, the dead boy is yours; mine is the live one!" And they went on arguing before the king.

²³The king said, "One says, 'This is my son, the live one, and the dead one is yours'; and the other says, 'No, the dead boy is yours, mine is the live one.'" ²⁴So the king gave the order, "Fetch me a sword." A sword was brought before the king, ²⁵and the king said, "Cut the live child in two, and give half to one and half to the other."

²⁶But the woman whose son was the live one pleaded with the king, for she was overcome with compassion for

her son. "Please, my lord," she cried, "give her the live child; only don't kill it!" The other insisted, "It shall be neither yours nor mine; cut it in two!" ²⁷Then the king spoke up. "Give the live child to her," he said, "and do not put it to death; she is its mother."⁵

Let me review the end of that story again, in case you are thinking about the story that you know and not the story that the Bible tells. The other woman insisted, "It shall be neither yours nor mine; cut it in two!" Then the King spoke up. "Give the live child to her and do not put it to death; she is its mother."

We all know, because the Bible tell us, the omniscient narrator of 1 Kings 3 tells us, which woman was really the mother of the child. It was the one who said "Give her the child." But how did Solomon know? Or to be more precise about it, how do we know that Solomon picked her, when it sounds like he picked the other one?

From a reader's perspective, this is an irregularity or a gap in the text, and we have to assume that what Solomon said was, "Give the live child to *her*"—not to the lady who just spoke, who was obviously a maniac of some kind—"Give it to *her*," either pointing or indicating with his voice something that is not in the text that gave the right response. Because the text as written sounds as if it is giving what we know to be the wrong answer.

Now, the midrash talks about this story and asks this question. After Solomon says, "Give the live child to her and do not put it to death," is it not obvious that he thinks she is the real mother? So why does he add that she is its mother?

The midrash says that is not Solomon talking. It was a *bat kol*, an omen and a sound from heaven; after Solomon said "Give her the child," the heavenly voice announced, "She is its mother." In this way, everyone knew that Solomon had decided the case correctly—not only was he wise enough to do it right, but he could be *seen* to do it right. The midrash has a heavenly voice give the studio audience (so to speak) the right answer, so there is outside confirmation that Solomon had decided correctly.

Now, this is a minor example. The question for midrash is, how do you know how to fill in that gap? Here the narrator of the chapter in the Book of Kings told us what the right answer was, so

we knew what it had to be. But in most cases, we do not know how to fill in the gap.

One particular method that is used in the classic midrashic texts is to read the Prophets and the Writings for clues to what is going on in the important part of the Bible, the Torah. The rabbis understood that these additional books held the key to all kinds of information about the back story of the Torah that was not included in the surface level. In fact, there is an expression in the Jerusalem or Palestinian Talmud that says, "Words of Torah are poor in their own context and rich in another context."⁶ Elsewhere the midrash tells us that the Torah has seventy faces or seventy facets, like a jewel.⁷ The straightforward meaning, the front story of the Torah, is one meaning, but if you take that verse of Torah and plug it into the right place in the Prophets or the Writings, all of a sudden you have the key to an incredibly rich array of meanings. The most common places to look for this kind of meaning, to find the "real" context of the Torah verse, are in the parts of the Prophets and especially the Writings that do not have much context themselves: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, and the Song of Songs.

You know from the Passover Seder that the Song of Songs is about the book of Exodus. How do you know? Because the Song of Songs says "I have compared you, my beloved, to a mare in Pharaoh's chariot" (Song 1:9). In a straightforward reading of the Song of Songs, the author is talking about this beautiful woman. Whom would you compare to a mare? Someone, perhaps Katherine Hepburn, let us say, who is often described as having that kind of a look. It is a way of describing the beauty of a woman. But if you flip the equation around, and of course if it is a valid equation you can do that, the Song of Songs is about Pharaoh's chariots and what is going on in the Exodus. If you find the right key and the right lock that match, you suddenly open the door to a world of new meanings.

