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NOTARIKON: THE RABBINIC ART OF WORD-BREAKING

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion

Graduate Rabbinical Program

New York, New York

2008

Advisor: Rabbi Norman Cohen

In memory of my grand-parents,

Sarah Kopolowitz, z''l and Isidore Ickovitz, z''l.

To the words hidden behind the silence of their shattered world.

A la memoire de mes grand-parents,

Sarah Kopolowitz, z''l et Isidore Ickovitz, z''l.

A tous les mots caches derriere le silence

de leurs mondes brises.

Contents

INTRODUCTION

'The main theology one learns at HUC is taught in History classes.'

Rabbi David Ellenson,

Student Luncheon, on November 20th, 2007.

Reflecting back on the years I spent at HUC and the education I received, I see clearly how my developing understanding of Jewish beliefs and ideas was impacted by the study of History. The academic journey I undertook along the places, times and contexts Jews inhabited enlightened my understanding of their changing theologies.

The historical and socio-cultural environments we experience, as well as the challenges we face, deeply shape our beliefs, just as our religious philosophy shapes the language we use to describe our religious experiences.

My Rabbinic training taught me that there is no 'out of time' theology. Our theologies are our attempts to name our experiences. *Midor le dor*, from generation to generation, we offer different answers and navigate through different approaches to similar questions: How do we make "ours" the texts and traditions that come from before and extend beyond? How do we reconcile the inherited words of our tradition with the radical newness of present time? History shapes the reading and understanding of our sources. Our new meanings, our new interpretations, are 'contextualized translations' of our heritage.

Therefore, I would argue that the main theology lessons I, personally, received at HUC took place in my *Midrash* classes. This is where I discovered the answers past generations gave and heard as they attempted to respond to the enduring questions I just enunciated. The theology taught by *Midrash* is one of ongoing revelation. The interpreter 'fertilizes' an existing text in a new context. The reader looks at Scripture

as a 'pregnant' document, about to deliver new sacred meanings. Inevitably, every

new reading speaks the language of its reader/interpreter and embodies the doubts,

certainties and challenges faced by his generation.

As one reads *Midrash*, one discovers the Rabbinic art of filling in the text's gaps,

sometimes explaining, detailing or embellishing a narrative, but always renewing

perspectives. *Midrash* often creates a distancing from the literal meaning, or even a

reading that directly challenges the 'obvious' primary sense. *Midrash* allows the text

to be revolutionized through what can be called the traditional Rabbinic '*Chutzpah*',

i.e., an audacious challenge to the text. The Rabbis fill in the gaps with their own

intertext, the cultural codes and norms that enable them to make sense of Scripture.

Rabbinic interpretation is controlled by certain rules (*middot*) that were enumerated by

the rabbis. These rules involve grammar, exegesis, interpretation of words and letters,

prefixes and suffixes, or vocalization. Some of them also focus on the numerical

values of words or their division into two or more parts. This last hermeneutical tool,

called *Notarikon*, represents one of the most creative ones and I have therefore chosen

to research the use and origin of this Rabbinic interpretative key.

With *Notarikon*, the rabbis are able to create a fragmented reading of Scripture. A

word is broken into pieces or read acrostically as a series of letters. By breaking the

codes of a linear reading, the reader is invited to literally break the text into pieces in

order to uncover hidden meanings. *Notarikon* is built precisely on the idea of an

ongoing revelation and the need to unveil the hidden.

Rabbinic commentary generally attempts to fill in the gaps in the text, but interestingly, *Notarikon* attempts to create new gaps in Scripture. Literally, it introduces spaces (between letters). As paradoxical as it may seem, *Notarikon* breaks the text in order to complete it. As such, it can be seen as a very subversive tool: it seems to open the path of infinite interpretative freedom for the reader/interpreter. But is that truly so?

Many authors, in recent years, have addressed the question of interpretative limits.[1] Some described the seemingly un-ending Rabbinic interpretation as a prototypal illustration of the very post-modem 'indeterminacy of sources'. Others chose to see in the ongoing Rabbinic dialogue in the Talmud, an ancient model for our modem religious pluralism. As seductive as these ideas and comparisons might be, one need to wonder about their relevance.

In this thesis, I will try to explore the rabbis' creative audacity as I address the questions of interpretative limits. I will attempt to address central questions such as: Do multiple readings of Scripture suggest infinite meaning? How far can our textual interpretations lead us? Are we, the reader, given a 'blank check' to any interpretation? If not, how do we define the limits of our contemporary *Midrashim?* It seems to me that these questions, relevant for every reader today, are particularly central for our Reform Movement.

Since we place personal autonomy at the core of our decision-making process, as we believe that our texts can say much more than their literal meaning, as we value

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[1] See, for example : Susan Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: the Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1982) or David Stern, "Moses-cide and Contemporary Literary Criticism" *Prooftexts* 4/2 (1984) :193-204. See also: Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budicks, *Midrash and Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986) and Jose Faur, *Golden Doves with Silver Dots* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

personal interpretation of sources, we need to reflect on the extent and limits of our freedom and on our faithfulness to the original source.

A Note on the Method

Notarikon is a hermeneutical tool of Rabbinic tradition, listed in the *Baraita* of the 32 *middot* of Haggadic interpretation (The Thirty-Two *middot* of Rabbi Eliezer ben Yose Hagalili*)*.[2] There, it is defined as the breaking of a word into pieces, or the reading of a word as an acrostic of other words.

The uncertain dating of this *Baraita* raises basic questions as one researches this theme: Is *Notarikon* really and only what this text says it is? Does the definition offered by the *Baraita* correspond to the 'original' meaning of the term? Did the understanding and use of *Notarikon* evolve over time?

The other challenge encountered by the researcher has to do with the occurrences of Notarikon in Rabbinic sources. The word itself occurs a limited number of times (not necessarily always functioning as the *Baraita* claims it should), but it is often used without being mentioned by name. Words are broken into pieces, letters as expanded into individual words, even though the text does not refer to this technique as "*Notarikon.*" It is therefore difficult to collect all the occurrences of this tool.

In this thesis, I tried as much as possible to focus on both the occurrences of the named examples of *Notarikon* and also the unnamed uses of the *middah* in early Talmudic and *Midrash*ic sources (Mishna, Palestinian Talmud and Babylonian Talmud, *Midrashei Halachah* and classic *Haggadah)*.

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[2] See chapter 1 of this thesis, p.34

PART I :

Reading Between the Lines and the Letters.

*"Intelligence comes from **inter-legere**, i.e., 'reading between the lines'."*

David Banon

(http://le*Midrash*.free.fr/CIEM2005site/dbanon.pdf)

A – <u>Min ha-shamayim</u> and <u>Lo ba-shamayim</u>:

The Paradox of the Perfect and Incomplete Torah

In traditional Rabbinic Literature, the very nature of Scripture seems ambivalent: Revelation is the product of both a heavenly and an earthly process. The essential paradox can be summed up in one subtle sentence: Torah is from Heaven...but not in Heaven.

The Rabbinic notion of *Torah min hashamaym*, Torah from heaven, is emphasized in many Talmudic sources. In the Palestinian Talmud *Peah* 3a, the traditional reading of a verse in Exodus (34:27): ' *I have made a covenant with you, <u>al pi ha-devarim ha'ele</u>, according to these words,* ' is interpreted (using a play on the word *pi* = *peh,* mouth) to signify that both the written and oral Torah (*she be'al-peh*) were given together on Mount Sinai. This idea goes together with a notion of a perfect revelation: everything was given then. The Torah, written and oral, its teachings and interpretations, were already communicated to Moses in the desert. The revelation was absolute and complete. This notion is emphasized in a famous passage of the Palestinian Talmud *Peah* 17a, 6:2 that claims that '*all the comments and interpretations a <u>talmid vatik</u>, an experienced student, will make in front of his teachers were already given at Sinai.* ' Therefore, there can be 'nothing new under the sun,' as everything was said and taught at the original moment of revelation.

1- *The Rabbinic Voice versus the Heavenly Voice.*

The idea of a perfect Torah given once and for all is challenged by another central idea found in many texts of Rabbinic Literature: the notion of an ongoing revelation unveiled through the human process of interpretation; the idea of a Torah 'to be completed.' The phrase *lo ba-shamayim hi* (Deut. 30:12) 'It is not in heaven,' is generally interpreted as the proof that constant human (Rabbinic) interpretative effort is needed to complete Torah's teachings. In this mindset, Torah is not a 'full' teaching already handed down, but one in progress, to be completed by the rabbis of every generation. A traditional text that depicts this approach is found in B.T. *Baba Metzia* 59B, and is often called *'the episode of Achnai's oven.'*

