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Contemporary Midrash: A Tradition Continues

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Rabbinic Ordination

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Referee, Professor Edward Goldman

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Digest

Over the past twenty five years, a new form of Torah study has emerged in synagogues and the Jewish press. Individuals and groups are experimenting with Contemporary Midrash, a process of reading the Torah and searching for meaning through modern eyes. While rabbinic midrashim were written by the ancient rabbis in a particular form and historical period, modern midrashim are created in various artistic forms by lay people and Jewish professionals to reflect the concerns and questions of the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries.

An initial problem with Contemporary Midrash is analyzing its authenticity as a continuation of the rabbinic genre of literature known as “The Midrash.” When choosing to use the word “midrash,” are modern people fairly appropriating this term and adequately representing the intentions of the original midrashists? This is one fundamental question considered in this thesis. In addition, guidelines are set for determining the authenticity of a particular piece as a genuine contribution to the on-going chain of Torah study and discovery.

While the body of Contemporary Midrash grows daily through synagogue programs, independent midrash groups, and organizations such as the Institute for Contemporary Midrash, very little has been written *about* Contemporary Midrash. This thesis is meant to provide some guidelines for intelligent discussion of acceptable boundaries applicable to the different forms of Contemporary Midrash emerging today.

Chapter One gives a brief overview of the history of rabbinic midrash. In understanding the origins of the original midrashim, we can frame the study of Contemporary Midrash in light of its ancient origins.

Chapter Two delves into the current trends of Contemporary Midrash. Drawing from interviews, workshops, and published pieces, guidelines are offered for creating Contemporary Midrash. It is important that the word “midrash” be used with integrity and a connection to its ancient origins. These factors are weighed and used to develop four principles for modern midrashists to follow, whether their works are written, acted, painted, sung, or developed in some other artistic medium.

Chapter Three and the Appendixes offer four examples of Contemporary Midrash with an analysis that shows how they each satisfy the guidelines developed in Chapter Two. The content of each midrash is compared to traditional midrashim written about the same verses or issues in the Torah.

Chapter Four briefly suggests reasons why Contemporary Midrash is important for the continued growth and vibrancy of Judaism. This chapter includes quotes from lay people and rabbis reflecting on the importance of Contemporary Midrash to their connection to Torah and God.

As a timeless document relevant to all ages, the Torah is kept accessible and alive as our Tree of Life when Jews are invited to grapple and immerse themselves in the text. Contemporary Midrash is an invitation to continuously rediscover Torah and God’s word through a meaningful and transformative process. This thesis tries to capture the essence of how Contemporary Midrash brings Torah to life, and how through Contemporary Midrash we can bring our lives to Torah.

Preface

I first encountered Contemporary Midrash in 1992 at the Brandeis Collegiate Institute (BCI) at the Brandeis-Bardin Institute in Southern California. As a participant in this non-affiliated summer camp program for people aged 18-26, I had no idea what “midrash” or “modern midrash” were — I only knew that for the first time in my life Judaism made sense and Torah seemed accessible.

Years later, as a rabbinical student, I spontaneously subscribed to a journal called *Living Text*, published by the Institute for Contemporary Midrash. Immersed in the study of Bible, Rabbinic Midrash, Talmud, Aramaic and other classical Jewish fields, I read the journal as an escape from scholarly Jewish study. The voices in the journal spoke to me and resonated with my own experiences in ways that Rashi simply did not. I did not know enough to think of Contemporary Midrash as revolutionary. I just knew that the people who were contributing to this journal communicated their understanding of Torah in a literary way that appealed to my love of stories and poetry.

Slowly, for I cannot remember the first time I encountered it, I developed an awareness that some scholars and novices scoffed at the term “Contemporary Midrash.” Midrash, I heard, was a closed genre specific to the ancient rabbis and their experience. There are some who claim that midrash cannot be modern, for its very definition is as an ancient body of literature. The idea that dance, music, art, or theater could be midrash is even more unbelievable — and the integrity of those claiming to be making modern midrash was put into question.

Because Contemporary Midrash captured my interest prior to the rabbinate, before I encountered medieval commentators, before I engaged in any other kind of Torah study or Jewish texts, it is important to me that it be a legitimate endeavor. That was my bias in approaching this thesis. However, through the guidelines I suggest it should be clear that not all works which the creator calls “midrash” are rightful heirs to that title. I attempted to balance my bias with a fair representation of the process one must undergo when creating midrash – maintaining its relationship to Torah and, when appropriate, to other traditional Jewish texts.

I know that Contemporary Midrash changed my personal approach to living a Jewish life. I have also seen it cause reactions in other people, ranging from smiles to gasps of disbelief to moments of transcendent understanding. This thesis attempts to break down the components that are changing the way we approach Torah, and to present Contemporary Midrash as a viable option for Jewish learners of all ages and backgrounds.

Eight years ago at BCI, I heard a woman read Torah and, in reading the names of the patriarchs, she added the names of the matriarchs right into her Torah reading. That was not Contemporary Midrash, because she changed the text. But she was pushing boundaries and experimenting with voices for legitimate Jewish learning. As a group we agreed that she had crossed the line. As individuals we were forced to grapple with what it means to own a collective story and keep it consistent in our communities.

Contemporary Midrash does not change Written Torah. But when it is done well, it can enrich our relationship with Torah, encourage our personal Jewish growth, and empower

our communities to keep the collective story alive and relevant to the experiences we face in our modern times.

Chapter 1 – The Purpose and Techniques of Rabbinic Midrash

The body of literature known as Rabbinic or Classical Midrash roughly dates from about the second to seventh centuries, a period known as the Rabbinic Era. The midrashic tradition continues beyond the Rabbinic Era, but Midrash as a particular body of literature develops mainly during this time.¹ The political and religious turmoil of the Rabbinic Era provides the framework for understanding the purpose of Rabbinic Midrash. A brief historical review of this period will suggest reasons for the emergence of Rabbinic Midrash.²

In 70 CE the Roman Empire destroyed the Second Temple in Jerusalem and conquered Judea. The Temple was the center of Jewish religious life, which up until this time included a strict hierarchy and sacrificial cult. Ritual sacrifices to praise God were made exclusively at the Temple. The hierarchy of the Jewish sacrificial cult centered around the Temple. With the destruction of the Temple the priestly caste and sacrificial system were displaced and a new order of Jewish religious observance emerged.

Jewish leaders came forward denouncing the priestly caste and promoting a new type of Judaism. This new Judaism focused on study, prayer, good deeds and non-sacrificial ritual observances. However, Jewish people knew that the Written Torah clearly stated the role of the Temple, the priests, and sacrifices in the relationship between God and the Israelites. For this reason the emerging Jewish leaders introduced the legitimacy of the Oral Torah. Rabbinic leaders determined laws and precepts governing Israelite life by citing the Oral Torah. The Rabbis received the Oral Torah (and the priests did not) because they continue a special chain of command. A main

component of the Oral Torah as recorded by the Rabbis, the Mishnah teaches: "Moses received Torah from Sinai, and transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the Elders, the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets transmitted it to the Men of the Great Assembly."³ The Great Assembly includes the ancient prophets and extends to the sages of the Talmud. In this way the Rabbis established their own authority in transforming the Israelite religion from a Temple based sacrificial cult to a study and ritual based community.

The Mishnah was codified c. 200 CE. After the destruction of the Temple, rabbinic leaders wrote the Mishnah as mainly a legal (*halakhic*) document meant to standardize the practice of dispersed Jews. The Mishnah became the inspiration for the commentary of the Gemarrah, with the two works together making the Talmud (codification c. 600 CE). The Mishnah rarely cites Scripture as it presents the rubrics for proper living. It deals intensely with legal matters purportedly transmitted orally through the ages since the time of Moses. In the rabbinic worldview, both Written and Oral Torah ultimately came from God as complimentary but independent teachings. Since the Mishnah is a part of Oral Torah, it does not rely on Scriptures for authenticity.

In the rabbinic worldview the source of authority for the Oral Torah is argued as not dependent *on* Scriptures, but rather as authoritative *alongside* Scriptures. A story is told in the Talmud of a proselyte who only wanted to accept the Written Torah. This man reasoned that since he thought only the Written Torah came directly from God he could avoid having to follow the Oral Torah. He asks, "How many Torahs were given from heaven?" Shammai answers, "One Written and one Oral."⁴ From this illustration we see that although the Mishnah does not directly quote the Written Torah, the rabbis saw them as intimately related and equally necessary for proper Jewish living.⁵

The deemphasis on Temple practice is not to say that the Israelite community walked away from the ruined Temple in Jerusalem and never looked back. Along with Torah and being chosen for a unique destiny, Jerusalem was a symbol of God's love. The Jewish people lived now under Roman rule, encountering persecution and oppression. They looked to the future day when the Messiah would come and Jerusalem would be rebuilt to her former glory. A display of this communal hope was exhibited in 135 CE with the false messianic Bar Koḥba revolt against the Roman government. In the course of this uprising hundreds of thousands of Jewish people were killed, mostly in the areas surrounding Jerusalem. A false messiah, Bar Koḥba promised a rebuilding of the Temple and the coming of the End of Days. The aftermath of this failed revolution included disillusionment among the Jewish people, increased persecution, and a cessation of further insurrections.

In the north of the country, the Rabbis in the Galilee (who had fled Jerusalem) were busy creating the Mishnah as a guide for living without the Temple. In the south, revolutionaries were trying to overthrow Roman rule. Eventually the way of the Rabbis won. But they had to respond to specific realities beyond the legal texts of the Mishnah.

In addition to the Bar Koḥba revolt, on-going tension continued with the ruling Roman officials. Add to this Roman financial problems in the middle of the third century, the conversion of Constantine the Great to Christianity in the fourth century, the short-lived hope and ensuing disappointment when Julian the Apostate offered to rebuild the Temple in the early 360s, and the continued demise of Jewish status after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire by the beginning of the 5th century. The Rabbis' responses to the myriad of political woes facing the people in Israel shaped

the Rabbinic Period as a pivotal time in Jewish history. As the Word of God, the Rabbis believed that the Torah must have something to say in response to their circumstances.

The Rabbis were bringing text study and prayer to the forefront of Jewish life. Text study certainly included the Mishnah as Oral Torah, but the Rabbis did not intend to undermine the Written Torah. Together the Written and the Oral compositions make the whole Torah complete. And as the Word of God, that complete Torah was a perfect teaching that remained vital and relevant for all times.

In a time of strife and trouble, the Rabbis looked to the Torah to guide their beliefs, speak to their experiences, and answer their questions. They read the Written Torah text with excruciating attention to detail. Every book was a gift from God, every word chosen with purpose and even every letter could potentially teach a message from God.⁶ The Rabbis composed explanatory remarks on the Written Torah and delivered these speeches to others in the Great Assembly, to students who came to study with them, and as they traveled the country as teachers of Torah. These sermons and teachings compile the body of Rabbinic Midrash. The Rabbis composed Midrash as a unique way of responding to their contemporary experiences. For instance, Jacob Neusner explains that the shift from Mishnah to Midrash is the shift from being oblivious to Christianity and its issues to explaining Judaism's beliefs in its own system, eschatology, and messianism using Scripture in a meaningful way.⁷ It could be argued that prior to the use of Scriptures to promote Christianity, the Rabbis did not feel compelled to explicitly cite Scripture or methodically explain Judaism. Midrashic sermons, and later the midrash compilations, were a response to various historical realities, Christianity being one of them.

Rabbinic Midrash is divided into two distinct genres: exegetical and homiletical. The Rabbis composed exegetical midrashim mainly during the Tannaitic period, while the homiletical style dominates the midrashim of the Amoraic period.⁸ The Rabbis writing exegetical midrashim used Scripture to derive halakha (Jewish law). These midrashim offer running commentary on Scripture, subdividing verses into phrases, words, or even sometimes individual letters in order to explore the deeper meaning of God's word. The midrashists believed that the Written Torah does not have redundant words or mistakes, and God included apparent inconsistencies to instruct people in some way. The Rabbis used exegetical Midrash as a way to extract hidden legal teachings from the text. However, distinguishing exegetical and homiletical midrashim according to their content of halakha is not entirely helpful. Non-legal midrashim are found throughout exegetical collections. The better defining qualities are the dates and the literary components.

Homiletical midrashim, from the Amoraic period, incorporate distinct literary elements and traits of their own. Whereas a fundamental intention of the exegetical genre is to derive and present laws, the homiletical midrash most often is a Shabbat or holiday sermon, and serves a didactic function. Collections of homiletical midrashim are divided into various chapters. David Stern explains that "each chapter in the collection is devoted to the interpretation of the initial one or two verses in the Torah reading for the week ... and those interpretations are themselves organized in a special and apparently conventional structure. That is to say, each chapter is basically composed of two parts."⁹ A chapter first contains proems and then includes interpretations with commentary. Most

notably, the proem (discussed in more detail below) identifies a homiletical midrash from the Rabbinic Era. While a particular midrash might be homiletical without utilizing the proem, a midrash with a proem most certainly is homiletical.

All midrashim intend to delve into the Torah text, searching its properties for meaning. The Hebrew root *d.r.sh*, “to investigate” or “to search,” became the root for the title of the genre of literature that emerged. *Midrash* is both a method of study and the literary result of that study. “The Midrash” as we have it today is the sermons and teachings from those ancient Rabbis that are composed with certain literary qualities that distinguish them from other types of Rabbinic Literature.

Throughout the redefinition of Jewish practice in the Rabbinic Period, the Rabbis maintained their faith in the covenant between God and Israel. Authors of the Midrash constantly sought to keep Torah at the center of Jewish life and the Midrash remained “above all, a means of confronting God and bringing Him into contact with His people.”¹⁰ Under the oppressive rule of the Roman government, the Rabbis continued to look to Torah for hope. In response to the historical time of the Rabbis, the midrashim they wrote primarily seek to communicate that Scripture teaches that salvation will come.¹¹ Stern emphasizes this for homiletical midrashim which frequently conclude with a final verse that “invokes the messianic hope or some other consolatory note.”¹²

The conclusion that salvation from oppression will come arises from the way the Rabbis read Scripture. The Rabbis looked to Torah as a source of information from God and a place to seek answers, but when they read the text they also found that it created questions. A close reading of the Torah text highlights the succinct language in which it is written. In “Odysseus’ Scar” Erich Auerbach highlights the terse language of Scripture

by contrasting it to the Homeric style.¹³ Greek plays provided full-disclosure of the details of characters' lives. The audience is told where characters come from, what led up to the events in the play, motives, behind-the-action conversations and other information that adds depth to the scene. Auerbach uses the Binding of Isaac to show that the biblical narrative is the opposite of the Homer tragedy. The biblical text tells only the bare necessities for progressing the narrative. Details remain undefined. The precise language of the scriptural narrative leaves lacunae. Continuing with Auerbach's use of the Binding of Isaac, readers do not hear adjectives describing the lads who accompany Abraham and Isaac on their journey – no descriptions, names, thoughts, or words. Readers find no emotion in the text – no fear, anxiety, anger, confusion, or other indication as to how father and son felt on this pivotal day. The ancient Rabbis recognized these informational gaps throughout the biblical narrative. They proceeded to ask questions. What must have happened that led God to test Abraham? What role did Isaac play in his binding? Who were the lads that accompanied father and son? These and more questions required investigation of the text. The Rabbis searched for answers. They looked to other narratives, and they offered their own ideas for answers that resonated with their beliefs. The answers the Rabbis elicited from text, from themselves, and from each other became midrashim. No single midrash is the definitive answer explaining a question of the text. However, midrashim offer insights into the questions important to ancient Rabbis and into how they processed their answers.