How do you find the right ones? You can do it by *derashing* the text. *Derash* is a Hebrew verb, even in modern Hebrew. If you open up the newspaper in Israel to the want ads it reads *derushim*, wanted. In biblical times the word meant to "seek" or to "search." But towards the end of the biblical period, after the return from Exile, it began to acquire a new meaning as well, not

just to “search,” but to “research,” to search in a text. So in a sense, midrash is a kind of scholarship. But you still need to add to the conceptual part of the definition, the poetic element; you need a certain amount of intuition. One of the ways in which the authors of midrash found out how to plug a gap in the main text was by having a sudden realization. This is what Daniel Boyarin, one of the great writers on midrash,⁸ calls “the midrashic moment”—a moment when you are reading one biblical text and you suddenly say to yourself, “This is about a different text entirely.” You suddenly realize that you can rub those two texts together and start a fire. Unbelievable! Once in my life I have actually experienced a “midrashic moment.” I had it in reverse of the person who actually did the midrash, because it was a concealed midrash and I figured out what they were doing because I got sparked in the opposite direction.⁹

Now, I am about to describe to you a fairly extensive case of a key from the Psalms that unlocks a part of the story of the Exodus, in the Torah. It is an example from Daniel Boyarin’s book called *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*. The midrash that he takes it from is the midrash on Exodus, the *Mekilta*. The *Mekilta* is the earliest midrash we have, not from talmudic times, but mishnaic times, on the book of Exodus.

Now, here is the verse that the midrash deals with. The Israelites are fleeing from the Egyptians, when Pharaoh suddenly decides that he does not want to let them go, and that he is going to chase after them. They get to the shores of the Red Sea, the Egyptians are in hot pursuit: “Then Moses held out his arm over the sea and the LORD drove back the sea with a strong east wind all that night and turned the sea into dry ground” (Exod. 14:21). Again, here is a place where most of us have not looked for a gap in the text, because the story is so dramatic, and the context in which we are usually telling the story is not one in which we put a microscope or a magnifying glass to the verse.

The rabbis who wrote the *Mekilta* did put a magnifying glass to the verse, and they realized that it did not quite make sense. *Moses* stretched out his hand over the sea and the *Lord* parted the waters. In all the other miracles, Moses would do it and it would happen; or, the Lord would do it and it would happen. But why does Moses have to gesture and then the Lord actually does it? If

you look at Exodus 14:15, a little bit earlier in the chapter, the Lord says to Moses, "What are you shrieking to me for? Speak to the Israelites and let them go." God goes on to tell Moses, "Hold out your hand over the sea and split it." What happens in our verse? Moses holds out his hand, but God splits the sea, not Moses. Why not? There is a gap there.

Here is how the *Mekilta* to Exodus 14:21 explains it: "Moses held out his hand over the sea..." and then the midrash comes in exactly where the gap is between the two phrases. Moses held his hand out over the sea. "Immediately the sea began to resist him. Moses ordered it in the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, to split, but it would not...As soon as the Holy One, blessed be He, in all His might and glory, manifested Himself, the sea began to flee, as it is written, 'The sea saw and fled' (Ps. 114:3)." That quotation is from the second psalm of the Hallel that we say on festival mornings. It is in the Passover Haggadah, before the meal; and there is a well-known tune to it that is sung in synagogues, at least all over America.

And there is a part a little bit later down in that melody where there is a call and response—"What's up with you, O sea? *Mah lekha, ha-yam?*"—that corresponds to the fact that in the psalm itself there is a call to the sea and a response from the sea and from the hills too. This call and response is the key to the midrash, which says that the whole thing is about a dialogue. Who was the sea talking to? Who asked the sea this question? *Mah lekha, ha-yam?* Who asked the sea "What's up with you?" Answer—Moses held out his hand, nothing happened, and he said to the sea *Mah lekha?* What's up with you, O sea? God told me to split you, but you are not responding! The two biblical texts that both had little gaps in them fit together like an inter-locking three-dimensional puzzle piece, revealing a scene from the biblical story that was not explicitly written down.