וזה הוא תנור של עכנאי מאי עכנאי אמר רב יהודה אמר שמואל שהקיפו דברים כעכנא זו וטמאוהו תנא באותו היום השיב רבי אליעזר כל תשובות שבעולם ולא קיבלו הימנו אמר להם אם הלכה כמותי חרוב זה יוכיח נעקר חרוב ממקומו מאה אמה ואמרי לה ארבע מאות אמה אמרו לו אין מביאין ראיה מן החרוב חזר ואמר להם אם הלכה כמותי אמת המים יוכיחו חזרו אמת המים לאחוריהם אמרו לו אין מביאין ראיה מאמת המים חזר ואמר להם אם הלכה כמותי כותלי בית המדרש יוכיחו הטו כותלי בית המדרש ליפול גער בהם רבי יהושע אמר להם אם תלמידי חכמים מנצחים זה את זה בהלכה אתם מה טיבכם לא נפלו מפני כבודו של רבי יהושע ולא זקפו מפני כבודו של רבי אליעזר ועדין מטין ועומדין חזר ואמר להם אם הלכה כמותי מן השמים יוכיחו יצאתה בת קול ואמרה מה לכם אצל רבי אליעזר שהלכה כמותו בכל מקום עמד רבי יהושע על רגליו ואמר לא בשמים היא מאי (דברים ל') לא בשמים היא אמר רבי ירמיה שכבר נתנה תורה מהר סיני אין אנו משגיחין בבת קול שכבר כתבת בהר סיני בתורה (שמות כ"ג) אחרי רבים להטת אשכחיה רבי נתן לאליהו אמר ליה מאי עביד קודשא בריך הוא בההיא שעתא אמר ליה קא חייך ואמר נצחוני בני נצחוני בני

"This is the oven of Achnai. What is "Achnai"? Said Rav Yehuda, said Shmuel: They

encircled it with words like a snake and called it impure. A sage teaches: On that

day, Rabbi Eliezer used all the refutations in the world, but they did not accept it from

him. He said: If the law is as I say, this carob tree will prove it. The carob was

uprooted one hundred feet. Some say: four hundred feet. They said to him: One does

not cite a carob for proof. He said to them: If the law is as I say, a stream of water

will prove it. The water began to flow backwards. They said to him: One does not cite

the waters for proof. Again, he said: If the law is as I say, the walls of the house of

study will prove it. The walls leaned over to fall. Rabbi Joshua rebuked them, saying:

When the disciples of the wise are involved in Halachic disputes over the Law, what

have you to do with it? They did not fall because of the honor of Rabbi Joshua and

did not stand straight for the honor of Rabbi Eliezer. He said to them: If the law is as

I said, let it be proven from Heaven. A heavenly voice went out and said: Why do you

argue with Rabbi Eliezer, according to whom the law is in every place?

R. Joshua arose and exclaimed: It is not in heaven. What did he mean by this? Said R.

Jeremiah: The Torah has already been given at Mount Sinai. We pay no attention to a

heavenly voice, because it is written in the Torah: 'After the majority must one

incline.' R. Nathan met Elijah and asked him: What did the Holy One, blessed be He,

do in that hour? He laughed and replied, saying: 'My sons have defeated me, my sons

have defeated Me'. "

n the midst of a Rabbinic disagreement, Rabbi Eliezer brings forth supernatural manifestations and a heavenly voice to prove his point. But the other rabbis, led by Rabbi Joshua refuse these miraculous proofs claiming that 'now' the power of Rabbinic interpretation and the will of the majority is stronger. Perhaps Rabbi Eliezer represents the 'old world' (a pre-Rabbinic world of direct divine intervention), while Rabbi Joshua represents a new era that values continued interpretation.

According to this text, even though the Torah was given at Sinai, the revelation is ongoing and mediated by interpreters. Supernatural manifestations are of no power in the face of human legal process and human courts.

This story also suggests that God Himself validates and enjoys this human intervention, as He laughs at the process. Strikingly, God is silenced by the use of His own words, the verse from Deuteronomy 30:12. Scripture is used here precisely to limit the power of the higher realm, the Divine, and to empower the lower realm, the human.

This famous text sums up the first paradox of the Rabbinic relationship to the text: **The Torah is at one and the same time, perfect and incomplete.**

2- *Holy Language versus Human Language.*

This paradox relates directly to a second ambivalence found in Rabbinic Literature. This one concerns the nature of the Hebrew language and its relationship to the Torah text. The Rabbinic understanding of language generally differs from ours. **Hebrew is**

often presented as the perfect language. The idea of a holy tongue, a tongue that preceded creation and operated as a blueprint for the world to be created is found in *Genesis Rabbah* 18:4.

רבי פנחס ורבי חלקיה בשם רבי סימון אמרי כשם שניתנה תורה בלשון הקודש כך נברא העולם בלשון הקודש

"Rabbi Pinchas and Rabbi Chilkiya in the name of Rabbi Simon say: Just as Torah was given in/with the holy language, the world was created in/with the holy language."

Sometimes, some commentators present Torah as perfect, and therefore necessarily understandable. Jacob Ben Sheshet (13th century), for example, writes that there is no such thing as a verse's imperfection. *"There are many verses to which we must add a word or two in order to understand their peshat (literal meaning), but this is not due to a deficiency in Scripture, but rather our own deficiency, for we do not comprehend the holy language except as it compares to the language in which we are immersed in the exile because of our sins."* [3]

Our incomplete understanding is due to our limitations and might be corrected with greater interpretative effort.

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[3] Jacob Ben Sheshet, "Sefer Ha-Emunah VeHa-Bitachon," in *Kitvei Rambam* vol.2, 379.

But most of the time, for interpreters, the text's discrepancies and deficiencies are seen as hints, vectors of meaning to be interpreted. This mindset follows Rabbi Akiva's school rather than Rabbi Ishmael's, i.e., in this mindset, the Torah does not speak in human language, one that tolerates contradictions, repetitions, discrepancies or the use of conventional rhetorical devices such as repetitions in order to emphasize a point. Rather, every word, every letter in the Torah matters and exists for hermeneutical purposes. Every redundancy in the text is present in order to teach us something. The Torah is, therefore, linguistically incomplete or ambiguous.

This opinion is strengthened by the lack of vocalization of the original text. The Hebrew Bible predates the time of vocalization.[4] But this lack of vocalization is perceived as meaningful. Every written word might be read otherwise and vocalized differently to imply another meaning. The most famous example of it is perhaps found in B.T. *Eruvin* 54b. There, the Talmud comments on the verse of Exodus 32:16 : *"The writing was the writing of God engraved (charut) upon the tablets"* and invites a new reading: *"Do not read 'engraved' (charut) but 'freedom' (cherut) upon the tablet."* The new vocalization has a very powerful theological message, as it suggests that the act of writing/engraving does not finalize or limit the revealed message. Instead, it is liberating, i.e., it opens the way to a renewed understanding of its content. Instead of fixing a meaning, the engraved word liberates it. Written Scripture becomes a tool of openness rather than restriction.

Linguistic ambiguity is, therefore, presented in a clearly positive light. *"It is hardly possible to conceive a more 'unreadable' text than one made exclusively of*

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[4] The Masoretes are scribes and scholars who, between the 7th and 11th century, compiled the system of vocalization of the biblical text that we use today.

consonants" [5]writes Jose Faur, suggesting that the lack of vowel notations is evidence

that the reader is expected to play a creative role in the process of interpretation.

Another way to depict the Rabbinic perception of the language of Torah is offered by

Howard Eilberg-Schwartz. He refers to what he calls *'the Rabbinic molecular theory*

of language':

"Consider an analogy from chemistry. For the sages, the letters of the Hebrew

Alphabet comprise a kind of periodic chart. These elements bind together in various

ways to form simple compounds or words. Just as hydrogen and oxygen form water

($H2O$), the letters h and y bond together to form the word "let there be" ($yhy=hy2$).

The letters moreover have certain properties that explain why they are present in

particular molecules." [6]

Eilberg-Schwartz defines reactions between Hebrew letters as molecular reactions and

illustrates this logic with a passage from Genesis Rabbah 47:1. When God changed

Sarai's name to Sarah (Genesis 17:15,) the *yud* was freed and confronted God in a

dialogue. The letter, then, became combined with the name Hosea, producing the

name Joshua. Not only do letters bring their essence to the names they build, but they

probably bring their personality too.

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[5] Faur, *Golden Doves with Silver Dots,* 121.
[6] Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, "Who's kidding whom? A serious reading of Rabbinic wordplays", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion,* LV/4 : 765.

אמר רבי שמעון בן יוחאי יו"ד שנטל הקב"ה משרי היה טס ופורח לפני כסאו של הקב"ה אמר לפניו
רבש"ע בשביל שאני קטנה שבאותיות הוצאתני משרה הצדקת, א"ל הקב"ה לשעבר היית משמה של נקבה
ובסופן של אותיות עכשיו אני נותנך בשמו של זכר ובראשן של אותיות שנאמר (במדבר יג) ויקרא משה
להושע בן נון יהושע,

Rabbi Shimon Bar-Yochai said: The <u>yud</u> that God took from the name of Sarai flew

toward God's throne and said: <u>Ribono shel Olam</u>, as I am the smallest letter, you took

me from the name of Sarah, the righteous woman. God told him: You were in a

woman's name and the last letter, now I will put you in a man's name as the first

letter, as it is said (Num.13:16) 'Moses called Hosea ben Nun, Joshua.'

The chemical imagery is very helpful in understanding a traditional Rabbinic

approach to language. Letters and words have an essence and even a character. The

language is therefore pregnant with meaning and coded with hidden properties that

transform the word into a living and evolving structure. Again, Torah is seen as both

incomplete and perfect, ready to be transformed, but yet all encompassing.

3- Interpretation: From a Useful Skill to a Sacred Task.

The process of interpreting Scripture is as old as Scripture itself. In the Bible,

Ezra is already presented as interpreting and searching the law. The verb used for his

search is *darash* (Ezra 7:10), from which the word '*Midrash*' is derived.