The specific techniques employed by composers of the Midrash include keeping Torah at the center of the Midrash, communicating a message through the *mashal*

(parable), making intertextual connections using the proem, and transmitting both exegetical and eisegetical messages.

The main focus of the Midrash is its relationship to the Torah and how it can illuminate Torah's meaning. Fundamental to Rabbinic Midrash is the relationship between the Rabbis, the Torah and God. The Rabbis regarded the Torah as the Word of God, with the utmost of respect and honor. Rabbinic Midrash considers every letter, verse and phrase in Scripture as being put there by God to teach something. Midrash is a way of investigating the Torah text, while God is always at the center of Torah. In this way the midrashic process begins with the relationship of the Rabbis to the Holy Torah and to God who gave the Torah. The verse being commented upon may not open the individual midrash, but throughout the course of the midrash the words always intend to return to the Torah and explain the connection between the rabbi's message and the Torah verse. The Midrash exists under the assumption that the Rabbis were pulling out of the Torah a true meaning of the verse and explaining it through the midrashic process. The art of extracting a hidden meaning from Scripture and interpreting the text is *exegesis*.

The Rabbis also used the Torah to impose their own messages onto the text. Herr wrote that "[a]t times it is difficult to determine whether the biblical exegesis is the source of the aggadic¹⁴ idea or whether the idea was read into the Scriptural passage."¹⁵ This type of reading into the text is *eisegesis*. Herr states that it does not matter whether a particular midrash is an exegetical or eisegetical reading of Scriptures. This distinction will become relevant when examining the boundaries for Contemporary Midrash.

The main literary characteristic of the homiletical Midrash is the proem. Not all midrashim incorporate this literary technique, but it is a telling component of what makes

a midrash. The proem connects two otherwise unconnected verses of Torah through the midrashic process. A midrash about a verse in Genesis might open with a verse from Writings without any indication that the midrash is leading towards illuminating a Genesis verse. After opening with the Writings verse the midrashist will discuss an element of the verse and craft a sermonic explanation that ends with the verse from Genesis. In this way the midrashist demonstrates that the entire Torah is connected as a unified document with a verse from Writings fundamental in understanding a verse from Genesis.

Other midrashim which use the proem might open with a verse from the book it is exploring, and then the midrashist will lead to describing how that verse connects to yet another verse in the same book. In other words, the proem need not connect verses from two different books of Torah. An example of this can be seen in an excerpt from Genesis Rabbah:

“And they sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites” (Gen. 37:28). Is it possible that Joseph, already seventeen years old, saw his brothers selling him, yet remained silent? Indeed not, for he threw himself at the feet of each one of them, imploring them to take pity on him, but not one did. [Later, recollecting Joseph’s pleas], the brothers are quoted as saying, “In that we saw the distress of his soul, when he besought us” (Gen. 42:21).¹⁶

The second quoted verse is from the scene where Joseph’s older brothers approach him as the vizier in Egypt. They do not recognize Joseph, although he immediately knows them. The brothers have come to ask for food rations. Joseph demands that one brother be left

in Egypt, while the others bring food to Jacob and bring their youngest brother Benjamin with them back to Egypt. The first verse cited is from the scene where his older brothers sell Joseph into slavery. The first scene does not say that Joseph intervened in the sale or spoke out in any way. This midrash teaches that the brothers remember ignoring Joseph's pleas, even though the Torah itself does not specify when those pleas occurred.

Answering the question, "What pleas are the brother recollecting," the midrash connects the two verses.

Another identifiable literary trait of non-legal midrashim is the *mashal*. The *mashal* is a fictional narrative or parable, usually about a king, meant as exegesis. A *mashal* might occur in a homiletical or a non-legal exegetical midrash. A parable about a king is given and then the midrashist explains the *nimshal*, the application of this parable to Israel. Although a midrash with a *mashal* does not always include a *nimshal*, the audience is expected to make the connection between the king parable, the Torah verse at hand, and the message to the Jewish people. The tone of parables suggests to some that midrashim which utilize the *mashal* were probably oral sermons, geared towards the masses rather than elite teachings for the highly educated.¹⁷ The parable contemporizes the midrash, helping the listener envision the thesis of the sermon. The non-scholar theoretically needs this aide more than the Rabbi or highly educated listener, who are accustomed to the exegetical enterprise. The mere inclusion of the *mashal* in a midrash presumably indicates it was composed for the public at large.

The Rabbis did not invent the literary techniques they used in composing midrashim. As with other aspects of their lives they were influenced by the cultures around them. The use of the parable to interpret Torah is similar to techniques used by

ancient Greeks who interpreted Homer. Other hermeneutic principles the Rabbis used can likewise be found among the works of Greek orators and grammarians.¹⁸ As with the exegetical-eisegetical distinction, this does not impact the importance of the Midrash or its place in Jewish literature. It will, however, become more important when considering the appropriate styles and techniques of creating Contemporary Midrash.

Chapter 2 – Contemporary Midrash

What Is Contemporary Midrash?

The ancient rabbis created midrashic interpretations of Torah in order to connect the text to their experiences and hear God's message in their day. Contemporary Midrash also espouses these goals, maintaining that Torah is a holy text with a message for all times. Contemporary Midrash is a way of approaching the Torah that allows people to draw meaning out of the text. The process of exploration might involve creating midrashim through dance, art, drama, storytelling, music or the written word. However, for most practitioners of Contemporary Midrash the purpose is in the process, not the final product.

Delineating between people's experiences and the midrash they create, Irene Fine, Director of Jewish Studies at the Woman's Institute for Continuing Jewish Education, describes the midrashic endeavor as both an internal and external process. Her "external process" results in the creation of a midrash, or an identifiable product. The internal process is the learning and growth an individual experiences through creating a midrash.¹

In synagogues, schools and study groups all over the world Jewish people read from the Torah every week. In most of these places a rabbi or another educated Jew teaches a lesson from the weekly reading. The quality, purpose, and message of these teachings can range widely between different communities. Contemporary Midrash seeks to maintain the relevancy of Torah, taught through the lessons gleaned from its text. In *The Genesis of Ethics*, Rabbi Burton Visotsky explains that when he reads the Torah to find contemporary meaning he is not searching for the historical truth of the narrative.

The essential objective of looking to Torah for modern meaning is to use the biblical narrative to understand ourselves, push our morality, and find guidelines for distinguishing what is and is not moral for us today.²

In *Reading the Book*, Rabbi Visotsky advocates studying Torah in community, setting a regular time and place to meet, and keeping an open mind for what participants might find when reading the text together. Stories in the Torah challenge readers to grapple with the morality of the narrative and how the message it teaches might inform the contemporary person.³

Should Contemporary Midrash Be Rule-Bound?

As a recognizable genre of literature, Rabbinic Midrash categorically falls within certain parameters. A midrash written by an ancient rabbi always includes a reference to the written Torah. We assume that the rabbi held the Torah in high esteem, regarding it as a holy text given by God. There are particular literary devices that distinguish a rabbinic midrash, such as the proem, as discussed in Chapter One. Should Contemporary Midrash be similarly held within particular boundaries?

Practitioners of Contemporary Midrash do not universally agree on setting standards for the emerging genre. Performer, writer, and director Arthur Strimling expresses concern that a rigid definition of guidelines for Contemporary Midrash would inhibit artistic creation. Through the Institute for Contemporary Midrash, and other East coast midrash groups, Strimling teaches people to integrate storytelling techniques with their own midrashim, re-reading Torah for spiritual nourishment. By constructing strict rules for legitimizing a particular work as midrash, a creator might be discouraged from

participating in the process of reading Torah and searching for meaning. As Strimling explained, "When artists come up against, 'here's how you have to do this...' we rebel. Offer an opening, a tzimtzum, and we will go there. Torah as presented is extremely problematic. Midrash says you must read this in ways that nourish you. And [artists realize] they've been doing this all along."⁴

With Strimling's concerns in mind, perhaps one guideline for creating Contemporary Midrash is that whatever "rules" are put into place, they must allow for continued artistic exploration. Further apprehension against creating rules for Contemporary Midrash is that in time the genre will create its own guidelines. Strimling assesses that it is still too early in the development of Contemporary Midrash to try limiting it with rubrics for creativity. For the future of Contemporary Midrash, Strimling hopes that "...a body of work will be created in the next century that will recreate Judaism in the same ways the rabbis re-created Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple. I hope it will stay open and will not be bogged down by definitions. I do not think we really know what the form is, and we should keep it open and let it find its own form."

Alicia Ostriker, professor, poet, and author of *The Nakedness of the Fathers: Biblical Visions and Revisions*, presents another perspective on defining the characteristics of Contemporary Midrash. Acknowledging that some modern scholars might discredit Ostriker's writing as something other than midrash because it does not fit their definition, she resists arguing with their assertion. Rather, Ostriker looks to the longevity of the work to attest to its relationship to people and Torah. "Alright, then it's not midrash. For me it is, for them it isn't. And I think the name matters less than the

substance of what it is. If what I and others write turns out to be meaningful...it does not matter if it is called midrash or not. This is a little bit like the 17th century critics who said Shakespeare was not writing proper tragedies because he was not obeying Aristotle's rules for tragedy."⁵

Creating guidelines or rules for Contemporary Midrash might stifle the creative energy of the writers or artists. This limit on ideas could result in creators producing a lesser product, or it might intimidate people from experiencing the process of entering a closer relationship with Torah and God through challenging and wrestling with the text. One might reason, "after all, if the work I am creating is not legitimate Jewish exploration of text, if I am somehow profaning Torah, or crossing a boundary of inappropriate interaction, perhaps I should avoid this process." Arthur Strimling tells of a woman who came to one of his workshops apprehensive about entering into his storytelling/midrashic process. She explained to him that her rabbi told her that she could not make midrash until she had absorbed the canon of rabbinic literature and then got approval by a rabbi to do so. Her fear of offending tradition, as explained by her rabbi, prevented her from expressing her own reactions and insights into the text. Jewish learners arguably benefit from a variety of people interacting and engaging in text, sharing their findings with one another. By establishing stringent rules for creating midrash, lay people might feel afraid of approaching the Torah that rightfully belongs to all Jews. Alternately, if what one considers "midrash" does not fit into the standards set by the authorities on Jewish texts, then a person may think "I should keep my discoveries and creations quiet – because they will not be accepted by others." Shaming people out of

sharing their insights does not benefit the ongoing process of keeping Torah relevant and engaging for all generations.

Considering the arguments against defining Contemporary Midrash, why might it benefit practitioners to have a working definition of the new genre? We can begin to answer this query with an account of one danger of not having any guidelines.

At a recent educational conference I attended a session entitled “Creating Personal Midrashim.” Expecting to learn about writing modern midrashim interwoven with personal experiences, I was glad when the instructor began the session by saying that he first wanted to define for us the term “midrash.” Certainly guidelines and expectations help participants understand the authenticity of their endeavor. Subsequently I was surprised to hear that “Midrash is anything you want it to be.” The session was an enjoyable hour of storytelling from participants’ personal experiences, but it did not involve any Torah, text study or biblical referencing and did not necessarily incorporate any lessons or teachings. This liberal use of the word midrash drew my attention to the need for guidelines within the legitimate movement for Contemporary Midrash.

Perhaps not everyone will find this example self-explanatory. The history of rabbinic midrash demonstrates that midrash is not just “anything.” The rabbis utilized specific methods when engaging in the midrashic process, authenticating their work through study, literary technique, and standardized approaches to the Torah text. Utilizing the word “midrash” in relation to a particular contemporary approach to Torah demands that we use the name with integrity and purpose. Appropriating words and names without regard to their meaning is a disservice to the movement for maintaining a

relevant and dynamic relationship with Torah, undermining the goal of extending a link with the past into the present and future.

What Makes a Midrash?

The ways to create Contemporary Midrash are as varied as the teachers and practitioners of the work. Some instructors begin their classes with Torah study, encouraging students to create based on discussions and questions the group explores. Others do not open with a text but begin with participants' recollections of the Torah narrative to guide their creativity. Still another method asks people to think of their own personal stories and find a Torah character or event that parallels their lives in a way conducive to creating a midrashic connection. My personal experience leads me to believe that starting with the open Torah text, reading it together and discussing the nuances, provides for a more solid and meaningful connection with the tradition. This method also ensures greater accuracy for midrashists when they refer to the Torah. Beginning without the written text allows for greater mistakes and misguided recollections of what the Torah says. The integrity of the process demands that the creator looks back to the Torah text to ascertain the correct sequence of events, names, and consistency, but one must concede that the creative process does not warrant dictating at what stage a person must look to the text.

After a particular piece is completed an individual may declare her poem a midrash based not on the words she wrote but on the fact that it developed during a seminar entitled "Making Midrash." While the person may have experienced a midrashic process of exploring the text, the final written piece may not deserve the title "midrash."

Concern for the integrity of the word, and the continuity of the genre suggests the benefits of instituting standards for Contemporary Midrash as a genre.

The great Jewish philosopher Maimonides taught that there are eight levels of giving tzedakah, based not on the amount given but on the attitude of the giver. Each level is judged better than the previous one, yet even the lowest level fulfills the mitzvah of giving to the poor.⁶ Although not an exact parallel, there are degrees of Contemporary Midrash, some of which can be judged better than others. Creating modern midrashim offers the creator the opportunity to participate in the mitzvah of talmud torah – studying Torah. One who creates a midrash based on his recollection of a biblical narrative he heard in his childhood stands on a different level than one who creates a midrash based on his recent study of a biblical narrative, its commentaries, and rabbinic midrashim.

Rabbi Norman J. Cohen suggests a range of levels for Contemporary Midrash.⁷ On one extreme of the spectrum stands the midrash written or created by a person who reads the Torah in translation with no background in other Jewish texts or studies. On the other end of the spectrum stands the midrash created by a person who reads the Torah in Hebrew and studies the classic rabbinic texts in their original Hebrew. While the writing quality of the person on the “low” end of the spectrum might prove better than the person on the “high” end, the person on the “high” end has achieved a greater level of talmud torah and his midrash carries with it a higher degree of authenticity. This might be compared to two people who give appropriate amounts of tzedakah according to their means: the person who begrudgingly gives a large amount of tzedakah is on a lower level than the person who freely gives a smaller amount.