I will have more to say about this example in a moment. But first, I want to address something I left out of the midrash when telling it to you. The midrash interrupts its own story to provide a second level of a story behind the story—a parable. The Hebrew word that the midrash uses is *mashal*. *Mashal* is also the word used in the biblical Book of Proverbs for a proverb. A *mashal* is really an equation—for example, "A thing of beauty is a joy

forever.” In linking those two things, which it is not obvious are equal, this English-language *mashal* shows you the world in a new way, by showing you two things that are the same, but which you never thought were before. The key verse in the Book of Proverbs is another example: “The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord.” Those two things do not necessarily look equal on first glance, but they are equal. The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord. The *mashal* is the equation that tells you they are the same.

Now, *mashal* in the sense of a parable—in the sense that the midrash uses it—is a more complicated equation. Here is the *mashal* or the parable that the midrash tells us about this incident with Moses at the sea:

To what is the matter similar? To a king of flesh and blood [Parenthetically, ninety-nine and forty-four one hundredth percent of these *meshalim*, these parables in the midrash, start with a king of flesh and blood. He is equal in the terms of the *mashal* to the King of Kings, God], who had two gardens, one inside the other. He sold the inner one and the purchaser came to enter, but the guard did not allow him. The purchaser said to him, “In the name of the king!” but he did not yield. The purchaser showed him the king’s signet ring, but he did not yield. Then the king came. Once the king came, the guard began to flee. The purchaser said, “All day long I have been speaking to you in the name of the king and you did not yield. Why are you fleeing now?” The guard said, “I am not fleeing from you! I am fleeing from the king!”

Now, this is the story *behind* the story behind the story. The story (in the Bible) is that Moses held out his hand and the Lord split the sea. The story behind the story (“revealed” by comparison with Psalm 114) is that the sea resisted being split until the Lord showed up. Now there is a story behind the story with a king and a guard and a purchaser who just closed on a garden.

The first reason there are stories behind the stories, I have to think, is because of the creative element of midrash. Midrash is, to my mind, the way that the Jewish urge for creative writing found its outlet. Look at creative writers in other cultures—two

examples spring immediately to mind, and these are Dickens and Gogol. The characters who walk into *The Pickwick Papers* cannot stop themselves from every once in a while telling stories of their own—stories that have nothing to do with the plot of the novel, but these are just new stories that burst through the surface of the novel from the back story, from the characters' "own" lives (as it were), without regard to the first level of the plot.

In Gogol, it is even more remarkable. You can read about this in Nabokov's biography of Gogol, which is an incredible book.¹⁰ He argues that in a book like *Dead Souls*, Chichikov, the main character, will be looking out the window, and someone will pass by, and in the space of three sentences, Chichikov has given the person passing by an entire biography, has buried him, and married off his children, and it has nothing to do with the plot of the novel. It is simply the creativity bursting through the cracks. The author cannot stop himself from telling you more, because he has so much more to tell than he can put on the page. To a certain extent, that is what these parables are doing too.

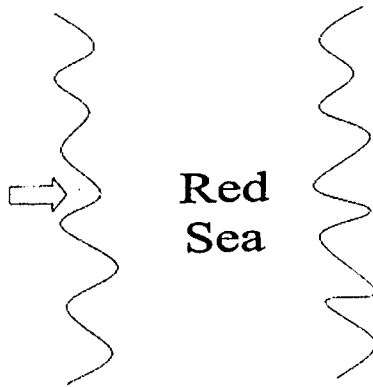
The midrash takes it one step further. It "unpacks" or decodes the parable. Just like the purchaser who could not get into the garden until the king who sold it to him showed up and frightened the guard away, similarly, Moses came and stood at the sea ordering it in the name of the Holy One to divide itself, and it would not consent. Moses is the purchaser, the sea is the guard. The Holy One, God, is the king. He showed it the staff with which the miracles in Egypt were performed, the equivalent of the signet ring in the parable, but it still refused to consent. So the Holy One, blessed be He, in all His glory, His own un-look-at-able presence, had to manifest Himself in person. As soon as the Holy One manifested Himself the sea began to flee. Now the midrash shows you exactly how the key in Psalm 114 unlocks this little gap. "The sea saw it and fled" (Ps. 114:3). Moses says to the sea, "All day long I have been talking to you in the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, and you would not listen. Why are you fleeing now? "What aileth thee, O thou sea, that thou fleest?" (v. 5 in the psalm). They take the back story that they have been able to figure out and fit it up against the verse in the psalm that gave the clue so you see exactly how they are filling that gap and what the evidence that they have to fill that gap is. How do we know