The rabbis see the Prophets and the Writings as totally intertwined with the Five

Books of Torah. Prophets and wise men were given the necessary tools to read and

understand the Five Books of Moses. Texts echo, interact and interpenetrate.

Temporal and spatial distinctions collapse in the exercise of intertextuality, i.e., the

simultaneous reading of different passages as responding to one another. In classic

Rabbinic reading, the original cannot be accessed in a linear way, but is always

clarified and interpreted in the light of another text.

In a famous *Midrash*, we read: *"In the beginning of the creation of the world, 'He*

revealed deep things,' for it says: 'In the beginning, God created the heavens.' There,

He did not interpret it. Where did he interpret it? Later on, 'he spreads out the heaven

like gossamer' (Isaiah 40:22) "[7]

This *Midrash* suggests that the biblical verses of creation cannot be understood

without an intertextual link with Isaiah's verse. Intertextuality is the condition of

meaning, as it is the process that fills the gaps in the text. The text linearity is broken

and the primary source is totally dependent on a later text. The later text becomes the

revealer of the earlier one.

This approach to text could be summarized by a quote from Midrash *Tan'huma-*

Buber, *Hukkat* 52: *"All words of Torah need each other, for what one passage locks*

up, another opens. "

The Rabbinic act of interpretation is therefore sometimes presented as a useful and

skillful craft. *Seder Elyahu Zuta* 82 uses a parable to define the nature of Scripture: *It*

is like a King who gives to his servants wheat and flax and He expects them to

transform them into bread and cloth. Here, Scripture is presented as a raw material

waiting to be processed by human's hands. This transformation is useful as it enables

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[7] See *Bereshit Rabbah* , Ed. Theodor-Albeck, Vol.I, p.3.

us to access a hidden meaning, to recover divine insights encoded in language and Scripture. Midrash Shir Hashirim Rabbah compares the words of Torah to *'a well of waters at great depth, cool and fresh, and yet no man could drink of them. A clever man joined cord with cord and rope with rope and drew up the water and drank.'* [8] The rabbis see themselves as these clever men and bind verses to verses to draw Torah (= water) from the well of knowledge.

Sometimes, the rabbis ascribe to interpretation a much larger role than its explanatory and clarifying goal. Interpretation is then not only seen as a 'useful' exercise for the reader, but it is a commanded activity, prescribed by the Divine Himself. The story of Achnai's oven already illustrated God's desire for human interpretation, as the Eternal laughs at the rabbis' daring initiative.

Interpretation is often presented as the quintessential sacred activity, as it takes precedence over the text itself. *"The God of the rabbis, furthermore, became a learner of the interpretations of the Torah which He had given – a concept which seemed blasphemous to outsiders. The rabbis' interpretation subtly takes primacy over the text in a way unprecedented in the history of religion: human interpretation becomes divine."* [9]

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[8] *Midrash Shir Hashirim Rabbah* I, 1:8.
[9] Susan Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory*, 42

B- The Limits of Interpretation:

Is There a Midrashic Boundary?

Interpretation always poses a risk as it potentially creates a dissonance between the writings of the rabbis and the book they interpret. Words are taken out of context, grammatical rules are violated, words are divided, and letters are transposed. This Rabbinic exercise of interpretation is undoubtedly audacious as it breaks a contextualized, linear reading.

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In the light of this explosion of meanings, Scripture is often depicted as having many faces, i.e., a plurality of meanings. This characteristic, often labeled 'polysemy' by contemporary scholars, is already alluded to in traditional sources. In different sources, Torah is presented as having seventy faces, as this number symbolizes pluralism and multiplicity in Rabbinic tradition[10]. In B.T. *Sanhedrin* 34a, we read an interpretation of Jeremiah 23-29: *'As a hammer that hits the rock'*: *"Like the hammer hits the rocks and projects many sparks, Scripture gives out many meanings."* This metaphoric illustration depicts what polysemy is: a verse gives rise to different interpretations. These interpretations might agree or not with each other. They might not be coherent with each other, or with the literal meaning of the original source. Sometimes, the interpretation might be precisely antithetical to the literary meaning.

Let's go back again to the episode of Achnai's oven. There, the rabbis argue against God's intervention using God's own words: *Lo bashamayim hi*, "it is not in heaven."

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[10] See, for example: *Bamidbar Rabbah* 13 (15-16). *There are seventy nations in the world and therefore, seventy ways to understand it.*

But, looking back at the original text in Deuteronomy 30:12, this verse refers to a slightly different idea. There, it defines Torah as an accessible goal that is not beyond human reach. It is not beyond our power to reach Torah, says Deuteronomy. However, the rabbis radically transform this reading. In the Talmud, the Torah is now beyond Divine reach! This transformation of meaning is very daring and it challenges the original text.

Therefore, when reading *Midrash*, one might be surprised by the nature of the polysemy and the contradictory interpretations of similar texts. One wonders about the meaning of a canonical text that yields multiple understandings. How can a text be faithful to its literal meaning and, at the same time, how can it be able to say something radically different? How might the Rabbinic principle of *ein mikra yotsei miyadei peshuto*[11] ('Scripture never looses its literal meaning,') stand alongside other daring interpretative tools? The rabbis seem to constantly navigate between these tensions and to solve these paradoxes; interpretation seems to play different roles:

1- Interpretation is a Federative Tool.

Whereas different interpretations of a single word could create divisions among readers and lead to a radical schism of readings, it seems paradoxically, in Rabbinic culture, to strengthen the unity of the text. As divergent opinions stand side by side in the Talmud, there are authors who see this multiplicity of meanings as one of the major Rabbinic innovations. Shaye D. Cohen, for example, writes: *"The major contribution of Yavne to Jewish History is the creation of a society which tolerates*

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[11] Quoted in B.T. *Yevamot* 11b and B.T. *Yevamot* 24a

dispute without producing sects. For the first time, Jews 'agree to disagree'. " In his

view, the Talmudic enterprise attests of this ability to have multiple contradictory

expressions and interpretations: *"No previous Jewish work, neither biblical nor post-*

biblical, neither Hebrew nor Greek, neither Palestinian nor diasporian, attributes

legal and exegetical opinions to named individuals who in spite of their differences

belong to the same fraternity. The dominant ethic here is not exclusivity, but

elasticity. "[12]

2- Interpretation as a Pre-Rational Tool.

Isaac Heinemann writes that in ancient Rabbinic culture, paradoxes were appreciated

and did not need to be solved.[13] This accepted polysemy is what he calls a tool of

"natural folk," i.e., of primitive culture. According to this theory, our laws of

Rationalism are not yet to be applied to these texts, as contradictions were tolerated

differently. Multiple and contradictory interpretations were not really problematic in

the Rabbinic culture, the way it would be in ours.

3- Interpretation as an Ideological Tool.

Interpretation is seen as a tool that does not only serve hermeneutical purposes but a

broader agenda. Joseph Heinemann, for example, claims *"the Haggadists do not mean*

so much to clarify difficult passages in the biblical text as to take a stand on the

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[12] Shaye D. Cohen, "The Significance of Yavne" *HUCA* 55 (1984): 29.

[13] Isaac Heinemann, *Darchei Ha-Aggadah* (Jerusalem: 1949, 3rd edition).

burning questions of the day, to guide people and strengthen their faith. In order to present their ideas in a more comprehensible and engaging fashion, the sages cast them in a narrative format and employed parables and other familiar literary means which appeal to all."[14]

In Heinemann's view, *Midrash* is therefore ideological and pedagogical more than hermeneutical. He suggests that the rabbis' political agenda is hidden behind their interpretations. The goal is then not to reach the one and only 'truth' of the text, but to teach through the text a transcendental truth. It is a pedagogical tool that tolerates certain incoherencies.

4- Interpretation as a Late Retrojected Tool.

In recent years, it has been claimed that Rabbinic polysemy and inherent pluralism in sources did not originate in early Rabbinic enterprise. [15]Rather, these elements were introduced by late redactors of the Babylonian Talmud, also known as the *Stammaim*. They are the ones who retrojected the Rabbinic controversies of meanings and presented this pluralism as a value of the Yavnean rabbis. Daniel Boyarin argues that this polysemy of Talmudic texts is in fact a late invention of the *Stammaim*, the late editors of the Babylonian Talmud, who attributed their work to early Rabbinic authorities. He claims these men, influenced by the hardening of borderlines between Judaism and Christianity around the 5th and 6th century CE, attempted to differentiate

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[14] Joseph Heinemann, "The Nature of *Aggadah*" in *Midrash and Literature,* ed. Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick,49.
[15] Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 151-201.

Judaism from the emerging strict dogmas of Christianity. The pluralism and accepted

polysemy of Yavne and the early rabbis can then be understood as a retrojection of an

idea onto an idealized version of the old academy.

All these justifications of multiple interpretations raise the same question of

boundaries. Are there limits to the process of interpretation? Is every reading

possible? How is *Midrash* regulated by the rabbis? Actually, there is no specific

formulation that limits the extent of interpretation. Itamar Grunwald writes: *"An*

interpreter can do with the scriptural word (even the word of God) almost anything he

considers fitting and proper...The limits of permitted interpretation are not given."[16]

David Stern argues that an *"institutional control on interpretation must have existed.*

Yet it is difficult to say what lies behind the borders of discourse. To be certain, most

institutional controls work silently through what Frank Kermode has described as 'the

tacit knowledge of the permitted range of sense'."[17]

The tacit knowledge of the limits can be defined as a product of social authority, i.e.,

who gives the interpretation and who hears it. The temptation to go beyond classical

interpretation is balanced by Rabbinic authority. The rabbis often emphasize the

proper respect due to them and make it a significant obligation under Jewish law.