The low end of the Contemporary Midrash spectrum can be seen as a starting point for the less learned. People who do not have a background in Jewish study should not be excluded from creating midrash. In fact, there are many instances where an introduction to the midrashic process inspires individuals to expand their Torah study and challenge themselves to higher Jewish learning. In addition, the degree of one's knowledge does not diminish the importance of one's voice. Individuals can offer meaningful insight into the relevance of Torah for today without an expansive knowledge of traditional Jewish texts.

Yet the same brilliant insight becomes more authentic in the chain of ongoing Jewish learning when the thinker is empowered to compare or contrast his idea to Talmud, Rashi, rabbinic midrash, or modern scholarship. Lee Meyerhoff Hendler recounts in *The Year Mom Got Religion* her experience in organizing and participating in a long-running Torah study group at her synagogue. As a grown woman with children, Hendler realized that "if you don't know Torah, you don't know squat about Judaism and I...I don't know Torah."⁸ Led by the rabbi of their congregation, a group of women embarked in serious Torah study, incorporating various translations, commentaries, and traditional texts. As their sense of belonging to the group and the chain of Torah tradition grew, Hendler and her peers "were learning to read between the lines, to truly understand midrash; not only to read and discuss traditional and contemporary midrashim but to contribute our own." Through study the women felt empowered to add their voices to the interpreters of Torah. Their study gave them a sense of authenticity and integrity, aligning them however modestly with their ancestors.

People who combine access to classical texts with the Hebrew language empower themselves to speak about Torah and Jewish text with an authority unavailable to those who read Torah only in translation without its accompanying commentaries. The movement for Contemporary Midrash benefits when practitioners place themselves in line to receive the Torah from the generations who have previously studied it, as opposed to reading it as if others have not before offered valuable insight. Individuals may enter the process of creating Contemporary Midrash from anywhere along the spectrum. Regardless of where one begins, one should be prepared to find a positive correlation between traditional text study and the authenticity and Jewish integrity of one's own modern midrashim.

When considering "what makes a midrash?" the role of Torah and the degree of Jewish learning reflected in the midrash are both relevant factors. A work completely without Torah does not constitute a midrash. However, across the other extreme of the spectrum might stand a piece which strings together various Torah citations and classical works in elegant language. Is this necessarily a midrash? Without creativity and the process of discovering a message in the text, the answer for this other extreme is also "no."

Beyond understanding the range of modern midrashim, there are four specific guidelines I suggest should be followed in creating Contemporary Midrash. Setting these guidelines provides a minimal amount of structure for the process and assists with delineating "is this a midrash?" Similar to the boundaries of rabbinic midrash, the four suggested guidelines are: Contemporary Midrash should be bound by Scripture; Contemporary Midrash should allow for creative freedom in investigating the text;

Contemporary Midrash should treat Scripture as a text connected to God; Contemporary Midrash should be an exegetical investigation of what Scripture can mean — it should not eisegetically place meaning into Scripture.

The first criteria calls for Contemporary Midrash to be bound by Torah. This means that the midrashist may not violate Torah narratives. While rabbinic midrash often appears to contradict the sequence of a Torah narrative, Contemporary Midrash does not warrant taking this liberty with the text. One fundamental purpose of Contemporary Midrash is understanding the Torah in a new, or more meaningful way. Contradicting facts given in the Torah repudiates this purpose. Being bound by Torah also includes making reference to the Torah verses being explored in the midrash. The model of rabbinic midrash teaches us that the completed piece must incorporate a reference to the Torah. This reference either specifies or hints at the motive for the midrash. While the reference may not follow the style of the rabbis, directly quoting and perhaps citing a verse, Contemporary Midrash should somehow clearly indicate its connection to Torah. Without a recognizable link to Torah a written or artistic piece should not hold the title “midrash.” Eliminating an identifiable relationship with Torah obliterates the legacy of the word midrash.

The next integral ingredient to a midrash is an element of creativity while exploring the text, expressed in the final midrash in the creator’s own voice. Pulling together other people’s words, no matter how impressive a person’s scholarship, does not constitute midrash. A midrash provides a new perspective on the sacred Torah text, or reframes the text in a newly accessible manner. Contemporary Midrash offers a vehicle for modern people to consider how the Torah speaks to their world; it provides a place for

people *lidrosh* — to investigate or look into the Torah text. This element of creativity constituted a vital component of rabbinic midrash. Creativity allowed the rabbis to develop the genre of midrash into a unique body of literature, expressive of their reality, their language, their lens on the world. Contemporary midrashists must continue this tradition for the newest incarnation of midrash.

Storyteller Corrinne Stavish advocates an eight-step process for creating oral or written midrashim. There are many ways to develop midrashim and it is nearly impossible to advocate any one way as “the” way. But Stavish’s first and last steps demonstrate the necessity of including both Torah and creativity in the final midrashic product. Her mnemonic for the process is “DRASHING”:⁹

- D**etermine the text
- R**ead interpretations
- A**sk questions
- S**peak to others, dialogue
- H**ear characters’ voices
- I**nterpret
- N**arrow images
- G**ive text new form

The first and last steps provide the first two boundaries for Contemporary Midrash. Namely, start with a Torah text and conclude with a new form, message, understanding or creative interpretation of that text.

The third guideline for Contemporary Midrash asks that the midrashist treat the Scripture as a text connected to God, or a Divine text. The specific definition of what this means will be personalized for every individual. The breadth of our understandings and beliefs in a Divine presence allows for a wide array of approaches to Torah as a text in relationship to God. Reflecting again on the rabbis, they surely considered Torah a holy text given to the Jewish people by God. While mandating this belief counters the

fundamental beliefs of many people today, asking that the approach include an infusion of holiness connects the process of midrash to a bigger religious ideal. Cynicism, speculation, doubt, even anger, all can contribute to a person's journey towards closeness to text. Incorporating God or a spirit of holiness into the process does not exclude a free approach to the process. Rather, remembering that Torah ultimately influences Jewish religiosity and relationship with God keeps the midrashic endeavor appropriately framed by one of its goals: gaining insight into a holy text of the Jewish people. The holiness of Torah continues today based on its legacy of relationship between God and the Jewish people.

Finally, the fourth criterion for Contemporary Midrash creates a boundary whereby the product is exegetical. The midrashist approaches Torah in order to extract a message or meaning from the text. Contemporary Midrash works from within the boundaries of the narrative, adding or imagining what fits in the lacunae, creatively connecting Torah verses, making midrash and gleaning a message *based on the text*. Contemporary Midrash does not put meaning into Scripture that cannot otherwise be extracted from the text. This is similar to avoiding midrashim that contradict the written verses. The message or final meaning emphasized by the midrash should stem from what is written, with the possibility of showing how the understanding evolved out of the Torah text.

Reading the Text

Creating Contemporary Midrash begins with reading Torah, brings the practitioner through a unique and hopefully enlightening process, and ends with a

creative product – only, of course, to begin again. While reading the Torah text at its most literal level satisfies the necessity of beginning with Torah, when extended to a more sophisticated reading the creative process can begin in this first step. Reading the Torah provides the foundation and source for a process of engagement and enlightenment. It is therefore beneficial to read the Torah in a particular way, connecting the modern reader to the ancient style of reading.

In his article “Hayinu K’Holmim” Rabbi Lawrence Kushner proposes that we approach Torah study as if interpreting a dream.¹⁰ He claims the Torah is like a collective dream to which we all can claim ownership. This is not to say that human beings necessarily created, or “dreamt up” the Torah. Rather, if we approach dreams as one way that God tries to communicate with us, so too we can consider Torah a way in which God tries to communicate with people. In the Talmud it is written: “Amemar, Mar Zutra, and Rab Ashi would say this: Master of the Universe, I am yours and my dreams are yours. I have dreamed a dream and I do not know what it means.”¹¹ By creating a metaphor where the Torah can be interpreted like a dream, Kushner demonstrates that what at first appears obvious may in fact have a deeper meaning. The six-step process of interpretation that Kushner describes for dreams and Torah can also direct creators of Contemporary Midrash.

In looking for deeper meanings and interpreting Torah the contemporary midrashist must first identify the circumstances surrounding the particular text he is reading. What is happening immediately before and after this narrative? Next, the interpreter identifies all of the nouns in the text; who and what are in this episode? The third step of the process requires one to pay close attention to the details of the written

word. Just as the ancient rabbis noticed peculiarities of letters, grammar, spelling, and lacunae, the contemporary midrashist must also notice textual intricacies.

After this close reading of the text, the midrashist articulates associations that he personally makes with the text. These associations must maintain a responsibility for the text – no aspect of the written word may be simply disregarded. All of the text is part of our collective Torah, a possession in its entirety. Finally, the midrashist examines all parts of the episode as a part of himself. Each of us can relate to some part of Torah, as it is our shared text. Kushner's steps were not written specifically for Contemporary Midrash but they start specifically with the Torah and end with the individual finding a creative relationship to the text. While Contemporary Midrash does not demand a person insert his own experiences into his work, the power of many pieces comes from the creator allowing his own sensibilities to bridge the gap between himself and the ancient text. This often allows for a unique creative expression in an exceptional voice.

Midrashim Not in Black and White

In most cases we assume that “midrash” refers to the written word. However this is not necessarily true. I have used caution to avoid referring to creators of midrash as “authors” because midrash today appears in many forms in addition to written.

As an endeavor steeped in process, Contemporary Midrash emerges in many different forms. While a group of people may study a text together and discuss its implications for contemporary times, they may also utilize different media for their creative expression of the meaning they gather from the text. Others may benefit from exploring the text non-verbally: from silent role-playing to torn-paper midrash (where

participants tear up pieces of colored paper and then use them to glue together a picture depicting what they imagine a particular scene looked or felt like for the characters in the narrative). Most people today take for granted the educational theory that individuals learn in a variety of ways. As such, the process of creating Contemporary Midrash can offer the practitioner or learner access to a variety of explorative options. Dance, music, art, drama, and storytelling all challenge the creator and the viewer, listener or participant to explore biblical messages in meaningful ways.

For people who learn and process in ways other than verbal, utilizing the non-literary arts to delve into Torah opens avenues previously ignored. Jo Milgrom developed a method of Torah study she calls *Handmade Midrash*.¹² Incorporating research that shows verbal language can actually hinder certain types of creativity, thinking, and personal discovery, *Handmade Midrash* provides a way to create and discover meaning in Scripture without using words. *Handmade Midrash* exemplifies one way non-verbal creativity enhances a person's connection to Torah. The person experiencing Contemporary Midrash through the arts returns to the Torah changed in some way, able to see the text through a different lens than before. The media of this process is far less important than the experience itself.

A particular form of experiential midrash occurs through bibliodrama. Based on psychodrama, Peter Pitzele first experimented with bibliodrama while guest lecturing in a leadership course for rabbinic students at the Jewish Theological Seminary. During the class Pitzele asked students to imagine they were Moses at some moment when he had to make a decision as a leader. In keeping with psychodramatic principles, Pitzele phrased the exercise in the second person – asking the participants to imagine actually being

Moses. Students obliged by answering in the first person with responses such as “I am Moses standing at the Sea of Reeds and I have this rabble to try to get across, and they’re scared, and I don’t know what’s going to happen. I don’t know how to fill them with courage,” and “I’m Moses. I just came down the mountain with the tablets of law and these people don’t know from law and I’ve got to try to teach them halakha,” and “Well, you know, we’ve got the Ammalakites on our trail and we’ve got to somehow become soldiers in the wilderness here.”¹³ After the class session ended a student approached Pitzele and called the experience a form of midrash – a process of asking questions of the text. Although Jewish, Pitzele did not have a strong Jewish education. After this experience he slowly learned more about midrash and Jewish text. Eventually his involvement with bibliodrama grew to leading workshops and bibliodramatic experiences for many sectors of Jewish professionals and laity, while his own knowledge of Jewish text and tradition also expanded through his new form of midrash. Today more and more people receive training as “directors” for bibliodrama, learning the process of guiding a group through role-playing, text exploration, de-roling participants, and gleaning understanding from the experience. Like dance and unrecorded music, this form of midrash is not readily available for others beyond the space in which it is acted out. However, the impact that participants feel from identifying with various Torah characters (human and non-human) brings those present to a new understanding of the Torah verses which accompanies them whenever they consider the narrative they explored through bibliodrama. Such is the power of experiential midrash, even when it is not written in black and white.

The Practitioners and Their Practices, or “Who’s doing Contemporary Midrash and what are they doing?”

Contemporary Midrash began appearing in print during the 1970s. *Moment* magazine, first published in May/June 1975, was perhaps the first venue for the contemporary form of biblical exploration. In the March 1976 issue, Elie Wiesel published “Adam or the Mystery of the Beginning,” from his book *Messengers of God* (which at that time was forthcoming). Then one month later a particular type of midrash made its debut from the pen of Marc Gellman. Dubbed “A Read Aloud Section,” Gellman’s story “The First Hamburger” was intended especially for children. Gellman called his story “a children’s midrash” but did not define the word midrash for the reader. Yet another month later, in the May/June 1976 issue of *Moment* magazine, editor Leonard Fein wrote

...significant numbers of adults evidently have come to feel that to live entirely cut off from the richest legacy to which they are heir makes no sense. Gifted men and women interact with the Bible in creative ways – using it to inform their prose and poetry, creatively translating it, seeking, in the classic Jewish tradition, to interpret its details. And humbler people do what Jews have long done – study it, minimally in an effort to learn why it has been thought to matter so, not infrequently to inform their own lives with its understandings.

In the pages that follow, we present four examples of contemporary interactions with the Bible... [among them] Marc Gellman, in the spirit of the midrash, proposes a way of understanding the Abraham-Isaac story.¹⁴

This first introduction to “what is midrash” provides an initial explanation to what practitioners of Contemporary Midrash seek through their work. Gellman continues to publish ten more midrashim over the following two years, many of which later appear in slightly varied forms in his popular book *Does God Have A Big Toe?* Many of Gellman’s midrashim published in *Moment* include the questions the story seeks to answer. For instance, after the title “Noah and the Fish” appears “God once got angry and drowned

everything with a big flood. Why didn't God kill the fish too?" Rabbinic midrash sought to make sense of the biblical text by presenting possible solutions for questions that arose from reading Torah. Gellman used the same premise, identifying the question his midrash intended to answer. These midrashim caught the attention of at least one ten year old girl who wrote a letter to the editor proclaiming "I love the stories by Marc Gellman."¹⁵ A rabbi who used Gellman's midrashim for children at family services wrote to the editor to promise that as long as Gellman keeps writing the new midrashim and *Moment* keeps publishing them, the rabbi will keep using them for his congregation.¹⁶

Over the course of two decades Rabbi Marc Gellman's name has become for many Jews synonymous with good story telling and fun readings of biblical stories. Gellman no longer prefaces his stories with the question they seek to answer, instead choosing to let the reader discover answers to questions that Gellman may not have consciously asked in his initial exploration of the text. Gellman views the creation of contemporary midrash as the revival of a unique Jewish literary genre. This revival must have two foci: the artistic impulse and the spiritual impulse.¹⁷

The literary art of creating midrashim shows that the biblical text offers constant meaning throughout all generations. The midrash itself emerges from lacunae in the biblical text – "the art emerges as the holes are filled." Midrash develops from questions that emerge while reading the Torah and the subsequent search for answers, but according to Gellman, stating the question gives away the author's initial meaning of the midrash and is a "violation of the artistic muse."