Moses said to the sea “Why are you fleeing?” It is this quotation from the Psalms, “What aileth thee, O thou sea, that thou fleest?”—*mah lekha ha-yam?* The sea answered him: “It is not because of you, Moses; not because of you, son of Amram—it is only because...” and now the sea quotes the psalm (vv. 7-8) back at him, “Tremble, earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the Presence of the God of Jacob, who turned the rock into a pool of water and the flint into a fountain of waters.”

But there is more to this parable than the little fairy tale image of the king and a garden. How do we know it? Because there is a gap. The story in Exodus and the midrash, if you diagram it, and the story in the parable, if you diagram it—the diagrams do not look the same.

When the Israelites had to split the Red Sea and go through on dry land, here is what it looked like.

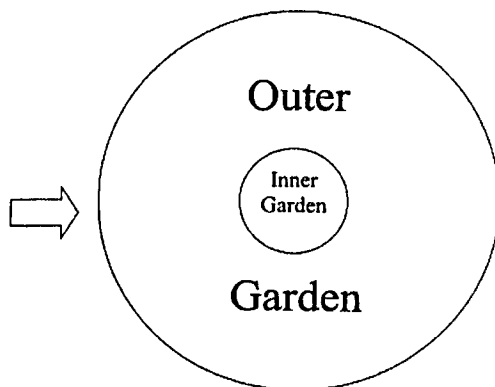
Figure 1



Egypt over here, the Israelites come through, the sea will split and the Israelites will get into the Sinai Desert. When the sea goes back, it kills the Egyptians and they are free. They have escaped from Egypt.¹¹

This is not what the parable describes. The parable describes an outer garden and an inner garden completely surrounded by this outer garden so that you cannot get through into the inner garden unless the guard lets you.

Figure 2



Now, there is nothing about the part of the Sinai Desert on the other side of the Red Sea that in any respect resembles an inner garden. It is not inner and it is not a garden. What is the inner garden of the parable? We know what it is from the way the Rabbis thought about geography as they describe it in many texts, and specifically in the *Mekilta*. "The Land of Israel is at the center of the world, Jerusalem is at the center of the Land of Israel, the Temple is at the center of Jerusalem, the Holy of Holies is at the center of the Temple."¹² That rock on the Temple Mount is the center of the geographical universe as far as the Rabbis are concerned. If not the Holy of Holies itself, then the Temple or Jerusalem, or at the very least, the Land of Israel, is that inner garden. So the *mashal*, the parable, ostensibly explaining what is going on when the Israelites were trying to cross the Red Sea, really says: Crossing the Red Sea does not mean just what it means in the book of Exodus (where the words of the Torah are poor)—that they escaped from the Egyptians and were in the desert, in the wilderness. Crossing the Red Sea, the parable says, is tantamount to entering the Land of Israel.

Now, it seems that Psalm 114, the key to our Torah text, is hinting at this too. Do not forget how it begins: "When Israel went forth from Egypt and the house of Jacob from a people of strange speech, Judah became his Holy One and Israel his dominion." Not Judah the tribe, and Israel the people, but *the land* of Judah, *the land* of Israel, became God's dominion. So the *mashal*, if you take

a moment to think about it rather than dismissing it, really says the same thing as the psalm: that the story in the book of Exodus means that crossing the Red Sea is the equivalent of entering into the Land of Israel. *And it does.* That is what the story in Exodus means. We know it from Exodus 15, the famous Song at the Sea, which talks all about the Egyptians being drowned in the sea and God's people being saved. What happens as the song goes on? As soon as the Israelites cross the Red Sea, the Philistines and the Ammonites and the Moabites and the Edomites begin to panic. Why? Because they are living where the Israelites are going. What happens at the end of the song? "You will bring them and plant them in Your own mountain, the place You made to dwell in, O LORD, the sanctuary, O LORD, which Your hands established. The LORD will reign for ever and ever!" (Exod. 15:17-18). If I can put on my biblical scholar's hat for a minute, we know that in the ancient Near East, epic poetry about creation ends with the story of the creation of the temple of the god who did all the creating. That is the peak of creation.