Eugene Borowitz notes that there are many references in the Talmud where the rabbi

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[16] Itamar Gruenwald, *"Midrash* and the *Midrashic* Condition" in *The Midrashic Imagination*, ed. M. Fishbane (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993) , 11.

[17] David Stern, *Midrash and Theory* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 25.

"sets his eyes on to the malefactor who is turned into a heap of bone...These examples most surely had a chilling effect on the temptation to Haggadic *excess."* [18]

Finally, it is important to note that there is a different freedom of interpretation depending on the topic addressed. Halachic interpretation is clearly less flexible than Haggadic hermeneutics. What matters to the rabbis is the conformity to the practice rather than a correspondence to a theory, or a pure statement of belief. Jews are expected to obey the *Halachah*, the laws concerning everyday life and legal decisions that Jews are supposed to follow. The Haggadic Rabbinic teachings are, on the other hand, presented without any sanctions for the person who would not accept them. This differentiation is particularly relevant in the enumeration of the *middot*, the hermeneutical tools defined by the rabbis. Some tools that can be considered as the most creative ones, and therefore enable very daring interpretation, are technically limited to Haggadic texts. This is the case, for example of *Gematria* and *Notarikon*. According to the *Baraita of the Thirty-Two Middot,* they are defined as applying purely to *Haggadah*. Therefore, one cannot derive any *Halachic* conclusion from the use of these methods. Other tools are used only if they can confirm an existing tradition. This is, for example, the case of *Gezeira Shava*, the tool of intertextuality. In P.T. *Pesachim* 6a, one reads that from *"a Gezeira Shava, conclusions may be deduced which support tradition, but not such opposed to tradition." Halachah,* on the other hand, tends to be fixed even prior to its biblical justification: biblical interpretation tries then to ground and support the existing *Halachah* in Scripture (a textual support named *asmachta).*

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[18] Eugene Borowitz, *The Talmud's Theological Language-Game* (New York: University of NY Press, 2006), 140.

C-The *Middot* :

Measuring the Infinite.

Every community that has canonical texts, a set of sacred or authoritative documents, must develop a hermeneutic, i.e., an accepted means to read and interpret these documents. The question of interpretative tools is therefore not purely Rabbinical, but exists in every society that possesses such books or texts. Once a canon is set, fixed in a particular form, it is essential that it can be adapted to new contexts, if it is to remain relevant and meaningful to new generations. Interpretation fulfills this task.

Paradoxically, even though canonization comes from a restrictive impulse, *"It results in increased flexibility in its interpretation."* [19] On the one hand, textual fluidity stops as the text is fixed. Some texts are included, others are left out, multiple traditions are unified and boundaries are set. But on the other hand, the canonized text speaks what Halbertal calls a *'different kind of language'*: *"The claim that divine language necessitates unconventional modes of interpretation enlarges the possibility of deriving meaning from the text almost endlessly."* [20] The divine nature of the text invites a hermeneutic of infinity, one that remains open-ended even if the text itself is sealed.

The Rabbinic *middot* (hermeneutical principles) precisely fit this paradox of 'enclosed openness'. These interpretative rules developed in parallel with biblical canonization.

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[19] Moshe Halbertal, *People of the Book* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 32.
[20] *Ibid.*

Even though they come out of a restrictive impulse and an attempt to limit the freedom of interpretation, they also open infinitely the reader's understanding. (This paradox will be particularly relevant as we study, in the next chapter, the use of *Notarikon*, a *middah* of tremendous flexibility*).*

1- The Emergence of the Middot.

To understand the emergence of *middot* and the fixing of hermeneutical rules, it is essential to understand the context of biblical canonization. *Canon* comes from a Greek word and literally means 'measuring stick.' Interestingly, the Hebrew word *middah* literally means 'measure.' These words are related semantically just as they are historically. The process of biblical canonization took place around the turn of the era and ended around the 2nd century C.E[21].

At that time, the rabbis already accepted the idea of two traditions, a Written Torah and an Oral Torah. Therefore, a certain coherence was probably needed both between the written and oral laws, and between the different books of the canon seen as complementary. The fixing of a biblical canon hastened the need for defined hermeneutical tools.

The first centuries of our era were also a time of social and religious change. Rabbinic institutions, schools and synagogues, developed and replaced the Temple as centers of worship. Exegesis became even more central in a geographically decentralized religion.

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[21] See W. Sibley Towner, "Hermeneutical Systems of Hillel and the Tannaim: A Fresh Look" *HUCA* LVIII, (1982).

This was also a time of sectarianism among Palestinian Jews. It is easy to understand why different sects and groups (Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, Hellenized groups, early Christians) might have developed different hermeneutical tools to promote their agenda and worldview, i.e., they competed for the 'proper way' to read Scripture. *"Such a highly competitive situation demanded that every party give an adequate and convincing account of the way of handling scripture."* [22] Some Qumran documents show evidence of this pattern, through the genre of *pesher*. A *pesher* (from the Akkadian word meaning *'to solve'*) can be seen as a proto-*midrash* . A text such as the *Pesher Habbakuk* illustrates an attempt to interpret Scripture in light of an ongoing reality or theology of a group, by applying the biblical text to the contemporary context.

Finally, around this time, similar hermeneutical tools developed in the Hellenistic world. Many scholars have debated the extent of cross-fertilization between cultures. David Daube, for example, claims that the seven *middot* of Hillel have a Hellenistic origin and writes: *"We have before us a science, the beginning of which may be traced back to Plato, Aristotle and their contemporaries."* [23] Saul Lieberman notes that *"the inhabitants of Palestine listened to the speeches of the rhetors and the art of rhetoric had a practical value."* [24] The Rabbinic *middah* of *Gezeira Shava*, according to Lieberman, is similar to the Hellenistic rhetorical term *synkrisis pros ison*, first attested in Hermenogenes around the 2nd century.

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[22] *Ibid.*: 107.
[23] David Daube, "Rabbinic Methods of Interpretation and Hellenistic Rhetorics" *HUCA* 22 (1949): 239.
[24] Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York: JTS, 1962), 56.

Other scholars claim that the rabbis only borrowed existing Greek terminology, but not necessarily the entire ideology and exact systematization of their neighbors. Louis Jacob rejects the idea that the *middah* of *kal vachomer* (from minor to major) was exactly identical to the Aristotelian syllogism.[25] In any case, Rabbinic hermeneutics develop at a time when others were engaged in similar initiatives. According to Saul Lieberman, the rabbis simply resorted to well-established devices and tools of their time: *"As the utilization of instruments accepted all over the civilized world of that time, their rules of interpretation of the Haggadah (and their 'supports' for the Halachah from Scripture) were a literary affectation which was understood and appreciated by their contemporaries."* [26]

The Karaite Yehuda Hadassi criticized the Rabbinic *middot* in his book *Eshkol HaKofer* where he pointed out the similarities between these rules and the twelve Greek rules known as *ergasiai kai epicheiremata.*

Over time, three groups of hermeneutical rules developed: the Seven Rules of Hillel, the Thirteen of Ishmael, and the Thirty-Two of Rabbi Eliezer ben Yose Hagalili. These rules relate to grammar, exegesis, interpretation of words and letters, prefixes and suffixes, numerical values of words, their interpretation according to their vocalization, and their division into two or more words.

The seven *middot* were probably not invented by Hillel, but might have been the main types of argument in use at his time. The thirteen *middot* are an expanded version of it, and probably not invented by R. Ishmael either. The pseudepigraphon gives these rules the authority of a major early Rabbinic figure. It also assigns the origin of the

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[25] Louis Jacob, *Studies in Talmudic Logic and Methodology* (London, 1961), 3-8.
[26] Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine,* 78.

middot to Sinai, probably as a way to ground their authority. The introduction to

Midrash Hagadol stresses: *"These are the thirteen middot by which the Torah is*

interpreted which were handed down to Moses at Sinai." This idea of a sinaitic origin

of *middot* (obviously hard to reconcile with the scholars' idea of Hellenistic

borrowing) is also found in other documents, such as *Gaonic* texts or in *Sefer Ha-*

Keritut, composed by R. Samson of Chinon (at the end of 13th century C.E*).*

The Thirty-two rules are named after Eliezer ben Yose Hagalili. They are referred to

in different documents, first in the writings of 11th century C.E. Abulwalid Ibn Ganah,

and then listed as Thirty-three *Middot* in *Midrash Hagadol.* The source of this

compilation has turned out to be *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer.* Rashi frequently refers to

'The Baraita of the Thirty-Two Rules.'

The dating of this compilation is disputed. According to H. L. Strack and Gunter

Stemberger, the list of the *middot* itself could be dated as early as 4th century CE (all

the Rabbinic authorities mentioned in the *Midrash* lived before the 3rd century), but it

was probably produced closer to the 8th or 9th century CE.[27]

Eliezer was a famous *Haggadist*, a *Tanna* (early Talmudic authority) who lived in the

2nd century C.E. He is mentioned only once in the *Mishnah* but more than ten times in

the *Toseftah.* He is quoted almost entirely in Haggadic texts. His notoriety might

explain the attribution of these *middot* to him. B.T. *H'ullin* 89a says: *"When you hear*

the words of Eliezer ben Yosse HaGalili in the Haggadah, open your ear like a

funnel."