The second focus of reviving the ancient midrash for today stems from the spiritual impulse. Midrash allows contemporary notions of spirituality to converse with

new understanding to the ancient works. In *Self, Struggle and Change* Cohen opens each chapter with an overview of the biblical story, assuming the reader knows the basic biblical text, and includes the issues that his books will raise based on this story. Throughout the sermonic or didactic chapters in both books, Cohen discusses many rabbinic midrashim and midrashic sayings about the Torah verses under study and includes citations for the classic texts in the margins. The non-scholar can easily read Cohen's midrashim without looking at the margins to review the rabbinic sources, but the citations are available for those who want to pursue further study. What the reader cannot do is simply read the words of Cohen's midrashim without an intellectual commitment.

In *Voices From Genesis*, Cohen begins each chapter with a brief summary of Erik Erikson's human developmental stages which are addressed by Cohen's reading of the Genesis narratives. In this midrashic work Cohen presents an understanding of the Torah text through the eyes of Jacob the patriarch, interwoven with an exploration of human development. The margins of *Voices* cite the biblical references where Cohen bases his midrashic readings. Story-narratives, like those produced by Gellman, can be read just for the story, or one can delve deeper into the words to look for meaning beyond the simple reading. Cohen's midrashic styles require the reader to pay attention to the steps of his process, bringing the reader directly into a careful reading of the biblical text and, in the case of *Self*, ancient midrashic commentaries. The reader must focus on the words and the ways in which Cohen uses his close, nuanced reading of the biblical text to draw out messages and new understandings for today. Because Cohen cites his sources and asks his questions of the text forthright, the integrity of his midrashim in the chain of tradition, or *shalsholet hakabbalah*,¹⁸ is apparent from the internal structure of his work.

Both Gellman and Cohen are rabbis from the Reform movement of Judaism. But people from across the spectrum of Jewish education and affiliation create Contemporary Midrash. Perhaps the most influential organization currently promoting the creation of new midrashim is the non-denominational Institute for Contemporary Midrash. Founding director Rivkah M. Walton notes that the foundation for the Institute for Contemporary Midrash was first laid by the practitioners of modern midrash who wrote and experimented decades before the development of a central organization. Authors including Howard Schwartz, Yehuda Amichai, JoAnne Tucker, Peter Pitzele, Arthur Waskow and Eli Wiesel, in addition to Ostriker, Cohen, Gellman, Milgrom, and others, began publishing Contemporary Midrash or curriculum for teaching art-based modern midrash, extending the midrashic genre into the modern era. ICM's unique contribution came with naming Contemporary Midrash as a cross-disciplinary field available to artists of varied media, and providing a central cite for people creating midrash to share their work.¹⁹

It is difficult to truly report on the demographics of Contemporary Midrash – the sociological phenomena of who creates modern midrashim. As the foremost organization supporting Contemporary Midrash, ICM does not keep records regarding affiliation, gender, age, or living location of those participating in its training institutes. Anecdotally Walton observes that most participants are East coast women from liberal branches of Judaism.²⁰ What does this reveal about the appeal of Contemporary Midrash? Such non-scientific data probably reveals very little, except to say that there *might* be a particular market emerging of individuals attracted to the renewal of Jewish text study through

creating modern midrash. Only three years old, ICM is still far too young to reflect a large vision of this relatively new artistic field.

Yet as with most infant organizations, ICM has visions for expansion to fill a perceived need in the Jewish community. Funded by the Nathan Cummings Foundation and Steven Spielberg's Righteous Persons Foundation, ICM offers annual training programs to teach Jewish professionals and laity how to create modern midrash and how to guide others to create it. In addition the ICM staff reaches out to liberal Christian communities in an effort to promote a Jewish reading of the Hebrew Scriptures which facilitates understanding and relationship between the groups.²¹ Though some may argue this outreach crosses an appropriate boundary, Walton points out that these trainings approach midrash from a Jewish perspective, using Jewish texts, to promote a Jewish reading of the text. This approach has proven valuable to Christians for their own faith and study, as well as for their sensitivity to a Jewish way of approaching sacred text.²²

The unspoken rule for the Institute for Contemporary Midrash dictates that regardless of its artistic form a midrash must be tied to the biblical text with ample room for imagination – *but it must not violate the biblical text*. Considering the fact that rabbinic midrash frequently violated biblical text to allow for imagination or a particular message this rule seems contradictory to the heritage of midrash. However creative the rabbis allowed themselves to be, modern midrashists confine their imagination to the boundaries of the Torah narrative. Details may be added, story lines created, but the final midrash may not contradict the written word of Torah. Walton explains that modern artists have reason to feel concerned about the seriousness with which their work is taken. Traditionalists defend the ancient rabbis and criticize modernists by pointing out that the

rabbis were steeped in text to a level unknown to most Jews today. Further, the midrashim they wrote were created for the sole purpose of heaven and God. To the first claim, modern midrashists can protect themselves from criticism by staying close to the biblical text and not contradicting what is written. While ideas may be radical, or against a classic oral understanding of a narrative, if the Torah is not violated the creative imagination has a fair opportunity to explore boundaries. To the second claim, the midrashim were created for the purpose of heaven, Walton explains that "the locus of heaven has shifted, our understanding of where God resides has moved." In other words, modern midrashists may not categorically create for the same idea of heaven as the ancient rabbis, but the idea of heaven itself does not persist for many modern midrashists with the same borders as those imagined by the ancient rabbis. This does not delegitimize Contemporary Midrash but rather expands the vision of why people create midrashim today.

Other venues for Contemporary Midrash include grass-roots writing groups, non-affiliated courses taught by instructors trained by ICM but outside of the Institute's official capacity, other non-denominational retreat and camp settings, and congregational programs. The ages of people learning about rabbinic midrash and creating Contemporary Midrash range at least from seven years old with religious school and campers through adults in a variety of settings. The diversity of Contemporary Midrash stems from the ways in which rabbis, educators, and instructors are tailoring its potential for their unique groups. For instance, in a New York gay and lesbian congregation the rabbi encourages his congregation to produce "gay and lesbian modern midrash."²³ Another rabbi in New York uses Contemporary Midrash tailored to women in her Rosh

Hodesh group.²⁴ Yet another use occurs at the Brandeis-Bardin Institute in Southern California where college aged summer camp participants from all types of Jewish backgrounds are led in creating their own interactive dramatic midrashim, visual art midrash, and written midrash. Rabbi Scott Meltzer, the director of the program, cites the basic purpose of using Contemporary Midrash as two-fold: "to help the students get into texts and help the texts get into students."²⁵ Across the country rabbis and Jewish educators incorporate Contemporary Midrash into their sermons and study sessions, but the details of who is creating the midrashim are at best incomplete.

In the midst of these particular uses of Contemporary Midrash in congregational and camp settings, there are also groups which meet monthly to share their midrashim and create new ones together. One such group, called "the Midrash Group" rents space at the West End Synagogue in New York City on the last Sunday of every month. Participants pay for the four hour session led by Alicia Ostriker, who guides the writers in text study, writing exercises, and development of midrashim. A powerful outcome of connecting to Torah through Contemporary Midrash seems to be the inspiration participants find to expand their study of Judaism and connection to Jewish text. Through sessions such as these, people find deeper meaning in Torah, inspiring them to see it as relevant to their lives.

Those involved in creating new midrashim today strive to bring a contemporary lens to reading Torah, searching for answers to questions the text raises. Some questions were asked in previous generations and answered according to the ancient rabbis' worldview. Today people ask the same questions, and struggle to find answers that

respond to our modern sensibilities. In the next chapter we will compare questions and answers asked of the Torah by both the ancient rabbis and contemporary midrashists.

Chapter Three – Cases in Point: Comparing Contemporary and Rabbinic Midrash

Rabbinic midrashim are preserved as literary works, available to readers in volumes of translated and original language texts. Contemporary midrashim are more diverse in presentation than their rabbinic predecessors, with pieces created in writing, music, visual arts, dance, and drama. Although Contemporary Midrash is not limited to the written word, this particular document is limited as such. For this reason the four contemporary midrashim included in this section are all written pieces, available for review in the Appendix.

The four pieces were chosen to represent different perspectives of Contemporary Midrash and the different approaches available to participants in the midrashic process. One midrash is a one-act play. Another is a third-person narrative. One midrash is a series of letters ascribed to a biblical character. Another is a poem. Two of the pieces transcend time and bring the biblical characters into modern experiences. The other two pieces approach the text from within the biblical scene, but inevitably project aspects of contemporary life – a technique also used by the rabbis. While considering the message and process of the contemporary authors, we will also consult rabbinic midrashim commenting on the same verses or similar questions of the text. For each contemporary piece addressed we must ask: what issue in the text spurred the author to write? Does the piece follow the four main criteria for midrash?¹ What is the message of the text? How does the overall content of the piece compare to rabbinic midrashim?

Case in Point: Hagar, the Stranger, calls home, by Gabrielle Suzanne Kaplan

At a workshop for writers of Contemporary Midrash, Gabrielle Suzanne Kaplan read the Torah narratives that chronicle the difficult relationship between Sarah and Hagar. Like the ancient rabbis before her, Kaplan wondered how Hagar came to be a part of Sarah's life. The text tells us that the handmaiden came from Egypt, appearing after Abraham and Sarah leave the land – after Sarah was held in Pharaoh's home.

In her one-act play Kaplan creates a midrash that makes Hagar the daughter of Sarah and Pharaoh. Hagar is not the result of a loving liaison, but rather the child born to a mother raped by a king. This is not the relationship described in the Torah, and it is not a relationship outlined by the rabbis in their midrashim. How is this presentation textually acceptable?

Attempting to read the Torah text without influence of rabbinic commentaries or midrashim is difficult for people learned in Jewish text. However, the same Torah text that for thousands of years readers have seen as proof of Sarah's righteousness might also be read through a different lens to show a dissatisfied woman in a strained and painful marriage. This is not an easy paradigm shift, but it can be shown consistent with (1) being bound by Torah text (2) allowing for freedom within investigation (3) treating the text as holy and (4) gathering an exegetical, not eisegetical, message.

To frame the new reading of Sarah and Hagar presented by Kaplan, particularly the instigation of Sarah as a woman inconsistent with our picture of righteousness, we will "retell" the story of Sarah and Abraham based on the Torah text. Parts of this retelling might seem jarring to the reader, particularly since there is an insertion of assumptions contrary to rabbinic tradition. Yet in comparing the Torah text to this

retelling, editorial comments about Sarah's experience are not contrary to the original biblical text. In creating Contemporary Midrash an author has the freedom to contradict rabbinic tradition, adding his own projections and insights as appropriate. These additions need not be seen as eisegetical if they do not contradict the Torah text.

An Editorialized Review of Sarah and Abraham: Through a New Lens

The narrative opens with our matriarch leaving her homeland with her husband and his nephew. The woman's impressions are not recounted. Maybe she did not want to leave. A woman's role as wife-property to her husband would surely mandate her departure with Abraham regardless of her desires.

When a famine curses the land, Abram takes his wife Sarai and the rest of their household to Egypt. The husband asks his wife to say that she is his sister "that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may remain alive thanks to you" (Gen. 12:13). In other words: tell them you are my wife and they will kill me. Tell them you are my sister, and they will reward me for your beauty. One might read that Sarai's husband threatens her and then barter her.

After entering Egypt and being seen by Pharaohs' courtiers, Sarai is brought to Pharaoh's palace. Abraham is rewarded with sheep, oxen, asses, male and female slaves, she-asses, and camels. Again, one might ask, "Did this husband sell his wife under the pretense of protecting himself?"

Once Sarai has been in Pharaoh's household for an undisclosed period of time, God must intervene on account of, or on behalf of, Sarai. Why? When? There is no indication in the text of Abram's presence, no indication of what he does while they are

separated. We can fill in the gaps according to how the rabbis read the text, supporting the patriarch as a devoted husband, heartsick over his wife's predicament; and supporting the matriarch as a chaste woman, unavailable to Pharaoh's advances. When confronting Abraham in Gen. 12:19 Pharaoh remarks: *lama amarta, "achoti hi" va-ekach otah li l'isha?*² The JPS translation of this verse reads: "Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her as my wife?" Rabbinic tradition maintains the purity of Sarah while she dwelled in Pharaoh's house. Midrash Rabbah explains that Pharaoh could not even approach her shoe without being struck with a plague. Any sexual advance that Pharaoh made needed only a simple wish of punishment by Sarah to result in his being smote.³ Despite this midrashic explanation of Sarah's chastity, Pharaoh clearly indicates in the biblical text that he "took" Sarah as a wife. This euphemism for sexual relations may explain why the rabbis wanted to clear Sarah of any adulterous suspicions.

Alternately, we can fill in the gaps according to another reading, perhaps Kaplan's: that Abram was absent during this time and Sarai was raped by Pharaoh and retained as one of his concubines. Abram and Sarai were kicked out of Egypt after God intervened. Maybe one reading suggests that after the rape, Sarai gives birth and despises the child that represents her husband's selling of her as a prostitute. After a few years, for whatever reason, Sarai loses favor in Pharaoh's eyes – maybe she turned rebellious? Maybe her "spunk" was gone? God intervened to bring Sarai out of Pharaoh's control. Why not earlier? Why not later? We do not know, but at least it is now. Pharaoh wants all traces of this God-protected, plague-bringing woman out from his house. He sends the girl with Sarai and Sarai takes Hagar, perhaps even against her will or better judgment.

The idea that Hagar came from Pharaoh's household, indeed that she was his daughter, is not new to rabbinic literature. Midrash Rabbah suggests that when Pharaoh experienced the severe plagues afflicted on behalf of Sarah he thought it better for his daughter to be a handmaiden in Abraham and Sarah's esteemed household than an honored wife in the company of a lesser man.⁴ However, in this rabbinic midrash Hagar is not given a mother – the plight of women and their relationships being a common oversight in rabbinic literature. Kaplan builds on the idea that Hagar was Pharaoh's daughter, giving her a mother who was raped by the king and expelled from her place as an enslaved concubine with a small child in tow.

