

Fill Your Own Cup – Fall Series – Reading the Parsha Through the Eyes of the Midrash
Session One – Genesis

Poem for Torah on Simchat Torah, Rabbi Jill Hausman

Each time, each time
And each year
We read the ancient words
Burrowing into the empty spaces
Between those words,
Feeling the wonder there
Letting them sink into us
As we become one with them,
Resting ever more deeply this year
In each line, each phrase
Each word.

Sinking into them and held mesmerized
In their embrace
The profound, expansive meanings
Washing over us, in us, and through us
Giving us a new glimmer of understanding,
Speaking to us of our ancient selves
And the life of our present heart.

This year may more of their secrets
Be unlocked
This year may we fall into them
And be caught there
Enveloped by their cosmic wisdom
Held more deeply than ever before.

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I. What is Midrash?

1) Barry W. Holtz, "Midrash," in Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts ed. Barry W. Holtz (New York: Summit Books, 1984) 177-179.

What is Midrash?

To begin with we should make clear that there is no single book called the Midrash. Despite the popular use of the term, one cannot with accuracy use the phrase "the Midrash says," the way we can refer to books such as the Talmud, the Zohar or the Shulhan Arukh. Midrash is a type of literature; it is, as we shall see, a kind of process or activity, but there is no one Midrash. Rather there are collections of Midrashim (plural of Midrash) which were put together at various times and by various editors and authors over the course of many hundreds of years. The great flowering of Midrash was roughly between the years 400 and 1200 C.E. But it is important to note that originally, midrashic literature was oral—sermons preached in the synagogues and teachings of various sages. During the years

mentioned, Midrashim were edited, organized, and written down, but midrashic texts often represent traditions a good deal older than the period of the written books...

What, then, is Midrash? It is helpful to think of Midrash in two different, but related, ways: first, Midrash (deriving from the Hebrew root “to search out”) **is the process of interpreting**. The object of interpretation is the Bible or, on occasion, other sacred texts;* second, Midrash refers to **the corpus of work that has collected these interpretations**, works such as Midrash Rabbah. There are different types of Midrashim, but before we explore the different categories, it will be useful to talk about the “why” of Midrash: what necessitated the development of this literature, and why it has been so important. To do so, we must return to two terms mentioned in the previous chapter: halakhah and aggadah. Halakhah refers to Jewish literature primarily concerned with law and codes of behavior...Aggadah is a looser and more wide-ranging term referring to narrative literature, parables, theological or ethical statements, and homilies...

Curiously, both halakhic and aggadic sorts of Midrash seem to develop out of the same set of forces. **Primarily we can see the central issue behind the emergence of Midrash as the need to deal with the presence of cultural or religious tension and discontinuity. Where there are questions that demand answers, and where there are new cultural and intellectual pressures that must be addressed, Midrash comes into play as a way of resolving crisis and reaffirming continuity with the traditions of the past.**

2) Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z”l, The Chief Rabbi’s Haggadah (Essays) p. 95

Unlike peshat, the ‘plain, simple, or accepted meaning’, midrash is the hermeneutic quest for the meaning of the text as if it were spoken, not then but now. Midrash is interpretation in the context of covenantal time, the word spoken in the past but still active in the present. It is an exercise in conscious and deliberate anachronism (the secular equivalent would be a performance of a Shakespeare tragedy in modern dress, the better to feel its force as contemporary, rather than classical, drama). It is prophetic in the sense of interpreting current events in the light of the Divine word. **Midrash is the attempt on the part of the sages to understand their own times as a continuation of the narrative of the covenant.”**

3) Dr. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, The Beginning of Desire, pp. xix

Ultimately, the interpretive act becomes similar to the creative act. One reads, and one begins to hear a certain hum in one’s ears...

The hum in the ears of the reader generates a personal response to the text. There are, of course, decorums and limits to be observed; but the intimate encounter between self and text must create something new, something neither “stale” nor “shabby,” in Wallace Stevens’s words, but with that essential “this-ness,” which is the classic midrashic description of what it is to “receive” the Torah: “On this very day, they entered the wilderness of Sinai”: the words of Torah should be new to you as though they were given this very day.

(Rashi, Exodus 19:1)