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[27] H.L. Strack and Gunter Stemberger, *Introduction to Talmud and Midrash* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1982), 22.

Depending on the source, *Notarikon* is listed either as the 30th or 31st *middah* in the list

(as in some sources, the 29th *middah* is divided). The enumeration of the 32 rules is

followed by examples of each *middah*, that were probably edited later and form a kind

of *Gemara*, a commentary on the original list. Sayings are cited of the *Tannaim*

Akiva, Ishmael, Jose, Nehemiah, Nehorai, Rabbi, Hiyyah, and the *Amoraim* Yochanan

and Jose ben Chaninah.

The *Baraita* of the 32 *middot* of R. Eliezer ben Yose HaGalili has not been preserved

in an independent form. It has been transmitted in the methodological work *Sefer Ha-*

Keritut, by Samson of Chinon. It now appears in the beginning of the *Midrash*

Mishnat R. Eliezer (discovered and published by H.G. Enelow in 1933) and in the

introduction to *Midrash Hagadol* (ed. M. Margaliot, 1947).

2- The Thirty-Two <u>Middot</u> of Rabbi Eliezer ben Yose Hagalili.

1. *Ribbui* (inclusive): The particles "*et,*" "*gam,*" and "*af,*" indicate that something

which is not explicitly stated must be regarded as included in the passage, or that some

teaching is implied.

2. *Mi'ut* (exclusive): The particles "*ach,*" "*rak,*" and "*min,*" indicate that something

mentioned in a text must be excluded in a specific case.

3. *Ribbui achar ribbui* (inclusion after inclusion): When one inclusion follows another

it indicates that more must be regarded as implied.

4. *Mi'ut achar mi'ut* (limitation after limitation): A double limitation indicates that more is to be omitted.

5. *Kal va-chomer meforash*: "Argumentum a minori ad majus," or vice versa, and expressly so characterized in the text.

6. *Kal va-chomer satum*: "Argumentum a minori ad majus" or vice versa, but only implied in the text.

7. *Gezeira shavah*: Argument from analogy. Biblical passages containing synonyms or homonyms are subject to identical definitions and applications.

8. *Binyan av mi-katuv ehad:* a paradigmatic point based on a particular verse.

9. *Derech Ketzarah*: Abbreviation used in the text when the subject is self-explanatory.

10. *Davar shehu shanui* (repeated expression): Repetition implies a special meaning.

11. *Siddur she-nechlak*: Where in the text a sentence is divided by the punctuation, the proper order and the division of the verses must be restored according to the logical connection.

12. *Davar Shehu ba lelamed*: Anything introduced as a comparison to illustrate and explain something is itself elucidated.

13.*Miklal she-acharav maasei ve-eino ela prato shel rishon*: When the general is followed by the particular, the latter is specific to the former and merely defines it more exactly.

14. *Midavar hanitlah bekatan mimeno kedei lehashmiya et ha'ozen*: Something important is compared with something unimportant to elucidate it and render it more readily intelligible.

15. *Mishnei ketuvim ha-macharishin ze-et-ze:* When two Biblical passages contradict each other, the contradiction must be resolved by a third passage.

16. *Davar meyuchad bi-mekomo*: An expression which occurs in only one passage can be explained only by the context.

17. *Davar she-eino mitparesh bimekomo:* A point which is not clearly explained in the main passage may be better elucidated in another passage.

18. *Davar she-ne'emar bemiktsat:* A statement with regard to a part may imply the whole.

19. *Davar she-neemar beze vehu hadin lechaveiro*: A statement concerning one thing may hold good with regard to another as well.

20. *Davar she-neemar beze ve-eino inyan lo, aval lechaveiro*: A statement concerning one thing may apply only to something else.

21.: *Davar she-hukash leshtei middot*: If one object is compared to two other objects the latter forms the third element of comparison.

22. D*avar she-chaveiro mochiach alav:* A passage may be supplemented and explained by a parallel passage.

23. *Davar she-hu mochiach al chaveiro*: A passage serves to elucidate and supplement its parallel passage.

24. *Davar she-haya baklal veyatsa min haklal:* When the specific detail implied in the general is especially excepted from the general, it serves to emphasize some property characterizing the specific.

25. *Davar she-haya baklal veyatsa lelamed al chaveiro:* The specific detail implied in the general is frequently excepted from the general to elucidate some other specific property, and to develop some special teaching concerning it.

26. *Mashal :* parable.

27. *Mi-ma'al*: Interpretation through the proposition that follows it.

28. *Mi-neged*: Interpretation through the opposite.

29. *Gematria*: Interpretation according to the numerical value of the letters.

30. *Notarikon*: Interpretation by dividing a word into two or more parts.

31. *Mimukdam umeuchar she-hu ba-inyan*: The phrases that follow must be regarded as preceding.

32. *Mimukdam umeuchar she-hu baparashyot*: Portions of the Bible refer to an earlier period than to the sections that precede them, and vice versa.

The 29th rule is sometimes subdivided. Therefore, the last rules are not always precisely listed as above. *Notarikon* appears as the 30th or 31st rule depending on the sources.

PART II :

Notarikon, an Historical Overview.

אמר רבא: סכינא חריפא מפסקא קראי!

Rava says: 'A sharp knife cuts-up verses'

(B.T. *Baba Batra* 111b)

Notarikon is the 30th *middah* (hermeneutical rule) attributed to Rabbi Eliezer ben Yose

HaGalili, as enumerated in Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer. It is followed, in this source, by

examples of *Notarikon* found in Scripture:

משנת רבי אליעזר פרשה ב עמוד 39

נוטריקון. מניין שדורשין נוטריקון. ת"ל אברהם, אב המון, כרמל, רך מל, דבר שהוא רך
ונמלל ביד. וכן הוא אומ' והוא קללני קלל' נמרצת, נמרצ"ת מלשון נוטריקון, נואף, ממזר,
רוצח, צורר, תועבה.

'Notarikon. What is the origin of this tool? The Talmud says: From (*a play on the*

name) Abraham, the father of a multitude of nations. From *Karmel*, soft and round, a

thing that is soft and round in hand. It is also written: He insulted me with grievous

words, written in *Notarikon*: adulterer, bastard, murderer, enemy and abomination.'

The examples provided in this text include two different forms of *Notarikon*:

a. The breaking of a word into pieces and the inversion of letters *(Karmel = Rach*

+ Mal).

b. The acrostic expansion of letters into words *(n'mr'ts't)*.

But these are not the only definitions given to this word in traditional Jewish sources.

Note, for example, how **Rashi** in his commentary of B.T. *Shabbat* 105a writes:

'*Notarikon,* with dots above the letter signify that it stands for an entire

word.'**Maimonides** in his Mishna commentary writes that '*Notarikon* is to write a

letter at a beginning of a word and to imply from this letter the entire word. For

example: to write a letter *kuf* with a dot as an abbreviation of *korban,* or to write a

mem to mean *maaser,* *according to the understanding and conventions of a specific*

place.'

Yosef Karo in *Kelalei Ha-Gemara* wrote: *"Notarikon means that a letter remains (In*

Hebrew: notar) and implies (in Hebrew: kone) a word."

The author of Beit Yosef, playing on the word *Notarikon,* goes so far as suggesting

that the word comes from Hebrew. To prove his point, he uses the very method of

Notarikon and splits the word in two pieces, two Hebrew roots, claiming that

Notarikon is self explanatory through its name, i.e., it is revealed by breaking it.

Actually, *Notarikon* comes from the Greek *notarion,* which means 'short-writing,' or

'abbreviation.'[28] *Notarikon,* just like *Gematria* (the 29th *middah* of Rabbi Eliezer ben

Yose HaGalili,) is called by a Greek name even though it is listed in a series of

Rabbinical hermeneutical rules. It is interesting that even though the rabbis did

translate some of the hermeneutical rules they used from Greek into Hebrew (we

mentioned earlier *Gezeira Shavah* , as a translation of *synkrisis pros ison*), they did

not bother translating *Notarikon* or if they did, their translation does not appear in the

Baraita. The lack of translation is even more surprising as one reads in the Babylonian

Talmud *Shabbat* 105a: '*Minayin Notarikon? Min ha-Torah'* – What is the origin of

Notarikon? It comes from the Torah. The untranslated Notarikon stands as a 'Greek

tool from Sinai.'.

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[28] In *Sefer Aruch Hashalem,* Nathan ben Yechiel gives the following definition: *"Notarikon* comes
from the Greek; the kings'scripts use this method of abbreviated writing."

Notarikon was probably used by the Hellenized world. [29] This might explain the use

of this tool as a legitimate and common one in the rabbis' cultural context.

As noted earlier, the dating of the Thirty-Two Rules of R.Eliezer is uncertain and the

definitions of *Notarikon* by different Jewish commentators vary. Therefore, it is

essential to research the early occurrences of *Notarikon* in order to define what might

have been its original meaning in Rabbinical sources.

A- *The Genesis of Notarikon:*

Its Use In Early Rabbinical Sources.

Looking at the Mishna, the Palestinian Talmud and *Midrash*ei Halachahh, it is striking

to see how rarely the word *Notarikon* appears.

1- The Mishna

The word *Notarikon* appears only once in the Mishna (2nd century C.E.)