Rabbinic opinion varies on the length of time Abram and Sarai stayed in Egypt. Many agree that Sarai was in Pharaoh's house for only one night, after which she was reunited with Abram accompanied by a healthy apology from Pharaoh. Despite the indication in the text that Pharaoh ordered them to leave immediately upon her return to Abram, there are texts that claim they stayed in Egypt for anywhere from three months to twenty years. The biblical text does not answer this question, nor does it support the idea that Sarai stayed in Pharaoh's house for only one night. The answers to these questions are based on the midrashists' understanding (or imagination) of what occurred during this time. Kaplan's suggestion that Hagar was "old enough to wipe my nose" when they left Egypt is just as plausible as the rabbinic midrashim. It allows for Sarai to have birthed the girl in Pharaoh's household, brought the girl with when reuniting with Abram, and introduced her as a "reward" or gift from Pharaoh, all without Abram knowing the details of the rape.⁵ Abram, Sarai, his household and new wealth left Egypt for the Negev. In Kaplan's story and many rabbinic midrashim this journey presumably includes Hagar.

After being sold by her husband, raped by Pharaoh, and kept as a concubine, Sarai watches Abram separate from Lot, giving him options. She had no options when she was separated from Abraham in Egypt. Maybe this offends her, hurts her, or angers her. Her husband treated his nephew with more respect than he treated his wife.

This preferential treatment towards Lot continues, for “when Abram heard that his kinsman [Lot] had been taken captive, he mustered his retainers...and went in pursuit...” (Gen. 14:17). When his nephew is taken away, Abram fights. One reading might suggest that when Sarai was taken away, Abram enjoyed his wealth without concerning himself with his wife’s safety or condition. Sarai sees this. This does not feel like a husband protecting his wife (or his property). Maybe Sarai needed God’s protection under Pharaoh’s roof because after three years it became clear that Abram was not going to come to her rescue. A more sensitive read might add that perhaps Abram went to help Lot as a result of the guilt he experienced when Sarai came back from Pharaoh’s court a changed woman.

Sarai sees that after he fought for Sodom, Abram will not take payment from the king. Yet, after allowing Sarai to be taken to Pharaoh’s house as a concubine, Abram gladly accepted payment. Twice. Upon seeing this, perhaps Sarai felt like chattel.

The Torah text can be read as an indicator that Sarai was in fact not wholly righteous. The narrative recounts that Sarai said to Abraham, “the Lord has kept me from bearing” (Gen. 16:2). If we allow for Kaplan’s suggestion that Sarai bore Hagar, then she is at worst lying to Abram, at best leaving one word out of her sentence, *l’cha*, that God has kept her from bearing children *to Abram*. Sarai’s lying is not unheard of. The narrative blatantly tells us that she lied when claiming not to laugh at the news of her

pending pregnancy (Gen. 18:16). God keeps promising Abram he will have offspring, but Sarai is beyond wanting to have his children. Let her own child, the one she bore as a result of being sold, or “leased” to Pharaoh, let Hagar bear Abram’s child. Sarai is detached. Maybe she is depressed, deeply angry, or hurt. She is not his lover anymore. Sarai suggests, “perhaps I will be built up through her” (Gen. 16:2), and the son Hagar bears. Perhaps Sarai’s lot will be better if Hagar can give Abram a son and Abram will stop bothering her about children.

Even after having sexual relations with Abram, Hagar remains Sarai’s servant. Sarai cruelly turns the injustice served against her into an injustice against her own daughter, following a pattern of abuse we can recognize today where an abused parent does not see the abuse she is inflicting upon her own child.

After Sarai perceives Hagar snubbing her, she finally feels she has permission to get rid of Hagar. Hagar, the proof of her suffering, the one she brought with her out of Egypt, now looks down on Sarai as an infertile woman. There are contradictions in the persona of an abused woman. Sarai wanting Hagar to have a child for her while simultaneously wanting to cleanse her life of the dirty memories surrounding her daughter’s and grandchild’s existence are contradictory, but not inconsistent with the confusion of an abused woman trying to sort out her situation.

Why does Abram let Sarai evict Hagar? One might suggest that she is nothing to him but a means to an end. Perhaps Abram’s faith leads him to believe he will still have a son. Perhaps his faith is weak and he reasons that the household disharmony indicates poor judgment in sleeping with Hagar. Maybe Abram just gives in to Sarai, again as an

answer to his guilt for selling her off in the first place. Abram loves Sarah, but she distrusts him.

The speculations inherent in this process of retelling can be frustrating and offensive. After believing we know a narrative and incorporating knowledge of rabbinic literature into our understanding of the characters and circumstances, reading through a new lens can seem fake and forced. However, to understand the validity of a Contemporary Midrash based on an unusual understanding of the primary text, it can help to follow the chain of retelling through the entirety of the story.

After God intervenes, Hagar returns to Sarai prepared to submit to her abuse. Sarai finally perceives herself as a woman with power who can pull Hagar back to her. Hagar truly is Sarai's servant. Sarai does not know or does not care about God's intervention on Hagar's behalf, which aligns the women as sisters in suffering or as mother and daughter protected by the same God. This similarity is lost to Sarai.

Finally, Abram begins to make physical strides towards reconciling his relationship with Sarai. Remember that Sarai does not hear God tell Abram to circumcise himself. Sarai only sees that Abram cut off a part of his penis. Does this perhaps appear to Sarai as some kind of penance? She may wonder if this act represents Abram's guilt for impregnating Hagar and not Sarai, or his guilt as a husband for sending his wife to Pharaoh's harem? Abram's circumcising the rest of the men in their camp may only solidify this gesture of repentance in Sarai's mind – he is apologizing for the pain caused to her by any man. While this seems like an extraordinary leap from the text, particularly since as readers we know that God asked for the circumcision, the text does not indicate that Sarai has heard God's voice. If Abram does not tell her why he performed the

circumcision she may only have her own assumptions. As a hurt and confused woman, only recently finding a glimmer of power and strength, she might choose to interpret the act as something meaningful to her own experience.

In addition to circumcising himself and the other men in his household, Abram changes his and Sarai's names to include an initial of God. The newly-named Sarah does not hear the Voice, she only sees the changes in Abraham. She hopes in her heart that he is making an effort. Maybe he is finally trying to put closure on their difficult past.

Sarah might hear Abraham talk about God. Maybe she even accepted God into her own belief. However, she has not heard God speak. Even God's first promise of Isaac (Gen. 17: 19) occurs without Sarah's knowledge. She is constantly "out of the loop."

Now that Abraham has incorporated God into his name, become circumcised, heard about Ishmael's future and Isaac's destined birth, Abraham becomes the perfect host. After telling Sarai to say he is her brother, this is the first moment since entering Egypt that the text recounts Abraham speaking directly to Sarah. By asking her to make cakes for the visitors, Abraham brings Sarah into the fold of doing something righteous, instead of lying and arguably scheming for wealth. He shows her respect.

Sarah perceives that Abraham is finally treating her with respect, demonstrating a positive will to move beyond the pain he caused in Egypt. It is under these circumstances that Sarah hears they will have a son. She laughs. Finally, now, after years without sexual intimacy with her husband, finally, as an old woman, her life is turning to a path of joy? She laughs. It is unbelievable. It is all unbelievable to Sarah. But when asked if she laughed, Sarah feels afraid. In defense of her reaction she denies laughing. Abraham and God scold her. Sarah does not want to be scolded by Abraham. She wants this joy. She,

the neglected wife, wants to make up and stay in the good graces of her husband. God does not speak to her. When the text recounts, "But he replied, 'You did laugh,'" one might argue that it is Abraham who is the "he." Abraham's disapproval threateningly skirts the behavior of his old self, disregarding and even deliberately challenging his wife's feelings.

Despite this momentary scolding, Abraham still tries to continue on his path of righteousness. He defends Sodom and Gomorrah. God sees that Abraham is changing into the kind of man He wants – a fighter for what is right. Perhaps this God, who as a character in Genesis is not always kind, wanted Abraham to experience the wrong of selling off his wife in order to learn the painful road of reconciliation and the struggle of doing right. Maybe Sarah was a pawn.

Even after all they have survived together, when Abraham and his household journey again he once more tells Sarah to lie. In a pattern not unusual to abused women, Sarah obeys her husband's request. In this episode the text specifies that the king who brought her to his house did not approach her, implying that Abimelech was not sexually intimate with Sarah. If here the narrative specifies a lack of interaction, but with regard to Pharaoh the text is silent, it seems reasonable to insert that Pharaoh and Sarai had some kind of sexual experience. If the text wanted to be perfectly clear that they had not had a sexual encounter it would have said so, as it does in the case of Abimelech.

At the conclusion of her night in Abimelech's house, Sarah sees that money is exchanged in *retribution* for the act of taking her captive – yet she was not abused during the stay at this king's palace. Abimelech treated her with dignity. Following this scene, Sarah conceives again, but this time with her husband's child. A reader might wonder:

does sexual interaction between Abraham and Sarah occur after Abraham finally sees Sarah's worth because Abimelech pointed it out to him?

After a long, nearly silent journey Sarah gives birth to Isaac and speaks about the birth of her son. Previously her voice suggested unhappiness or fear: she tells Abram to take her servant as a wife and she proclaims that she did not laugh. When recounting the circumstances of Isaac's birth, Sarah sounds happy! She has a given birth to a child out of what she considers love. But Hagar is still there, the evidence of her rape. Hagar's child is evidence of Sarah treating another woman in exactly the manner that she did not want to be treated. Sarah feels angry, embarrassed, defensive, disgusted, and guilt-ridden. Relying on their newfound joy as husband and wife, Sarah makes Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away. They are the remnant of bad times. Isaac brings in the good times. Sarah wants the past to be over.

Once Isaac is born and Hagar and Ishmael are gone, Sarah no longer plays an active role in the text. Abraham brings Isaac to the slaughter. (Kaplan interprets for today: allows their son to go to war.) Sarah never sees him again. She dies away from her husband. She knows what he did, she knows he did not defend their child. She knows she is alone, for she sent away her own daughter, her first born, and now she must face life alone. The Torah does not explicitly say that Sarah died immediately following the Binding of Isaac. While this rabbinic reading makes sense based on the proximity of the two texts, Sarah could potentially have lived in Kiryat Arba for an indefinite number of years while waiting for someone from her family to come back to her.

Kaplan's depicting of Sarah as an angry, chain-smoking woman is definitely inconsistent with the rabbinic understanding of this matriarch's character. However, it

does not need to be seen as inconsistent with the Torah text. It depends on how we read the narrative. Do we read it looking for examples of righteousness? We can. We can also read it looking for examples of very painful human experiences that depict people with flaws, conflicts, and doubts about themselves and God. This is not the woman upon whom rabbinic literature and Jewish tradition base their reverence for the matriarchs. But this is a woman named Sarah who lives in our Torah with a man named Abraham who is different from the Abraham we know in our books of commentary. We are not required to raise this woman and this man to the level of an esteemed matriarch and patriarch solely based on the account of their lives in the book of Genesis. While undergoing a full exploration of Sarah, Abraham, and Hagar, we should not have to censor our reading of the text to deny what could have happened had our rabbis not believed in the sanctity of Abraham and Sarah as models for good Jewish behavior. None the less, after exploring the darker sides of who Sarah and Abraham could have been, we might choose to adamantly support the rabbinic readings of their righteousness! Connecting to text and believing in its capacity for truth demands that we allow for alternative readings at least to explore limiting assumptions that disallow the range of full human experience to be felt by our ancestors. After reviewing what could emerge from the midrashic process, and perhaps deciding that a particular midrash contradicts our beliefs, we can either change our beliefs or deny the Truth of the midrash. Ultimately, however, the validity of a midrash resulting from a defined process cannot be denied.

After reviewing the acceptability of Kaplan's basic premise, it is also important to consider her chosen style. Hagar and Sarah are clearly modern women with flaws and contemporary outlooks. The Sarah and Hagar we know from the Torah would not

understand airplanes, cowboy boots, telephones, or even the city of Jerusalem. How does this leap of time affect the integrity of a midrash borrowing from an ancient genre? Quite simply, it does not change the legitimacy of the midrash. Perhaps the most famous example of superimposition of time in rabbinic midrash occurs in commentary to the Akedah. Rabbi Berekiah claims that Isaac does not descend Mount Moriah with Abraham after the near-sacrifice because Abraham has sent his son to Shem to study Torah. This is clearly a case of Babylonian rabbis projecting their values and reality onto the biblical ancestors. Kaplan simply follows this projection in contemporizing Sarah and Hagar. While the Contemporary Midrash expands on this particular style, it does have classical predecessors that use the style to a lesser degree.⁶ This technique follows the rubric that Contemporary Midrash should allow for creative freedom while investigating the text.

While the scene and situation facing the characters in this one-act play are certainly superimposed onto the biblical text, they are not eisegetical. Eisegesis implies that the meaning or message of the piece is read into the biblical text, but the meaning of this piece does not stem from its unusual setting. Staying within the boundaries of the relationship as outlined by Scripture (Sarah is Hagar's superior, Hagar is Sarah's servant, the women experience strife, Hagar's son is raised in the wild and becomes a leader) Kaplan derives her exegesis from the Torah text. Sarah is Hagar's mother. The horrible "reality" of Hagar's conception leads Sarah to despise her own daughter. Hagar knows the truth and resents Sarah for the abuse inflicted upon her. The meta-picture speaks to the difficulties of women's relationships, particularly those that abuse and ignore each other without communicating their pains. In most rabbinic commentary the women are silent, absent, or reduced to naïve and chaste pawns. In this scene Kaplan captures the

complicated reality of human beings with faults, traumas, and unseemly pasts. She also allows for the possibility that reconciliation is possible. In this scene it is the men who are absent – except for an allusion to either Pharaoh or Abraham, some man who might yet find Sarah and still be impressed with her beauty. Yet we know from Kaplan's writing that Sarah is much more than just a well-preserved face.

Case in Point: Stealing God, by Susan Kaplow

Susan Kaplow presents another time-travel midrash where the circumstances surrounding Rachel's move from home are contemporized to reflect a modern girl's life. Changing the idols to a tallit, the destination to a college, Jacob to a boyfriend, and introducing a mother all may bring the reader to question this short story's legitimacy as a midrash. How far can an author go away from Scripture, while still being bound by the biblical text? At what point is simply saying, "this is a midrash," not enough to qualify a piece as a midrash? These questions can be asked about any piece, and each one needs to be examined individually.

This story displays reverence for the biblical text, maintaining images throughout reminiscent of the life of Rachel and Jacob. For instance, the words of her father cause a heavy stone to metaphorically seal Rachel's lips. In the biblical text Rachel tends to her father's flocks, watering them at a well covered with a large stone. In order to tend for their flocks all of the shepherds gather together to use their combined strength to uncap the well. However, upon seeing Rachel the patriarch Jacob musters amazing strength and single-handedly removes the stone. Kaplow's reference might be reminiscent of the stone that Jacob moves, unsealing the well beneath. The message might suggest that Laban had

his daughter quiet and under his control. Jacob helped to free her from Laban's fatherly rule. The Jacob in Kaplow's story demonstrates his strength by helping Rachel to come out from under her father's control. Kaplow carefully chooses her allusions to show that not only does she regard the biblical text as holy, but her character Rachel also treats her Judaism with respect and love.