II. אל תקרי - Do not read x, rather y

4) Genesis 1:31 And God saw all that had been made, and found it very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. Genesis 2:1-3 The heaven and the earth were finished (vayechulu), and all their array. On the seventh day God finished the work that God had been doing, and God ceased on the seventh day from all the work that God had done. And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy—having ceased on it from all the work of creation that God had done.	בראשית א:לא וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וְהִנֵּה-טוֹב מְאֹד וַיְהִי-עֶרֶב וַיְהִי-בֹקֶר יוֹם הַשִּׁשִּׁי: בראשית ב:א-ג וַיְכַלּוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ וְכָל-צִבְאָם: וַיְכַל אֱלֹהִים בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי מְלַאכְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וַיִּשְׁבֹּת בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי מְכָל-מְלַאכְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה: וַיְבָרֶךְ אֱלֹהִים אֶת-יוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי וַיְקַדֵּשׁ אֹתוֹ כִּי כֵן שָׁבַת מְכָל-מְלַאכְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר-בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים לַעֲשׂוֹת:
5) Babylonian Talmud Tractate Shabbat 119a Rav Hamnuna said: Anyone who prays on Shabbat evening and recites the passage of vayechulu (Genesis 2:1-3), the verse ascribes them credit as if they became a partner with the Holy Blessed One in the act of creation. As it is stated: "And the heavens and the earth were finished [vayechulu]." Do not read it as: were finished [vayechulu]; rather, as: They finished [vayikhallu]. (i.e. It is considered as though the Holy Blessed One, and the individual who says this become partners and completed the work together.) Rabbi Elazar said: From where is it derived that speech is like action? As it is stated: "By the word of God the heavens were made, and all of their hosts by the breath of His mouth" (Psalms 33:6).	תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת קיט. דאמר רב המנונא כל המתפלל בערב שבת ואומר ויכולו מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו נעשה שותף להקדוש ברוך הוא במעשה בראשית שואמר ויכולו אל תקרי ויכולו אלא ויכלו. אמר רבי אלעזר: מניין שְׁהַדִּיבּוּר כְּמַעֲשֶׂה — שְׁנַמְרָא: "בְּדִבְרֵי ה' שָׁמַיִם נַעֲשׂוּ".
6) Rabbi Dena Weiss, Giving Back the Gift, Parashat Terumah, Hadar.org https://www.hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/giving-back-gift The language of vayekhulu implies the exact opposite of what Rav Hamenuna teaches. The word testifies to the fact that all of creation is finished and that God successfully spoke its entirety into being. However, Rav Hamenuna employs it to teach that the world is not yet complete and that there is still more that we can do with God in partnership and co-creation.	
7) Chiddushei Aggadot, Shabbat 119a <i>Rabbi Shmuel Eliezer Edels, the Maharsha (1555 – 1631, Poland),</i> "As if he became a partner, etc." For one who says <i>Va-yekhulu</i> thereby testifies to the work of Creation, and so he becomes a partner with the Holy Blessed One. Without his testimony, God's making would not be known. And just as the making was through speech alone, as [the Gemara] cites on this point, "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made" (Ps. 33:6), so too his testimony is through speech. It is therefore as if he became a partner through speech. This also explains why it says "even an individual, etc., must say <i>Va-yekhulu</i>." That is, even an individual, whose testimony elsewhere does not count as full testimony, must nevertheless say <i>Va-yekhulu</i>, in order to become a partner with the Holy Blessed One through this testimony, by mere utterance.	חידושי אגדות שבת קיט. כאלו נעשה שותף כו'. כי האומר ויכולו הרי הוא מעיד על מעשה בראשית והרי הוא נעשה שותף עם הקב"ה כי בלתי עדותו לא יודע עשייתו וכמו שהעשייה לא היה רק במאמר כדמייתי עלה בדבר ה שמים נעשו כן עדותו במאמר והו"ל כאלו נעשה שותף במאמר והוא מבואר שאמר אפי' יחיד כו' צ"ל ויכולו ר"ל אפי' יחיד שאין עדותו עדות גמור במקום אחר אעפ"כ צ"ל ויכולו להעשות שותף של הקב"ה בעדותו זאת באמירה בעלמא ודו"ק:

8) Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Halakhic Man." trans. by Lawrence Kaplan. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1983), pp. 105-106

Man, the creature, is commanded to become a partner with the Creator in the renewal of the cosmos; complete and ultimate creation – this is the deepest desire of the Jewish people. The Scriptural text "And the heaven and the earth were finished, and all the host of them" (Bereshit 2:1) – the Targum, the Aramaic translation of the Pentateuch, translates *va-yekhulu*, "were finished," as *ve-ishtakhlelu*, "were perfected" – is both a profound expression of the soul of the people and the most fervent desire of the man of God. This lofty, ontological idea illumines the path of the eternal people. When a Jew on the Sabbath eve recites [this passage as part of] the Kiddush, the sanctification over the wine, he testifies not only to the existence of a Creator but also to man's obligation to become a partner with the Almighty in the continuation and perfection of His creation. Just as the Almighty constantly refined and improved the realm of existence during the six days of creation, so must man complete that creation and transform the domain of chaos and void into a perfect and beautiful reality.

The Midrashic Canon by Biblical Book

Book	Halakhic Midrash	Aggadic Midrash
Genesis	—	Bereshit Rabbah (c. 400–450)
Exodus	Mekhilta de-R. Yishmael (3rd c.) [School of Yishmael] Mekhilta de-R. Shimon bar Yohai (3rd c.) [School of Akiva]	Shemot Rabbah (10th–12th c.)
Leviticus	Sifra (3rd c.) [School of Akiva]	Vayikra Rabbah (5th c.)
Numbers	Sifrei Bamidbar (3rd c.) [School of Yishmael] Sifrei Zuta (3rd c.) [School of Akiva]	Bamidbar Rabbah (12th c.)
Deuteronomy	Sifrei Devarim (3rd c.) [School of Akiva] Midrash Tannaim (3rd c., reconstructed) [School of Yishmael]	Devarim Rabbah (c. 450–800)
Megillot	—	Eikhah Rabbah (5th c.) Shir HaShirim Rabbah (6th c.) Ruth Rabbah (6th c.) Kohelet Rabbah (7th–8th c.) Esther Rabbah I (c. 500)
Psalms	—	Midrash Tehillim (layers through c. 11th c.)
Whole Torah / cycle	—	Pesikta de-Rav Kahana (5th c.) Tanḥuma (5th–9th c.) Pirkei de-R. Eliezer (8th c.)
Anthologies	—	Yalkut Shimoni (13th c.) Midrash HaGadol (13th–14th c., Yemen)

Dates are approximate dates of final redaction; much of the material is older, and dating is contested.