In Tractate *Shabbat* 12 : 5, one reads:

כתב אות אחת נוטריקון רבי יהושע בן בתירא מחייב וחכמים פוטרין

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[29] Saul Lieberman explains that the dissolution of a word into parts was practiced in the Greek *onirocritica*, the interpretation of dreams. (See *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine*, 75).

"If he wrote one letter as a <u>Notarikon</u>, R. Joshua ben Bateira declares him liable, but the Sages declare him exempt."

This passage relates to the prohibition on writing on Shabbat. According to tradition, one cannot write two letters, as it already constitutes a word. The debate here is to know if the writing of only one letter, that is intended by its writer as *a Notarikon*, i.e., an abbreviation, is permissible on Shabbat. For example, if one writes a *bet* as a way to abbreviate the word 'house' *(Bayt)*, did he transgress? One rabbi considers it is forbidden, whereas the others permit it and do not see it as a violation of Shabbat's prohibition as the intention behind the action does not have the same value as the actual writing. The minority opinion is recorded, but the *Halachah* follows the majority.

The one and only occurrence of the word *Notarikon* in the *Mishna* is quite surprising, for a number of reasons. First, it has nothing to do with biblical hermeneutics and the interpretation of Scripture, but rather with an everyday life situation: Can someone write any word in an abbreviated form on Shabbat. The abbreviation does not need to stand for a biblical word: it is simply the language convention of a particular society. The word *Notarikon* seems here to be taken to simply mean 'abbreviation', i.e., it is understood precisely in its Greek original meaning. Second, the question of *Notarikon* here is related to a case of *Halachah*. The question has purely legal implications. It is not an Haggadic case at all, even though the tool is clearly restricted to non-halachic material in the list of the thirty-two *middot*.

2- *The Palestinian Talmud.*

In a similar way, the Talmud of Jerusalem features only two occurrences of the

vocable *Notarikon*. In Tractate *Shabbat*, the Palestinian Talmud literally reiterates the

Mishna we just addressed. But in P.T. *Orlah* 61, 1:5, a strikingly different use of

Notarikon is offered:

הלכה ז' ענקוקלות והחרצנים רבי זעירה וחד מן רבנין בשם רב ענבים שלקו עד שלא

הביאו שליש אמר ר' יוסי בי ר' בון אפילו לקו משהביאו שליש אמר רבי חייא בר אדא

לשון נוטריקון הוא ענבין דלקי תלתיהון

Halachah 7 refers to the language of the Mishna: 'The defective grapes

(ANKUKLOT) and the grape shells' (that are forbidden as the Orlah). Rabbi Zeira

and another rabbi, in the name of Rav (interpret it as refering to) grapes that

degradated before they reached the third of their growth. Rabbi Yossi, son of Rabbi

Bun, (says they are improper) even if they blighted after they grew beyond a third.

Rabbi Chiyya bar Adda says this is a language of Notarikon: these are grapes that

were blighted at a third of full growth (anavim dilaku telateihon).

This Gemara comments on a Mishna that prohibits the use of defective grapes and

grape shells as part of the *Orlah* prohibitions (a fruit yielded by a tree in its first three

years is called *"Orlah"* - prohibited). Different rabbis try to clarify the loose definition

of 'defective grapes,' i.e., the word *ankuklot*. Whereas Rabbi Zeira, in the name of

Rav argues that defective grapes are the ones that did not grow beyond a third of their

size, Rabbi Yossi claims that it includes also larger defective grapes. Rabbi Chiyya

bar Ada agrees with Rabbi Zeira and brings what could be called a linguistic support (

asmachta) under the norm of a *Notarikon*. According to him, the very word

'defective' can be read as an abbreviation of *anavim dilaku telateihon*, which means in

Aramaic, 'grapes that were blighted at a third (of full growth).'

This use of Notarikon in the Jerusalem Talmud is striking: here, *Notarikon* comes as

an *asmachta*, a support, for a halachic decision, a legal ruling. This seems again to

counter the very first principle of the Thirty-Two *Middot* of Rabbi Eliezer, which

states: *"These tools apply only for* Haggadic *use. "* In this Gemara, the use of

Notarikon is secondary to the Rabbinic argument and acts only as a support to one

side of the debate, the *machloket*. The most striking element is the fact that *Notarikon*

is applied to a *mishnaic Halachah*, i.e., to *mishnaic* Hebrew, rather than biblical

Hebrew! Not only does it suggest that the *Mishna* itself is written in abbreviation, but

it also implies that the Aramaic *Gemara* can expand and reveal the hidden meaning

behind the *mishnaic* text.

We are left wondering what is the implication of a mishnaic *Notarikon*. Does R.

Chiyya bar Ada believes that every human society uses abbreviations and therefore

Notarikon can be found in the Rabbinic editing of the Mishna, just as it can be found

in every profane language? Or does he believe that the Oral Torah is written in a

'special language,' just like biblical Scripture is and therefore needs to be interpreted

with the hermeneutical tools of the Written Torah? Does he believe that the Mishna is

written in the same 'divine' language as the Written Torah handed to Moses on Mount

Sinai?

In the two early sources we just analyzed, neither the Mishna (2nd century) nor the Jerusalem Talmud (4th century) seem to use the word *Notarikon* in the way we would have expected, in the light of Rabbi Eliezer's thirty-two rules. None refers to the breaking of Scriptural words, or to an acrostic expansion of letter in order to reveal a 'hidden' meaning. Also, none addresses purely Haggadic excerpts.

3- *Midrashei Halachah.*

The first acrostic Notarikon is found in *Sifrei Zuta 11:8*, probably written in the 3rd – 4th century C.E. Again, there is only one occurrence of the word *Notarikon* in this early *Midrash*.

והיה טעמו כטעם לשד השמן, הדבר הזה אמר נוטריקון הדבר הזה משמש לשלשה דברים לייש ושמן ודבש כליש שהוא ערוך בשמן ומקוטף בדבש זו היתה בריתו של מן וכך היו כשרים אוכלים אותו

(The taste of the Manna) was like the taste of oil cake. This word is a <u>Notarikon</u>. This word defines three things: a cake, oil and honey. Like a cake fried in oil and covered with honey was the covenant of the Manna and this is how the 'kosher' ones were eating it.

The *Midrash* refers to Numbers 11:8, a verse which states that the *manna* had " *the taste of oil cake*". The rabbis, then, link this taste to another description offered in Exodus 16:31. There, the *manna* is depicted as having the taste of a *"wafer made with honey."* In an attempt to describe the actual taste of the manna, *Sifrei Zuta* uses intertextuality and the breaking of a word into letters. Each letter is presented as a different tasty nourishing and sweet ingredient: cake, oil and honey. This is the first time we read about a purely Haggadic use of *Notarikon*: *Haggadah* comes to fill the gaps of Scripture. It invites a closer look and suggests that if one reads between the letters, the recipe of a biblical delicacy can be revealed.

The *Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael*, redacted at the end of 3rd century C.E., presents two occurrences of *Notarikon*. In the chapter *Massekhta Beshalach De-Amalek, Parasha 1*, one reads:

ויחלוש יהושע את עמלק ואת עמו, רבי יהושע אומר ירד וחתך ראשי גבורין שעמו
העומדים בשורות המלחמה. ר' אלעזר המודעי אומר בו לשון נוטריקון ויחל ויזע וישבר.
עמלק כמשמעו.

The *Midrash* offers a commentary on the verse (Ex.17:13): *'Joshua weakened Amalek and his people'* to define the precise meaning of this verb. The Rabbis are trying to fill in the gap of the text and to answer the question: How did Joshua defeat Amalek? What had been his strategy? In this Rabbinic world of the *Beit Midrash*, far away from the fields of war and military campaigns, their passion for military strategy is quite striking.

*"R. Yehoshua said: He went down and cut off the heads of the fighters who stood with
him in the battle lines. R. Eliezer Hamodai said :It is a language of Notarikon. 'He
made them sick, he made them tremble, he broke them.' Amalek is according to its
literal meaning."*

The two rabbis display much Haggadic creativity in their dialogue. As they wonder
about Joshua's powerful military strategy, R. Joshua simply describes the military
move taken by Joshua. R. Eliezer Hamodai grounds his imagery in the linguistic play
on words. His 'proof' is based on the expansion of the letters of the verb *yachlosh*,
which was understood as a list of successive actions.

Here, the two rabbis do not seem to be involved in a very polemical discussion.
Notarikon seems to be used as a tool of pure Haggadic creativity, a kind of poetic
means.

Another interesting point is that the end of the passage recognizes that *Notarikon*
applies to specific words in the passage. The name 'Amalek' is said to be understood
'according to its literal meaning'. The rabbis recognize that sometimes a word simply
means what it seems.