Kaplow allows herself freedom within her investigation of the emotions and motivation behind the biblical Rachel's action of stealing her father's idol. One can argue that Kaplow maintains scriptural boundaries, logically renaming items in the biblical text to match a contemporary experience. For instance, the fictional Rachel's father does not worship idols, however he does worship his tallit and the male-dominant religion it represents for him. This is a type of idol worship that his daughter takes away from him. The most blatant and problematic breach of the biblical text occurs when we find out that the father in Kaplow's story does not know that his daughter Rachel is headed for the same destination as her boyfriend Jacob. Kaplow introduces the idea that Jacob may be blamed for stealing the tallit-idol, but fails to parallel her characters' stories with the biblical account that the father Laban did not know at all that his daughters were leaving with their husband Jacob.

This inconsistency with the biblical text must not simply be ignored under the pretense that the author should have creative license with her search for a truth from the biblical narrative. Not meeting the criterion that midrashim remain bound by Torah brings into question the legitimacy with which this story uses the title "midrash." However, of the four criteria specified an individual reader must reconcile to what extent one may violate a parameter and still be creating midrash. Is one stray component enough

to invalidate the midrashic legitimacy of an entire piece? Probably not, depending on its relevance to the overall exegesis, if the other components are in place. Perhaps this is exactly the window that a knowledgeable teacher can use to help educate a midrashist regarding biblical text and consistency. The process and message are not disregarded, but a space is made to introduce further Torah study to the author.

The message of this story again provides a perspective of the woman's mind, often omitted from rabbinic text. This Rachel takes her father's tallit because she believes that she appreciates it more than he does, she believes that he is blind to the power of God manifested in its billowing silk. The biblical text does not tell us about Rachel's motivation but only that, "Rachel stole her father's household idols," unbeknownst to any of her traveling companions.⁷ After reading the modern Rachel's encounter with holiness and struggle to find her own spirit under the oppressive roof of her father's house, one can return to the biblical text with a different perspective. Perhaps, as Kaplow seems to suggest, the biblical Rachel stole her father's idols because she believed in their power. For her the idols held a key to communicating with the god she believed in, gods that could protect her on her journey.

Rachel as a pagan heretic is not a comfortable insight for readers who want to maintain the sanctity of our matriarchs as God-fearing women. While the ancient rabbis may not agree that Rachel was an idol worshipper, rabbinic midrashim do not unanimously support her as a sinless woman either. Maybe Rachel stole the idols with the noble purpose of protecting her father from his errant ways.⁸ However, as other midrashim suggest, perhaps she could not help but steal the idols for she was the exemplar of a fundamental weakness in women: women are prone to thievery. This verse

(Gen. 31:19) is used to proof-text one of several faults in woman who, as it says in Proverbs, has “spurned all my advice, and would not hear my rebuke” (1:25). Despite the fact that God advised her otherwise woman still is “light-fingered” and prone to stealing.⁹ Clearly this simplified reasoning for Rachel’s action deserves a modern person’s perspective. What leads a daughter to steal beloved, holy objects from her father, especially considering that this is a violation of one of the ten commandments? Kaplow’s story allows for a contemporary answer that may at first seem to admonish Rachel as an idol worshipper, but in fact tries to establish her as a God-seeking young woman. The fact that both Rachels steal from their father raises ethical questions about their behavior – but does not contradict a reading that sees them as women who desire a relationship with God.

Case in Point: Four Notes, by Vered Lynne Harris

Centuries of speculation surround the circumstances of the Binding of Isaac. The ancient rabbis created numerous midrashim addressing the factors that might have motivated Abraham to bring his son for a sacrifice, and what might have motivated God to ask for such an offering. Contemporary feminist literature frequently asks the question “Where was Sarah?” during this narrative, offering answers that range from Sarah’s knowing the details of the Binding to her complete ignorance of the episode. While the ancient rabbis are often criticized today for ignoring the women in the Torah, contemporary readers must not ignore the rabbinic midrashim that address our modern questions: Where was Sarah? How much did she know?

Speculating why Abraham was not with his wife when she died, Rabbi Jose suggests that Abraham came to Sarah directly from Mount Moriah. According to this midrash Sarah died of grief thinking that Isaac had been sacrificed.¹⁰ How did Sarah learn of this event? A contemporary reader might build a midrash based on a modern model of marriage, where Abraham tells his wife of God's command with trepidation or fear of her reaction. The ancient rabbis explain in a midrash that Satan came to Sarah disguised as an old man in order to disclose the sacrifice. Despite Sarah's shock and the account that she "was not more of this world," her faith proved unshakable when she declared to Satan, "All that God told Abraham, may he do it in life and in peace."¹¹

Working from the assumption that Sarah did not know why Abraham and Isaac embarked on their journey, I tried to simultaneously project a contemporary woman's response (looking for her missing family) with the events of the narrative. How did Sarah come to die in Kiryat Arba when it appears that Abraham left for Mount Moriah from Be'er Sheva? The Four Notes strive to convey that Abraham did not tell Sarah about his plan. When Sarah discovered that her husband and son were gone she initially went about her activities as she would any other day. As the day progressed and turned into night, the matriarch began to worry. This midrash attempts to show Sarah as a proactive character. Unable to sit idly waiting, Sarah sets out to find her husband and son herself. Abraham and Isaac went on a three day journey to Mount Moriah, indicating that they were gone for a total of at least six days. Presumably this time frame allows Sarah the time to worry, panic, search, find an answer from a local shepherd, and then determine her own course of action.

This midrash does not suggest that Sarah dies of a broken heart. In fact, it does not even suggest that she died immediately following the Akedah. The reader can determine this individually. What I hope this midrash does is offer a new way to read the text, suggesting that Sarah travels to Kiryat Arba in search of a friend's company and establishing a pre-existing relationship between Abraham and Ephron through the friendship of their wives. Ephron, the man who sold Abraham the cave of Machpelah in which to bury Sarah, does not have a wife named in the text. However, many times the names or existence of women are omitted. By joining the families before Abraham encounters Ephron a depth is added to Sarah's persona. The next installment to this midrash might offer journal entries specifying what Sarah confided to Malkah, and what Ephron in turn knew about Abraham's disappearance and Sarah's concern for her son. While this midrash does not offer many definite answers, it hopefully reframes the existing information to allow for a new level of exploration.

There are not many rabbinic midrashim addressing why Sarah died in a place other than where Abraham left her. One midrash asks the question "Why Kiryat Arba?" and answers with numerous variations on the number four (since *arba* means "four" in Hebrew). For instance, the midrash tells us that four righteous men were circumcised there: Abraham, Aner, Eshkol and Mamre. It also tells us that four righteous men were buried there: Adam, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And four righteous women were buried there: Eve, Sarah, Rebecca, and Leah. The point of the midrash seems to be to suggest why the city is called Kiryat *Arba* in this particular place in the text, as opposed to one of the city's other three names. Note that Kiryat Arba is one of four names for the place, in addition to Eshkol, Mamre, and Hebron. This midrash that asks "Why Kiryat Arba?"

does not ask “How did Sarah come to Kiryat Arba?” which is the question that was important to me as a reader.

Contemporary Midrash often opens new avenues for discovery so that one midrash is only a starting point for further inquiries into the text and its implications. The presentation of Sarah as a woman with responsibilities (gathering eggs for the household), a schedule (down for my nap), an awareness of her advanced years (“Guess I’m getting pretty old and forgot.”), and a doubt of her husband’s honesty (“You did tell me, didn’t you?”) gives a modern person places to relate with the character. Other aspects of the note also give insight into the relationship between wife, husband and son. Once we feel connected to the characters in the Torah we are in a better position to speculate on what messages their life stories can relay to our life experiences.

Case in Point: Adam, by Yevgeny Vinokurov

Two main issues are often identified by practitioners of Contemporary Midrash as the impetus for needing new voices commenting on the traditional texts. These two modern topics that demand a paradigm shift for many contemporary readers are feminism and the Holocaust. Feminist perspectives are both obvious and deducible in the previous three pieces. Midrashim responding to the Holocaust ask much different questions, including grappling with eschatology and the role of God in human experience. Contemporary midrashim connecting Torah texts to the Holocaust also sometimes struggle with the existence of God in the modern world. It is important to note that *struggling* with whether or not God exists is not the same as *denying* God’s existence, even if that struggle includes exploring ramifications for a godless world. A person

grappling with whether or not God is real can still treat Scripture as a holy text with sacred meaning and tradition.

In his poem "Adam" Yevgeny Vinokurov plays with the meaning of knowing good and evil after the realities of the Holocaust. In Psalms a passage reads, "Your eyes saw my unformed limbs; they were all recorded in Your book; in due time they were formed, to the very last one of them."¹² The ancient rabbis used this verse as a starting point to craft a midrash that teaches Adam saw every generation and its sages throughout time. Adam himself was unformed at the time of this viewing, not yet sculpted into the final version of man.¹³

Perhaps based on this rabbinic teaching Vinokurov imagines an Adam that sees his future generations – the still unformed limbs of his legacy developed into human beings thousands of years later. The joy of seeing his children is not hampered by the vision of them murdered in Auschwitz because Adam has not yet eaten from the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. We cannot speculate on whether or not Vinokurov knew of the rabbinic midrash, but his poem becomes a response to the rabbis as well a speculation on destiny. The rabbinic midrash suggests that the sages and generations of Adam were all predestined by God, written before the completion of Creation. There were arguably sages in the generations murdered by the Nazis. If this is true, then the Holocaust was a predestined event revealed to Adam before human beings could understand the implications of evil in our world. Vinokurov's poem does not mention God as the source of Adam's dream, but it does imply inevitability with Adam's vision and thus speaks to a notion of God as the One who predetermined history with Creation.

The rabbis could not respond to the Holocaust fifteen hundred years before it occurred. Yet Torah is supposed to be a timeless text speaking to every generation of Jews throughout time. As a result, the members of each new generation must have the freedom with the text to allow it to speak to their concerns and experiences. The depth and meaning of any piece of literature can be argued from many perspectives, and this is particularly true of poetry. A few of the discussions which could stem from Vinokurov's poem might include whether good and evil are absolute or subjective terms; if upon eating from the fruit Adam became aware of the devastation to come, or only of the good and evil in his own experience; based on God's history of Creation, what was the role that God played in constructing the Holocaust; the culpability of a person who does not seem to distinguish between good and evil.

Not only does Vinokurov remain within the confines of Scripture, he seems to include a rabbinic midrash in the process that leads to his poem. Taking from his experience with Torah and his experience with midrash, Vinokurov then incorporates the next step: testing both texts against the modern world. It seems that Vinokurov is finding a resolution to the rabbinic midrash – if Adam could see into the future, why did he not have a reaction to the horrors of the Holocaust? The answer Vinokurov suggests is that Adam did not know what he saw was evil. As noted above, there are many other issues raised by Vinokurov's poem and the midrash on a midrash on the Torah becomes a starting point for endless exegetical discussions.

Summary

These four pieces present diverse ways of reading the biblical text through contemporary eyes. Addressing issues both similar and unimaginable to the writers of

rabbinic midrashim, Contemporary Midrash can bridge questions ancient and modern by using the Torah text in a serious, meaningful way.

When reading Contemporary Midrash it is beneficial to also look to the midrashim of the ancient rabbis. This process of connecting the original genre with the developing style of midrash bolsters the authenticity of the new midrashim. We see that the issues important to contemporary midrashists can parallel the questions the rabbis put to the texts. Incorporating ancient midrashim into the study of modern midrashim can also suggest a continuity with both Torah and rabbinic texts as the authors of new pieces strive to maintain the integrity of their work through consistency with the tradition. However, agreeing to remain bound by holy Scripture does not exclude the midrashist from “playing” with the text and freely exploring new readings of old words. The presentation of the new midrash after the midrashic process of exploration may also leave the confines of the ancient midrashic style to allow for creative expressions of the newly discovered questions and answers.

Beyond the enjoyment that one may find reading new pieces of literature or experiencing different types of midrashic art, important values for the modern Jewish world can be realized through Contemporary Midrash. These potential benefits will be further explored in the next chapter, *Contemporary Midrash: Why We Need It Today*.

Chapter Four – Contemporary Midrash: Why We Need It Today

A congregation that I once served as student rabbi had a Torah in their ark that survived the Holocaust. After purchasing a new Torah, some members of the congregation did not want to continue using the Holocaust Torah. This particular scroll was legible and in fairly good condition. Members of the Board approached me and asked me what I thought about no longer reading from the Holocaust Torah. In an unguarded moment I passionately responded that the Torah is our Tree of Life, our *eitz chaim*. When we do not use a healthy Torah scroll for Shabbat services, Torah study, and as a part of our ritual observance we are essentially holding back the water that gives it life. Although I believe what I said, I was perhaps a bit indiscriminate when announcing that by “retiring” a kosher scroll we are disrespecting the generations of people who were murdered because of their connection to that very Torah. In relaying this episode to a professor and struggling with my undiplomatic response, she mused that I had essentially announced to the Board that those people who wanted to discontinue using the Torah were “Torah killers” – not a comfortable image, or the one I intended to send!

Several months later at a training program for creating Contemporary Midrash, Alicia Ostriker introduced me to a metaphor that resonated with my Holocaust Torah experience. Ostriker explained that like any healthy tree, the Tree of Life must continue to grow. Contemporary Midrash is part of this growth. As with any living thing, without growth the Torah would die. Contemporary Midrash is just one method of Torah study that keeps the Torah a living, breathing document. We cannot neglect what came before,

for the new buds could not exist without the branches, trunk, roots, and seeds. But all that came before would petrify if we do not tend to its growth.

Jewish people of all ages are busy creating new midrashim in congregational and non-congregational settings. This endeavor teaches people that the lens through which they see the world can also be applied to seeing the Torah. For many unaffiliated Jews who found an inroad to Torah through Contemporary Midrash the story is the same: they say that they never knew Torah study could be so intriguing and relevant.

Particularly with adult learning, relevancy is a primary factor in encouraging study. The “initiated” – the person who has turned to Torah study as a part of his life long connection to Judaism – may see the relevancy as inherent, for it is already an integral part of his life. But for those who were discouraged from serious Jewish learning at a young age, either because they did not have access to it or they were bored by the exposure they had, Contemporary Midrash offers one avenue towards bringing Torah into their lives.