Now, if you think about Psalm 114, you realize that it is not just the sea in that psalm that is splitting, there are some mountains dancing also. Mountains do not dance because there is great music playing. Mountains dance because someone very large is tromping around. Mountains dance in the same conditions in which the sea flees. When else does the sea flee? There are two other times when the sea flees in the Bible. One time is when the Israelites enter the Land of Israel, 40 years to the day after escaping Egypt. I guess they could have just leaped over the Jordan—which is a lot narrower than most of us all thought before we actually saw it—but they did not. The waters of the Jordan parted, according to Joshua 3:14-17, and the Israelites walked across on dry land, just as they did in the beginning of the journey. When the sea splits and you are walking on dry land, that is the same as when you are walking into the Land of Israel—and that is what happened. The Jordan splitting and the Red Sea splitting are bookends of one single process.

When is the other time when the sea fled? We do not often think about it this way, but it is in Genesis 1. At the very creation of the world, the surface of the world was covered with water and God did His imitation of King Canute, and said, "Thus far and no

further!” and He rolled back the sea so there could be some dry places for plants to grow and animals and people to live on. In the mythological background of the stories of creation that we read in other ancient Near Eastern literature—there are plenty of hints about this in our Bible as well, in the Book of Isaiah and the Book of Job and in the Psalms—it was not just that God set seven mops with seven mops to sweeping the sea away. God *battled* the sea. God *commanded* the sea to go back so there could be dry land. Psalm 114 is telling you that when the sea is moving and the mountains are shaking, that is a moment of creation. Psalm 114 is saying: The moment that the Israelites left Egypt is the moment that the book of Exodus tells us is the moment of our creation as a people, “This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you” (Exod. 12:2). The Psalm says *that* is the moment of creation. Exodus 15, continuing the story, already sees and accepts that and confirms it and insists on it. Imagine this, the Israelites have just escaped from Egypt, the first instant of their freedom from slavery, the sea has drowned the Egyptians, they are standing there singing their song of praise, and the text ends by talking about God’s Temple as if it were already a done deal. We did not really see that, we did not understand that, until the midrash came along and showed it to us.

Now there is still one further level of story behind all these stories. I do not have time to discuss at length, but I want to mention it to you and let you know it is there.

Just as the *Mekilta* showed us something going on in the book of Exodus at a deeper level than the surface level, there is also a phenomenon that I am going to call by the name that a friend of mine invented for it. My friend Aryeh Cohen, from the University of Judaism, has coined the word *sugyaetics*.¹³ The talmudic *sugya*, the course of a talmudic discussion, has a poetics. It is literature, not just a tape recording of rabbinic discussions. In the Talmud, there are long sections that look as if they are just one story after another. Cohen says that in the Talmud—and I am here to add, it occurs in the classical midrashim as well—these sections were deliberately, and artfully, put together, with both a religious and an artistic purpose.

James Kugel, with whom we began, says one of the things to remember about midrash is that midrashim are like jokes. This is so, first of all, because sometimes they are clever and actually meant to be a little bit funny. But aside from that, people know them and they cluster in certain contexts. If you happen to be talking about the crossing of the Red Sea—if you are sitting around the Passover table and you are in the right context—you are tuned in to midrash the way some of us are to Jewish jokes. You are just going to automatically come up with the midrash that someone wrote long ago about Psalm 114, telling the real story of what is going on in the book of Exodus. Then, after you finish your midrash, the next person will say: “I have another one for you.”