Notarikon occurs a second time in *Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael*, in *Massekhta
d'Bahodesh, Parashat Yitro*, as one reads:

מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל יתרו - מס' דבחדש פרשה ח

בד את אביך ואת אמך. אם כבדתן, למען יאריכון ימיך, ואם לאו, למען יקצרון ימיך;
שדברי תורה נוטריקון שכן דברי תורה נדרשין, מכלל הן לאו מכלל לאו הן

" Honor your father and mother. If you honor them, your days will be lengthened. If you don't, they will be shortened. The words of Torah are a <u>Notarikon</u> as they are interpreted this way: From the positive, infer the negative and vice versa. "

This excerpt offers us a radically new understanding of the meaning of *Notarikon*. Here, the term seems to refer to another interpretative technique: from any positive outcome, the negative can be inferred. *Notarikon* here has the meaning of an 'economy of words.' Scripture is minimalist and you should be able to fill in the gaps: if something is true, the opposite is false. If something gives a reward, its opposite brings a punishment. *Notarikon* here has nothing to do with a linguistic tool. It does not refer to the breaking of words into pieces or to the acrostic expansion of letters. It invites us to enlarge our interpretation of a particular text, making explicit what is simply suggested. This is a hermeneutic tool of logic, revealing the obvious which is unstated but not a hidden secret.

Conclusion

There are very few occurrences of the word *Notarikon* in these early *Midrash*im. When the word appears, it usually does not fit the classical definition of the word, nor does it fit the examples offered by the *Baraita of R. Eliezer*. In early sources, *Notarikon* is not necessarily purely Haggadic, it is not restricted to biblical interpretation only, but applies to abbreviations in general, both in the words and the meaning of a text.

However, the fact that *Notarikon* is not named in these sources does not mean that the

tool is not used without being mentioned. For example, in the early *Midrashic* source

of *Sifra* 13:8, one reads:

ח) כרמל רך מל וכן הוא אומר ואיש בא מבעל שלישה ויבא לאיש האלהים לחם בכורים
עשרים לחם שעורים וכרמל בצקלונו, כרמל רך ומל בצקלונו בא ויצק לנו ואכלנו ונאוה
היה

The biblical word *karmel* (in Lev. 2 :14) is interpreted by breaking it in two pieces and

reversing its consonants. Even though this precise example is offered as an illustration

of *Notarikon* in Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer, it is not named *Notarikon* in this early

Midrash.

I suggest therefore that in early sources, the use of *Notarikon* is not yet systematized,

as it will become in later sources. It is not clearly defined as a tool to unveil the

hidden, to reveal the esoteric and the hidden essence of Scripture, as it will appear to

be later. *Notarikon* in early sources seems to be much more pragmatic: it is a

conventional tool that expands the abbreviations that exist in every language. It

remains close to the Hellenistic meaning of the word.

It even seems that some early *Midrashim* are somehow suspicious of this

interpretative method. In *Sifrei Devarim* (*piska 1*), for example, some criticism against

the use of *Notarikon* is expressed by one of the rabbis:

כיוצא בו דרש רבי יהודה (בראש' מא מג) וירכב אתו במרכבת המשנה אשר לו
ויקראו לפניו אברך, זה יוסף שהיה אב בחכמה ורך בשנים, אמר לו רבי יוסי בן
דורמסקית, יהודה ברבי, למה אתה מעוית עלינו את הכתובים, מעיד אני עלי
שמים וארץ שאין אברך אלא לבירכיים אבריכם [אל ברכים] שהיו הכל נכנסים
ויוצאים מתחת ידו כעניין שנאמר +שם /בראשית מא מג/+ ונתון אותו על כל
ארץ מצרים סליק פיסקא

Rabbi Yehuda interpreted (Genesis 41:43): *They called before him 'Abrekh.'* This is

Joseph who was a father in wisdom and tender in years. Rabbi Yose ben Dormaskit

said to him: Yehudah be-Rabbi, why do you twist Scripture upon us? I call heaven and

earth to witness that *'Abrekh'* simply refers to the fact that they were all falling *'el*

birkayim' to their knees, in front of him as he was ruling over all Egypt."

It seems to me that this story could be read as a kind of "anti-Achnai" episode: Rabbi

Yehudah, a *Tanna* of 2nd century C.E., dares to break a Scriptural word into two

pieces, for Haggadic purposes. He represents the power of Rabbinic interpretation, as

he faces another Rabbinic figure, Rabbi Yossi ben Dormaskit. This one happens to be

one of Rabbi Eliezer's students (the main 'actor' in Achnai's story). Ben Dormaskit

criticizes his reading as too distant from the literal meaning, i.e., from a more

traditional (original) reading. One can almost hear an echo of Achnai's story, claiming

'One does not bring a proof from a *Notarikon.'* Here again , like in the Achnai's

episode, there seems to be an opposition between an old school (represented by

Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yossi ben Dormaskit) and a new era of Rabbinic

interpretation (Rabbi Joshua and Rabbi Yehudah.)The new school is accused of

twisting Scripture through the use of a subversive and dangerous tool. In later sources,

it seems that these daring initiatives will not be contested anymore.

B- The Babylonian Revolution:

The Birth of Polysemy.

The Babylonian Talmud, probably edited at the end of 5th century C.E., represents a

turning point in our understanding and use of *Notarikon*. It seems to develop a new

definition of this tool.

1- 'Labeling' Notarikon: Tractate Shabbat 105a.

In this source, as in earlier ones, the word *Notarikon* appears only in one place, in

Tractate *Shabbat* 105a. There, the word is repeated a few times and followed by

different examples that illustrate how this hermeneutical tool functions.

כתב אות אחת נוטריקון, רבי יהושע בן בתירה מחייב וחכמים פוטרין. אמר רבי יוחנן
משום רבי יוסי בן זימרא: מנין ללשון נוטריקון מן התורה - שנאמר +בראשית יז+ כי א"ב
המו"ן גוים נתתיך, אב נתתיך לאומות, בחור נתתיך באומות, המון חביב נתתיך באומות,
מלך נתתיך לאומות, ותיק נתתיך באומות, נאמן נתתיך לאומות. רבי יוחנן דידיה אמר
+שמות כ+ אנכי - נוטריקון: אנא נפשי כתיבת יהבית. רבנן אמרי: אמירה נעימה כתיבה
יהיבה. איכא דאמרי אנכי למפרע: יהיבה כתיבה נאמנין אמריה. דבי רבי נתן אמרי:
+במדבר כב+ כי יר"ט הדרך לנגדי יראה ראתה נטתה. דבי רבי ישמעאל תנא: +ויקרא כג
/ב/+ כרמ"ל - כר מלא. רב אחא בר יעקב אמר: +מלכים א, ב+ והוא קללני קללה נמרצ"ת
- נוטריקון: נואף הוא, מואבי הוא, רוצח הוא, צורר הוא, תועבה הוא. רב נחמן בר יצחק
אמר: +בראשית מד+ מה נדבר ומה נצטד"ק - נכונים אנחנו, צדיקים אנחנו, טהורים אנחנו,
דכים אנחנו, קדושים אנחנו.

Let us look at each of these examples:

a) Avraham av hamon goyim

Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Yose ben Zimra: " Where does <u>Notarikon</u> come from? From Torah, as it is written in Genesis 17:5: 'The father of a multitude of nations I have made you,' I have made you a father of nations, a chosen one of nations, a beloved one of nations, a king I have made you, an eminent figure among the nations, faithful among the nations.

The passage starts with the affirmation that this hermeneutical tool is found in the Torah itself. This is the first time we read so clearly about this idea of a *Notarikon*-encoded Bible. In this reading, the tool was given on Mount Sinai as the Torah itself is written in *Notarikon*. This idea was absent from the *Mishna* and the Palestinian Talmud. It is expressed by R. Yochanan, an important Rabbinic authority (2nd generation Amora), in the name of an earlier authority (Rabbi Yose ben Zimra), i.e., it is presented as being very ancient and, therefore, very authoritative.

The first example that illustrates the use of *Notarikon* defines Abraham's destiny as already engraved in an early prophecy God gave him, through his very name. *Av hamon*, a father of nations, is decomposed letter by letter into different attributes of the Patriarch.

Here, *Notarikon* is a purely Haggadic tool that enhances the biblical narrative. Abraham's destiny is included and coded in his very name. *Notarikon* reveals that the Patriarch's name is essentially who he is and is meant to become. It reveals the man's essence. The hidden code is unveiled.

The Babylonian *Gemara* goes on by giving another example of *Notarikon*:

b) Anochi

R. Yochanan, in his own name, said: " Anochi (Exodus 20:1) is a Notarikon: Ana Nafshi Ketivat Yehaveit, I Myself have given the script. The Rabbis said: Anochi-Amira Ne'ima Ketiva Yehiva, Sweet speech, writing, a gift. There are those who say: 'I' is to be read as a reversed abbreviation: Yehiva Ketiva Neemanin Amrei, Scripture was given, faithful are its words.

This is probably one of the most famous examples of *Notarikon*. The first word of the Ten Commandments, *Anochi*, is expanded and interpreted. For the rabbis, the first person singular pronoun of God is obviously expected to reveal something of the Divine nature and is, therefore, a perfect object for the use if this '*Midrashic* tactic' in their attempt to fill in the gaps of Scripture.

Here are presented three different personal interpretations: R. Yochanan (this time, in his own name), the other rabbis and some alternative readers ('There are others who

say...'). They disagree over what the four letters represent. The alternative reading

goes as far as to reverse the order of the letters in the pronoun.

This is the first time we witness different Rabbinic authorities debating different

possible *Notarikon* exegeses. The pluralism of opinions seemed absent from the

earlier sources we investigated.