Contemporary Midrash is used today to bring people to a deeper connection with Torah and a deeper commitment to Torah study. Peter Pitzele, renowned for his work with a form of Contemporary Midrash known as bibliodrama, began his Torah study by first experimenting with psychodramatic role-playing based on biblical narratives. After being told that his experiment had a name in Jewish study, Pitzele began to learn more about the genre of midrash. His involvement with bibliodrama spurred him to learn more about what different traditional commentators said about the narratives he explored in Contemporary Midrash. He began learning from rabbis and other learned Jews who were his students in bibliodramatic experiences. What may at first have appeared an innocent

dabbling in mixing biblical stories and psychodrama became a field of its own and a catalyst for Pitzele to enter into Jewish study in a way he did not anticipate. This movement from making Contemporary Midrash (of any type) to learning more about rabbinic midrashim, Talmud, and medieval commentators is not unique to Pitzele – many creators of Contemporary Midrash relay the same journey.

For the “initiated” student or scholar of Jewish text, Contemporary Midrash may force a dramatic change in the way he reads Torah. Beginning in Contemporary Midrash with access to the traditional texts provides the midrashist with a higher level of authenticity in his own work and connection to the breadth of Jewish literature that Contemporary Midrash strives to join. While this previous knowledge is certainly an attribute, it can also be a hurdle for someone new to Contemporary Midrash. Reading the Torah through one’s own eyes with permission to even temporarily dismiss thousands of years of rabbinic commentary requires a paradigm shift for the “initiated” student. Contemporary Midrash asks that an individual learn not just from what others have said in the past about the Torah, but also from what modern eyes today might say about the narratives it relays. The process of Contemporary Midrash encourages personal growth outside of the established comfort zone enmeshed in rabbinic scholarship. This can be jarring, frightening, and even fundamentally offensive to people accustomed to traditional Torah study. When approached with an open mind it can also be liberating, inspiring, and eye-opening in unimaginable ways.

Practitioners of Contemporary Midrash approach the creation of new midrashim with a range of understandings of what both rabbinic and modern midrash entails. At a workshop for writing Contemporary Midrash, participants were asked to articulate why

they create new midrashim and what they see as the connection between rabbinic and modern midrash. Some of the participants had rabbinic training and an easy fluidity with rabbinic text. Others had a basic knowledge of rabbinic tradition, but were much more familiar with other ancient literary pieces. The reactions that these people have to grappling with the Torah text and producing new midrashim speak towards viewing Contemporary Midrash as a Torah-affirming, God-seeking process for the modern Jewish experience. Their statements include:¹

“We don’t have [the same connection as the rabbis had to ancient oral legends]. What we have is the text and our response to it. We write stories or essays or poems that start with a close look at the text and we ask questions. Where are the gaps? Where are the holes in it? How do these people feel? There is plenty of room in there for answers. Sometimes there are things that don’t seem to make sense and it is up to us to come up with an explanation, or an argument. Every time there’s a problem in the text, that is an opportunity to write up a midrash about it, whether it’s a grammatical problem or logistics, or whatever.”

- Ann Nunes, teacher at a community college

“I think Contemporary Midrash as we know it today couldn’t have happened without Freud or Jung. It really has grown out of a modern psychological understanding of human dynamics and a desire to understand these characters in a deeper way than they may come across on the sacred text page.

“But I also like to stay grounded when I can in text, in the traditional Torah text... I am still attached to the sacred text, I am still attached to the classical midrash in that way, and yet Contemporary Midrash is incredibly exciting and creative.”

- Pam Wax, congregational rabbi

“I love ancient and Contemporary Midrash. For me, the rabbis of old were the first literary critics. They were of course working with sacred text, but they were sensitive to and devised equally sophisticated approaches to text as Aristotle or the ancient Greek[s] and Romans. They were very aware of different levels of textual interpretation. They were very aware of things like word play.

“What I love about doing Contemporary Midrash is that even though we can’t touch a letter of the Torah itself, we can say anything we want about it, in any way that we want to, and in ways that tap into our deepest individual selves. [We can talk about it] in ways that excite the imagination, in ways that bring us closer to an ancient community that we may not be so immediately in contact with. From a literary point of view I find it a very exciting practice.”

- Ronnie Scharfman, professor of French and Literature

“The way I think of midrash is this: I kind of figure that I am living in the text along with the characters and all of the people who have come before who tried to grapple with the text. Midrash is trying to figure out where you are: where the actual characters in the text are, where the rabbis are who tried to understand it so long ago, and where we are, trying to understand both our position in the world and in the text.”

- Virginia Spatz, lay leader in a congregation without a rabbi and a Jew by choice

“For me, Contemporary Midrash is just like pornography: know it when I see it. It is very free. Working with the sacred text and really paying deep, close attention to the language, the Hebrew, and the grammar, and getting in and knowing these characters... it all allows for me to transcend my own life, to grow in my own life, and to become closer to the Divine.

“I don’t know why this is more exciting for me than working with Shakespeare. I don’t know why I want to create this kind of theatre. But the reason that I am doing it is that it makes me feel closer to God.”

- Gabrielle Kaplan, rabbinical student, teacher, playwright
aspiring to create Jewish sacred theatre

“I write and teach Contemporary Midrash because I believe that Torah is a Tree of Life, that is still growing. When we do midrash we are part of its growth. I think that Judaism is in process of change and that those who work in this field are doing something not only for themselves but also for Torah and for God. Torah asks to be continuously reinterpreted. God asks to be continuously reinterpreted. That’s our work and I believe it is as important as the shift from Temple sacrifice to Yavneh.”

- Alicia Ostriker, English professor, midrashist, teacher at the
Institute for Contemporary Midrash

The field of Jewish Education has been undergoing an important shift for several years. Educators are striving to make Jewish Education vibrant and connected to the every day concerns and lives of Jewish learners. Many Jews who grew up in congregations where Jewish education was a burden, bogged down by rote activities and repetitive text book work seek experiences for their children and grandchildren that inspire intellectual activity as fun and enjoyable challenges. Simultaneously, many of these people are investigating adult learning opportunities that bring the riches of Jewish learning to a level they find accessible and fulfilling. A connection to God and the Jewish people is gained through these carefully crafted educational growth experiences. To claim

that this shift is as monumental as the shift from Temple sacrifice to Yavneh may seem like hyperbole to many of us. However, the point that an important undercurrent is happening that demands relevancy and inspiration from Judaism and its sacred texts is, for most communities, undeniable. Contemporary Midrash is answering this demand. It is opening the eyes and hearts of Jewish people around the nation to the possibilities of Torah for life long learning and a relationship to the breadth and depth of Judaism.

Other aspects of modern Jewish practice also appeal to keeping Judaism invigorated with new insights and relevancy. Contemporary Midrash is one way to tap into the need for a never-ending dialogue between personal growth and Jewish communal traditions. Torah is our collective story as a people. Contemporary Midrash allows us to bring our individual stories, insights and opinions to the narrative of our communal experiences. Through Contemporary Midrash we know that our voices can echo Torah as it echoes our lives. Torah can continue to speak to us throughout all of our modern experiences. By reading the Torah again and again, approaching it with new eyes informed by old ideas we reaffirm the value that Torah is a timeless document, eternally relevant to the Jewish people.

There is a Jewish folktale about an old man planting a carob tree in his garden. Honi the circle maker sees this elderly gardener and asks him, "Old man, why do you plant that tree? Don't you know that by the time it bears fruit you will be long past this world?" The old man responds, "Yes, it is true that I will be dead before this tree bears fruit. But I grew up enjoying the fruit from the trees planted by my ancestors, and my grandchildren and great-grandchildren will grow up enjoying the fruit from this tree that I plant today."

In tending to the Tree of Life, we are similar to that old man. Although it is not a brand new tree that we plant, we use Contemporary Midrash to assist the Tree of Life to continue to bear fruit. As the branches grow, its influence spreads. Contemporary Midrash can help maintain the Torah as a beautiful, meaningful text for the generations yet to come.

Appendix A

Hagar, the Stranger, calls home by Gabrielle Suzanne Kaplan¹

Open, blank stage. Stage right Hagar stands surrounded by mismatched luggage. A pay phone is on the wall beside her. Stage right Sarah sits beside a table holding a phone, a pack of cigarettes, and ashtrays. The women do not make eye contact.

HAGAR:

I have landed. I am sick. I was sick for the last six hours of the flight. My flight to Jerusalem was turbulent and four hours late. They would not leave Kennedy. El Al would not leave Kennedy until they checked each and every crevice of my pockets, my bags, my books. I am a stranger.

SARAH:

Strange. Waiting by my telephone. I never wait for anyone. I gave that up after I waited once, three long days, waited for my husband, my son to come home. I detest waiting.

HAGAR:

Waiting. She was never good at waiting. It will make her crazy to wait for me. I should call. No. She used to make me wait. I remember she would eat first, take her time, stuffing dates and cheese and hot pickles in her mough. After I cleaned her table, then I could eat.

SARAH:

Eating. I have to stop eating. I'm trying not to smoke. I've promised my best girlfriend we will quit smoking together. She's weak that way. I haven't smoked for two hours. I don't know why I should bother at this age. One can't live forever. As Golda Meir said, "I'm too old to die young." (She laughs nervously and lights a cigarette. For the rest of the scene she alternates between smoking and stuffing her face with pumpkin seeds.)

HAGAR:

(pulls out compact and lipstick, applies)

Young. I don't look young. I know it. The bitch stared at my passport. 36? She asked. 36 I said. It's just a number. Thirty-six of my years, sweetheart, years in the wilderness, they don't give you a pretty face.

SARAH:

Smoking has leathered my girlfriend's face. That's why she wants to quit; it's not her lungs, she wants to save what she can of her face. Ha! Not Sarah. My face betrays me. If he foundm e, if he walked through that door, he'd still call me princess. Take my chin in his thick hand, "My princess!" All my life, men stopped in their tracks when they saw my face. A sense of humor, our creator has. No one can see my scream with such a face.

¹ This is an unpublished work in progress, used with the permission of the author.

HAGAR:

I am a stranger with my covered head, my cowboy boots, my tight jeans. The look of my lips, black kohl around my eyes. I look Egyptian like my father. I don't look like my mother at all.

SARAH:

She couldn't afford her own ticket. That was clear. I've kept up with her over the years. Not by speaking with her, by asking. A woman has a network. Someone has to know someone whose aunt knows someone else. It wasn't easy. She doesn't keep an address. She doesn't pay taxes. She lived in a convent at one point. Then she turned around and went through a time where she leant herself to men.

HAGAR:

Only my mother would send me to Jerusalem on El Al. Only my mother, who laughs hysterically at herself any chance she gets, would lose all sense of irony when it comes to anything concerning me.

SARAH:

The child, the boy writes to me. He is in law school, on scholarship. He looked me up.

HAGAR:

He looked her up –

SARAH:

He runs a group on campus, you've heard them on the news. The Palestinian students who build shanties on the Prime Minister's lawn –

HAGAR:

My son grew up in the wild – do you know what I mean – sleeping in shelters, sleeping where I could find him sleep –

SARAH:

Who sleep in the shanties protesting something or other. At least he makes a name for himself.

HAGAR:

My son will be a great leader – MY son is a great leader –

SARAH:

He writes me darling letters about his political views. Dear Sarah, he writes. She won't let him call me Grandma.

HAGAR:

Those years. She knew we didn't have food. How could she not have known, I didn't know where I'd find his food.

SARAH:

Won't call me Grandma. Ridiculous. He knows. He knows.

HAGAR:

My father was an Egyptian king. He never knew me. The palace was large, the concubines in their quarters. I went to a psychic once. She told me I should have returned to his palace. That he lived in deep pain, eternally waiting for me. Bullshit. I don't believe that. My father didn't know I exist. You can't ache for what you never know. Rather, she suffers. You can't really sit shiva for one who's still alive.

SARAH:

She thinks she is the only one without a home. She imagines me an old woman who has never left her mother's home. I could tell her stories. I could tell her stories that would wipe that superior smirk off her face, stories that would freeze her dropped jaw, her chin.

HAGAR:

It's like this: she plays that memory game. The blank chalkboard. Trauma. Before. After. Rape. I was old enough to wipe my nose when we left Egypt. Who was I, this sniveling wet thing? Why, she must be a slave. The princess needs a slave.

SARAH:

She doesn't have to call me. It would be better if she stays away. I shouldn't have listened to that old Rabbi. I never go to shul. Only Yom Kippur. I go for Yizkor, I go to that awful building because I have a son who went to fight a war in Lebanon. I have a son whose father promised he wouldn't make the boy—we would take the boy to Canada or claim religion—I have a son who went to Lebanon, who I haven't seen since. I go once a year, for Yizkor. And those old rabbis, they tell you if you don't forgive, make up, ask forgiveness, you may not live.

HAGAR:

I might as well call my mother. I don't have to stay with her. I wouldn't mind seeing her face. Watch her mouth curl when she sees my wrinkled face. I won't stay with her. She made that clear. We will have tea. At the King David hotel. The diplomat's hotel. She will pay for me to stay at the hotel. In a room with a beautiful view of the Old City, a room far more luxurious than my efficiency apartment in Brooklyn. She has agreed to pay.

SARAH:

I could go for a walk. I need more smokes. Or I could bake. I haven't baked in years. I remember, she likes honey. And pistachio. She always had rich taste.

Hagar picks up the phone. She dials Sarah. It rings.

SARAH:

Yes?

HAGAR:
Hello—yes—

SARAH:
Yes, Yes—

HAGAR:
Yes.

Lights down. The end.

Appendix B

Stealing God by Susan Kaplow¹

Rachel made her way through the thicket of suitcases on her bedroom floor and stepped out into the dark hall. Her heart pounded, though all she had been doing for the past three hours was lying in bed thinking. Thinking about how hard she had wrestled with her father for permission to go to Stanford, when he wanted her to stay home and go to Penn like him. Thinking about what she had decided to do tonight, her last chance before she flew to California in the morning.

Thick carpeting muffled the sound of Rachel's footsteps as she walked down the long hallway. Her father had never agreed to her college plans. "I won't bless a mistaken enterprise," he had told her, "but it's not worth the argument. If this is what you and your mother want, I wash my hands of it." Rachel reached her parents' bedroom. Through the closed door she whispered: "Dad, I'm tired of begging for your blessing. You're not God, even though you think you are."

Rachel bit down hard on her lip, frightened by her own daring. Any minute, she feared, her father would come roaring through the door to stop her. But the house stayed silent.

At the top of the long, curved staircase, Rachel paused and looked into the shadows below. A few months back, she had floated down these stairs in her prom dress toward her boyfriend, Jacob. Tears had filled his eyes as he took her hand and kissed her lightly on the forehead. How had she found someone so different from her father? Her

¹ Reprinted from *Living Text: The Journal of Contemporary Midrash* 2 (winter 1997): 44-46.

father disliked Jacob, would never have let her go to Stanford if he knew Jacob would be there, too.

Now the staircase looked like a steep, rickety ladder with no one to hold it steady. Rachel's stomach lurched. This was even more frightening than standing up to her father about college. I'll just try it on and be back in my room before he finds out, Rachel reassured herself. Gripping the polished banister, she slowly descended the stairs.