Now, as I said, there are lots of rabbinic texts that look as if it is just someone saying, “I have another one for you.” They sometimes even say explicitly, *davar aher*: “I have another one for you.” If you read that expression in a more formal translation like Lauterbach’s translation of the *Mekilta*, it will say “another interpretation.” What it really means is “I have another one for you.”

But we are beginning to realize, as Cohen suggests, that in many of these collections that say “I have another one for you,” or that without saying it just give you another one, and another one, and another one, such things did not fall into place because someone picked up a bunch of index cards that had spilled on the table and squared up the deck. Someone selected those particular midrashic “jokes,” if you want to call them that. Someone picked those little paragraphs and strung them together in a story where the individual paragraphs, what they are speaking about in plain Hebrew, ostensibly do not connect, except in the most tenuous way. But if you step back from the subject, like backing up from Earth so you can see the whole planet at once, suddenly you realize someone put those midrashic texts together in a very particular order.

One of the examples of this phenomenon that I have looked at is on page 37b of Tractate Sanhedrin of the Babylonian Talmud. The context is the mishnah that warns people who are about to give testimony in a capital case. The judges are supposed to warn them: Do not forget! If your evidence is not accurate, if it is not true, if it does not follow all the legal rules, and we put this man to

death wrongly, you have destroyed an entire world. Just as when Cain killed Abel, he did not kill just one person, but he killed the dozens, hundreds, thousands and millions of people who would have descended from Abel.

The Talmud, in response to that mishnah, begins to talk about Cain and Abel. And there is one midrashic paragraph after another. By the end of that sequence of paragraphs, if you have stepped back, you see that the string of tiny stories actually fits together to make one larger, symbolic story. The figure of Cain has switched from being the murderer who needs to be put to death, to (what he also is in Genesis 4) someone who has committed a crime and needs to atone for his crime and then be redeemed. By the end of this talmudic *sugya*, which looks like just a string of different colored beads, they have managed to turn the story of Cain back into the story of Israel, and it ends with a promise that says, "The punishment came to you early." Israel was exiled more quickly than they should have been, but for a good reason—in order to save the remnant that will preserve the people. The front story, that of Cain, the sinner in need of redemption, has a back story—the people of Israel in need of redemption.

There are these deeper meta-stories in places that you probably have not looked for them, where even scholars are only beginning to find them. I am sure that our *Mekilta* passage is part of such a story. I would encourage you to look elsewhere in the Talmud and in the traditional books of midrash, like Genesis Rabbah, where there is some incredible creativity going on just by juxtaposing older midrashim, one to the next to the next. If you listen to the story behind those stories, you will find, in the case I have just mentioned to you, a powerful promise that redemption is coming for the Jews; in another case, a very powerful question that asks how God could stand idly by and let Abel be murdered. These are all things that are told, not as the straightforward story, but as the story *behind* the story. But I am going to have to leave those two stories, and many more, for another occasion.

NOTES

¹I have left this piece in the informal style in which it was delivered, revising it just enough to make it coherent as a printed text and to offer a few references. My thanks to Dean Bell for inviting me home to Spertus to offer this talk, and to Sue Levison for making the transcript from which this revision was made.

¹James L. Kugel, "Two Introductions to Midrash," in *Midrash and Literature*, edited by Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 77-103; originally published in *Prooftexts* 3 (1983): 131-155.

²Ibid., p. 91.

³Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, translated by Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 573.

⁴Gen. R. 1:10.

⁵The translation is from *The Tanakh* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985).

⁶Y. R.H. 17a.

⁷Num. R. 13:15.

⁸See Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

⁹See Michael Carasik, "Who Were the 'Men of Hezekiah'?" (Prov. xxv, 1)," *Vetus Testamentum* 44 (1994): 289-300.

¹⁰Vladimir Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol* (New York: New Directions, 1944).

¹¹This at least is the generally accepted picture. Ibn Ezra would have drawn the Israelites making a half-circle in the sea and coming out on the same side. See his comments.

¹²Tanhuma (Buber) *Kedoshim* 10.

¹³Aryeh Cohen, *Rereading Talmud: Gender, Law and the Poetics of Sugyot* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), pp. 131-151.