At the bottom, Rachel crossed the hallway and hesitated on the threshold of her father's study. She had never been in here before without his invitation and she half-expected a stern voice to rise from a thick cloud and say: "Thou shalt not." Rachel shook her head. Why should she obey her father as if he had engraved the stone tablets himself? Anger carried her into the room, across the wide expanse of dark purple rug to the massive mahogany desk. "The ark of the covenant," her mother always called the desk, a sarcastic twist in her voice. But she enforced Rachel's father's commandment that no one be allowed to touch the desk except him.

Kneeling, Rachel grasped the brass handle and pulled open the bottom drawer. Inside lay the scarlet and gold tallit [fringed prayer shawl] bag her mother had embroidered with the Lion of Judah surrounded by bells and pomegranates. Didn't her mother resent being allowed to make the cover but being forbidden to touch what was inside? Rachel would never settle for being a handmaiden to her husband.

Ever since she had first seen the tallit billow around her father's shoulders, Rachel had longed for the black and white silk to embrace her. Then she would be as special to God as her father was. Then she could kiss God's word with the white fringes. One Shabbat, in the back of the sanctuary just before services, Rachel had shyly asked her

father if she could try on his tallit. "Don't be ridiculous," he had answered, turning to laugh with two other fathers who had overheard her request. Ruffling her hair, he said: "Be grateful you don't have to wear the tallit. One less obligation for my Rachele."

Her father's words had rolled a huge stone over Rachel's mouth. Since that day, she had never spoken to him about the tallit again.

Rachel pulled the tallit bag from the drawer and removed the tallit. For a long moment, she held it in her hands, surprised by the feel of the silk, strong and soft at once. Then she loosed the tallit, let it billow around her shoulders. She shivered with the cool current it made as it settled over her. Eyes closed, Rachel pulled the tallit tight and stood still. She waited for a sign of God's disapproval. Instead, a phrase flew into her mind, beating a steady reassurance: *Kanfay Shekhinah*, Shekhinah's wings.

And the rhythm of the phrase lifted Rachel's feet until she was dancing around the mahogany desk, threshing her father's deep purple rug with her steps. The tallit lifted and swirled her, drew her past the dark windows that burst with reflected light, faster and faster until she gasped for breath. Then she slowed, swaying with the tallit, smiling.

I'll have to take it off soon, she thought. A picture of her father came into her mind. He was putting on his tallit again, as if she had never worn it. Ordinary gestures for him, he had done this so many times. He could never feel for his tallit what Rachel felt, never need it as much as she did. Grabbing the edge of the tallit in both hands, Rachel said out loud: "I have to have it."

She removed the tallit from her shoulders and began to fold it into a small square. As soon as she got back to her room, she would hide the tallit under the sweaters at the bottom of her suitcase. By the time her father discovered it was gone, she would be in her

new home in California with Jacob. Her father would never let himself think his Rachele could be the thief; he might accuse Jacob, but so what?

Gently Rachel kissed each of the fringes before she tucked them into the folds of the tallit. Picking up the empty tallit bag, she put it back in place and closed the drawer. She pressed the tallit to her chest and climbed back up the stairs.

Appendix C

Four Notes by Vered Lynne Harris

Abie –

Boy! You got up early this morning.

Ran out for some eggs.

Back soon.

S.

Abe –

Please be quiet when you enter the tent.

Down for my nap.

Love,

S.

Abie –

Since when don't you come home at night?

If you find this note please stay here.

I took the donkey to Nahor's – in case you're there.

S.

Abraham –

Back from Nahor's.

Saw Ben the shepherd on my way back. He told me he saw you leave with Isaac and the boys, equipped for a journey.

Guess I'm getting pretty old and forgot.

You did tell me, didn't you?

Anyway, I'm not sure when you're coming back so I'm going to Malkah, wife of Ephron, in Kiriath Arba.

Send word when you get home.

You know how I hate being in this tent alone!

Love to Izzy,

Sarah.

Appendix D

Adam by Yevgeny Vinokurov¹

On the first day, gazing idly around,
He trampled the grass down and stretched himself
In the shade of the fig tree.

 And placing
His hands behind his head,
 dozed.

Sweetly he slept, untroubled was his sleep
In Eden's quiet, beneath the pale blue sky.
And in his dreams he saw the ovens of Auschwitz
And he saw ditches filled with corpses.

He saw his own children!
 In the bliss
Of paradise, his face lit up.
He slept, understanding nothing,
Not knowing good and evil yet.

¹ This poem, translated from the Russian by Daniel Weissbrot, appears in David Curzon, ed., *Modern Poems on the Bible: An Anthology* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1994), 57.

Notes

Chapter One – The Purpose and Techniques of Rabbinic Midrash

¹ For a chart of major midrashic works and their dates, see Moshe David Herr, “Midrash,” in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 11:1511.

² For further historical details, see Robert M. Seltzer, “The Efflorescence of Rabbinic Judaism, Second to Seventh Centuries,” in *Jewish People, Jewish Thought* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1980), 243-314.

³ Pirkei Avot 1:1 Pinhas Kehati.

⁴ *B.T. Shabbat* 31a.

⁵ For more on the authority of Oral Torah, see Rimón Kasher, “The Interpretation of Scripture in Rabbinic Literature,” in *Mikra* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 547-94, but especially 550-51.

⁶ Gary G. Porton, *Understanding Rabbinic Midrash* (Hoboken: Ktav, 1985), 9.

⁷ Jacob Neusner, *What is Midrash?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 45.

⁸ Barry Holtz explains in *Back to the Sources* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), 138, that the Tannaitic period lasted for roughly the first two centuries of the Common Era. Mishnah, Tosefta, Midrashim, and certain other books composed during this time are known as Tannaitic literature. The Amoraic period lasted from about the third to sixth centuries. The distinction is most often used in referencing talmudic sages and rabbinic literature.

⁹ David Stern, *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 56. The weekly Torah readings in compilations of homiletical midrashim are “divided according to the Palestinian triennial cycle in one of its several versions” (56).

¹⁰ Porton, *Understanding Rabbinic Midrash*, 10.

¹¹ Michael A. Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 8.

¹² Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 56.

¹³ Erich Auerbach, “Odysseus’ Scar,” in *Mimesis*, translated by Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 3-23.

¹⁴ Here *aggadah* can be understood as referring to non-legal midrashic discourse.

¹⁵ Herr, “Aggadah,” *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2:358.

¹⁶ Genesis Rabbah 91:8.

¹⁷ David Stern, *Parables in Midrash* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 187. Stern comments that parables are scarcely found in biblical and Late Antiquity writings. He suggests that this is because the texts we have (without parables) were not oral sermons meant for the masses but rather “high-brow” preached sermons for the highly literate. The educated elite did not need a parable to help concretize abstract ideas.

¹⁸ Herr, “Aggadah,” *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2:359.

Chapter Two – Contemporary Midrash

¹ Fine describes the midrashic process and its effect on people, particularly on women, in her Preface to *Taking the Fruit: Modern Women's Tales of the Bible*, 2d ed. Jane Sprague Zones, ed. (San Diego: Women's Institute for Continuing Education, 1989).

² Professor Visotsky led a New York based study group in the reading of Genesis. His book *The Genesis of Ethics*, New York: Crown, 1996 is based on these study sessions. The cross-denominational group found that "in studying the family narratives in Genesis, moral education occurs," (p. 11). Professor Visotsky explains that while reading Genesis for moral guidance "I am not primarily interested in understanding the contextual meaning of the narrative," (p. 30). His methods are useful for those creating Contemporary Midrash.

³ Burton L. Visotsky, *Reading the Book: Making the Bible a Timeless Text* (New York: Anchor, 1991).

⁴ Arthur Strimling, telephone interview by author, 13 August 1999. Strimling taught the Storytelling tract at The Institute for Contemporary Midrash (ICM) Summer Training Intensives, July 5-11, 1999, at Camp Isabella Freedman in Connecticut.

⁵ Alicia Ostriker, interview by author, transcript of tape recording. Institute for Contemporary Midrash (ICM), Camp Isabella Freedman, Connecticut. 6 July 1999. In addition to *The Nakedness of the Fathers: Biblical Visions and Revisions*, Ostriker is the author of several books of poetry and works of literary criticism. She teaches English and creative writing at Rutgers University, and taught the Advanced Writing Seminar at the ICM Summer Training Intensives July 5-11, 1999.

⁶ Maimonides' eight degrees of tzedakah are found in Mishneh Torah: Matanot Aniym 10:10-14.

⁷ Rabbi Cohen described this spectrum in a private conversation with the author in Cincinnati, Ohio, on 26 October, 1999. The comparison to Maimonides' eight degrees of giving is the author's.

⁸ Lee Meyerhoff Hendler, *The Year Mom Got Religion: One Woman's Midlife Journey Into Judaism* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 1998), 58.

⁹ Corrinne Stavish, "Making Midrashim" (outline and notes distributed at the Conference for the Advancement of Jewish Education, Columbus, Ohio, August 1999).

¹⁰ Lawrence Kushner, "Hayinu K'Holmim: An Alternative Method of the Teaching of Torah," *CCAR Yearbook* 88 (1979): 98-103.

¹¹ Brachot 55b, as translated by Lawrence Kushner in "Hayinu K'Holmim," *CCAR Yearbook* 88 (1979): 103.

¹² In *Handmade Midrash* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1992), Jo Milgrom discusses verbal language as a hindrance to creativity on page 3.

¹³ Peter Pitzele retold his experiences as creator of bibliodrama and practitioner of Contemporary Midrash during an interview with the author and Aron Hirt-Manheimer, editor of *Reform Judaism* magazine. Quotes are from transcript of tape recording. ICM, Camp Isabella Freedman, Connecticut. 7 July 1999.

¹⁴ Leonard Fein, "The Bible," *Moment Magazine* 1, no. 10 (1976): 33-48.

¹⁵ Karen Chaye Faigle to the Editor, *Moment Magazine* 2, no. 9 (1977): 4.

¹⁶ Seymour Prystowsky to the Editor, *Moment Magazine* 2, no. 10 (1977): 8.

Chapter Two – Contemporary Midrash, cont.

¹⁷ Background information about Marc Gellman's midrashim and his personal views on modern midrash are from a private conversation with the author, Cincinnati, Ohio, 22 March 1999.

¹⁸ *Shalsholet Hakabbalah* is the reception of Jewish traditions, texts, and practices from one generation to the next, which reveals the on-going story of the Jewish people. In a private conversation with the author on 26 October, 1999, Cohen explained that where the author sees himself (or herself) in the chain of *shalsholet hakabbalah* provides parameters for his authenticity as a creator of midrash. One who does not feel a part of the continued chain of Jewish heritage does not have the same legitimacy as one who perceives himself to be a rightful heir to the legacy of Jewish learning, honestly contributing his own voice to the existing body of work and passing down as much as he can to the next generation.

¹⁹ Rivkah M. Walton discussed the history, current status, and vision of ICM in a telephone conversation from Philadelphia with the author on 28 December, 1999.

²⁰ At the 1999 Summer Training Intensives held at Camp Isabella Freedman in Connecticut, 6% of the participants were men, about 70% of the participants came from the mid-Atlantic region, and there were a "small percentage" of people concerned about the halakha of Shabbat observance. Walton emphasizes that this is anecdotal information, but the skewed number of mid-Atlantic participants probably reflects the high cost of traveling to the summer program from other parts of the country, and the low number of traditionally observant participants may reflect a skepticism among Orthodox Jews about creating new midrashim. The disproportionate number of male and female participants is a mystery to Walton, who notes that many of the instructors are men and many of the creators in the field are men.

²¹ It may be worthwhile to note that ICM will not train Christian missionary groups in the midrashic process because the missionary agenda of these groups disallows for the legitimacy of Jewish text study and goes against the basic premise of accepting Jewish beliefs as legitimate.

²² Christopher Leighton discusses this further in his article "When Christians Do Midrash," with a particular sensitivity to the danger of Christians appropriating midrash without due regard to its necessarily Jewish heritage. *Living Text* no. 6 (winter 1999): 14-15.

²³ Rabbi Roderick Young informed the author about the midrashim at Congregation Beth Simhat Torah in New York, in an email 20 December 1999.

²⁴ Rabbi Pamela Wax has also brought in an artist to lead her congregants in art midrash, as she told the author in an email 20 December, 1999. Rabbi Wax has also used midrash with two nine-year olds who have trouble with school writing assignments. She found that their interest in writing midrashim indicated their difficulties in school were not related to a learning disorder but rather probably a lack of interest in the assignments.

²⁵ Rabbi Meltzer reported the camp's goal of using Contemporary Midrash in an email to the author 27 December, 1999. This Institute is also the first place the author encountered Contemporary Midrash.

Chapter Three – Cases In Point: Comparing Contemporary and Rabbinic Midrash

¹ As discussed in Chapter Two, the four main criteria are that the midrash be bound by Scripture, allows for creative investigation of the text, treats Scripture as a holy document, and is exegesis (not eisegesis). Although the ancient rabbis often employed eisegesis in creating their midrashim, this form of commentary is not appropriate for Contemporary Midrash.

² Punctuation marks are my own, emphasizing what I believe is an uncontroversial correct reading of the verse.

³ See Genesis Rabbah XLI, 2. Other explanations of the plagues also serve to maintain Sarah's chastity while in Pharaoh's household.

⁴ GR XLV, 1.

⁵ GR XLV, 1 says that the name Hagar is a play on the word *agar* (reward) – indicating that Hagar was Sarah's reward presented by Pharaoh. Also supporting Kaplan's midrash that Hagar was "old enough to wipe my nose" is Seder 'Olam I; Jub. 13, 11 which claims that Abraham was in Egypt for five years. If Sarah remained in Pharaoh's custody during that entire time, Hagar could have been just over four years old when they left.

⁶ GR LVI, 11. See also the time travel of Moses who journeys to Rabbi Akiva's yeshiva to witness the great teacher interpreting law, Babylonian Talmud, Menahot 29b. This is yet another example of the rabbis legitimizing their lifestyle with implied consent from God and the biblical ancestors.

⁷ Gen. 31:19 and 31:32.

⁸ GR LXXIV, 5.

⁹ For the full text of relevant midrashim see GR XVIII, 2 and GR LXXX, 4.

¹⁰ GR LVIII, 5.

¹¹ Saying that Sarah was "no more of this world" implies that she died upon hearing the news of the planned sacrifice. Overcoming death Sarah was able to reveal the strength and depth of her faith to Satan. This midrash from *VaYosha* 36 is translated in *Legends of the Jews*, pg. 278.

¹² Ps. 139:16.

¹³ GR XXIV, 2. See also Sanhedrin 38b, Exodus Rabbah XL, 2, 3; Leviticus Rabbah XXVI, 7.

Chapter Four – Contemporary Midrash: Why We Need It Today

¹ Quotes from the final session of the Advanced Writing Track at the Institute of Contemporary Midrash Summer Training Intensives, Camp Isabella Freedman, July 1999.

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