It seems that the Babylonian source is the one that introduces Rabbinic arguments and

sheds a positive light on their unresolved dialectic. No *Notarikon* is presented as truer

than another. The *machloket* remains unresolved. This observation fits the thesis

developed by Daniel Boyarin in his book *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-*

Christianity. Boyarin argues that the indeterminacy of Scripture and the pluralism of

opinions found in the Babylonian Talmud might be the product of its late editors, the

Stammaim. According to him, " *the Amoraim generally did not preserve the*

argumentation and debate, but only the final conclusions. For them, dialectical

analysis was a means to an end, a process through which a sage could determine the

normative law or the correct explanation of a source. The Stammaim, however, valued

analysis and argumentation as ends in and of themselves. "[30] The late editors of the

Babylonian Talmud introduced theological innovations by emphasizing indeterminacy

of meaning and multiplicity of Rabbinic voices. Doing so, they were able to retroject

these patterns and make it seem it is a product of the original authorities of *Yavne*. The

Beit HaMidrash, the house of study, they present is a world of debate and argument,

of pluralism and encouraged polysemy, but it might also be an icon that never really

existed.

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[30] Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*, 151.

The illustrations of *Notarikon* in B.T. *Shabbat* 105a seem to fit this pattern. Rabbi Yochanan, other rabbis and 'those who say otherwise,' freely debate and every opinion is recorded.

In early sources, *Notarikon* did not appear to be a tool of a pluralism of opinions. It did not come to illustrate textual polysemy, in the way it does here. This pattern will be emphasized in later *Midrash*ic sources.

But what are the rabbis precisely debating in B.T. *Shabbat* 105a? What is exactly the meaning of their different interpretations of the Divine 'I'?
At first, this hermeneutical exercise looks like a purely creative Haggadic exercise on the part of different rabbis, as they all play through similar words on the notion of revealed Scripture handed down at Sinai, by God Himself (in Yochanan's reading), in a sweet way (for the rabbis) and in faithfulness (for the 'others').

But this *Notarikon* might hide a larger difference of opinions.Rabbi Yochanan reads *Ana Nafshi Ketivat Yehaveit* – I have Myself written the Script; that is, God wrote Himself the tablets, both the first and the second one.
Other rabbis read: *Amira Ne 'ima Ketiva Yehiva* - a sweet speech, the script given. This second reading seems to emphasize the oral nature (*amira*) of the gift, rather than the written revelation, as if part of it had been said by God rather than written. The debate seems to focus around the question of the content of revelation: what exactly did Moses receive on Mount Sinai? What was the medium of this revelation? Did Moses receive written tablets or did he hear part of it?

This reading of the argument might be an over-interpretation. Nevertheless, a version of a similar interpretation found in the Yemenite *Midrash* Hagadol seems to support this understanding. In *Midrash* Hagadol to Deuteronomy 5: 6 [31], one reads *Anochi: Rabbanan Amrei Ana Nomika Ketavat Yahaveit* . The rabbis read this time a different *Notarikon*: "*I, Nomiko, wrote and gave them.*"

Saul Lieberman interprets this *Notarikon* saying " *There can be no doubt that Nomikos is none other than Moses.* " In Hellenized Latin, *Nomikos* means ' scribe, *notarius.*' According to this reading, there are rabbis who claim in the *Midrash* that Moses engraved the second tablets. The debate, in B.T. *Shabbat* 105a, might refer precisely to the same argument.

c) *Yarat and Karmel*

The Babylonian *Gemara* in B.T. *Shabbat* 105a goes on giving other examples of *Notarikon*:

The school of R. Nathan said: Because your way is perverse (yarat) before Me '(Numbers 22:32) – (the ass) feared (yar'a), saw (raata), and turned aside (nateita).

The school of R. Ishmael stated as a tannaitic teaching: Karmel means rounded and full (kar male).

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[31] in *Hasegula* 18, 53.

These *Notarikons* are attributed to different schools of 3rd generation *Tannaim*, suggesting that different schools were developing their own interpretations. In each case, a verse or a word is read in the light of the context of Scripture. The verse is expanded either through an acrostic or by breaking the word into two pieces.

As noted earlier, the Notarikon of *karmel* was already present in an earlier source, the book of *Sifra*, but this time, the interpretation is 'officially' labeled *Notarikon*.

This seems to prove that the tool is evolving to become more clearly Haggadic in nature. It is also used more systematically to name a specific interpretative process.

d) *Nimretset* **and** *Nitstadek.*

R. Acha bar Jacob said: And he cursed me with a curse that is grievous (nimretset-
IKings 2:8). This serves as a Notarikon for : 'He is an adulterer (no'eif), a Moabite
(mo'avi), a murderer (rotseach), an enemy (tsorer), an abomination(to'eivah).

This *Notarikon* is brought forth by a Babylonian *Amora* of the 4th generation. He proposes an intertextual reading of an excerpt in I Kings 2:8. The verse refers to David's accounts of the insults of Shemei. The interpretation creates a link with the account of an actual episode where Shemei insults David in II Samuel 16:8, as it enumerates the insults.

R. Nachman bar Isaac said: What shall we speak and how shall we justify ourselves

(nitstadek - Gen. 44:16). This stands for : We are honest (nechonim), righteous

(tsadikim), pure (tehorim), submissive (dachim), holy (kedoshim).

Here the *Notarikon* is used to depict the true essence of Joseph's brothers, as they are

suspected of being robbers, in the narrative. The reader of Genesis knows the truth,

and the interpretation comes to reveal their honesty as engraved in the letters of

Scripture.

These last *Notarikons*, given in the Babylonian Talmud, are Haggadic tools that fill in

the narrative's gap as they offer extra-details absent from Scripture.

2- The Unnamed Notarikons: Solving the Mysterious.

We noted in earlier *Midrash*im that some interpretations that use the *Notarikon*'s

method are not identified by name as such. For example, in *Sifra*, the word *karmel* is

read in an expanded *Notarikon*, but the tool is not named. In the Babylonian Talmud,

this pattern of an unnamed *middah* is still frequent. In many instances, words are

expanded acrostically and the method is not mentioned.

In B.T *Yoma* 28b, we read a commentary on the name of Eliezer, Abraham's servant:

אליעזר עבד אברהם זקן ויושב בישיבה היה, שנאמר (בראשית כד) ויאמר אברהם אל עבדו זקן ביתו
המשל בכל אשר לו, אמר רבי אלעזר: שמושל בתורת רבו. (בראשית טו) הוא דמשק אליעזר - אמר רבי
אלעזר: שדולה ומשקה מתורתו של רבו לאחרים

This passage is a good illustration of Rabbinic interpretation in general, as it offers a combination of daring hermeneutical methods. It presents an intertextual reading of Abraham's servant's identity. In Gen. 15: 2, Abraham refers to Eliezer, a man from *Damasek* who lives in his house. In Gen. 24:2, Abraham sends his old servant to find a wife for his son. The rabbis link the two verses and conclude that the two texts refer to the same person.

Then, the rabbis create an anachronistic reading of the verse. Eliezer is not simply Abraham's servant, but he sits in his Yeshiva. Rabbi Eliezer interprets the verb 'to rule over' (his house) as an ability to control, i.e., to master the knowledge of Torah. No wonder he was interested in this biblical character as they share the same name! Finally, Rabbi Eliezer concludes his demonstration with the use of *Notarikon*, without naming the technique. *Damasek* becomes: He pours (*dole*) and offers to drink (*mashke*) from his master's Torah to others. Eliezer is not only Abraham's student. He is also a teacher of Abraham's wisdom to others. The technique suggests that the name of the character, in this case a reference to his origin, literally refers to his essence and true identity. The *Notarikon* unveils the character's truth.

This pattern of revealing the hidden and mysterious through hermeneutics is used in the Babylonian Talmud's approach to dreams. In the tractate *Berachot*, an entire section is dedicated to dream interpretations. Note for example, in B.T. *Berachot* 56b:

הרואה ישמעאל בחלום - תפלתו נשמעת.

A person who sees Ishmael in his dream, his prayer is heard (nishma'at).

In order to 'read' the dream's content, the rabbis analyze the dream's language as a coded text. They use a *Notarikon* (without naming it), among other techniques, to divide that text into parts and reveal the message of the dream.

In B.T. *Berachot* 57a, one reads:

הרואה לולב בחלום - אין לו אלא לב אחד לאביו שבשמים

The one who sees a <u>Lulav</u> in his dream, has a full heart (<u>lo lev</u>) for his father in heaven.

Suddenly the dream's material has nothing to do with the object depicted (*Lulav, a* Palm branch), even if this object is a ritual one. The language used by the dreamer takes precedence over what is depicted; the signifier over the signified.

Sometimes the play on word is even subtler as it includes an homophony. The word is divided to include other words or homophonic vocables. Note, for example, in B.T. *Berachot* 57a:

הרואה שעורים בחלום - סרו עונותיו.

The one who sees barley (<u>se'orim</u>) in his dream, his sins were removed (<u>saru</u> <u>avonotav</u>).

According to Saul Lieberman, *Notarikon* is quite common in the interpretation of dreams among both Jews and Gentiles. Lieberman believes that the dissolution of one word into two parts was practiced in the *Onirocritica* (the Hellenistic science of dream interpretation). For example, in Artemidorus IV-24: *"During the siege of Tyre, Alexander the Great is said to have seen a satyr in a dream who mocked him at a distance. The diviners, dividing the word 'satyros' in two parts (sa + tyros), said to him plausibly enough: Tyre is to be thine."*[32]

The rabbis probably borrowed this accepted and recognized tool from the surrounding Hellenized culture and adapted it to their reading.

The Greek and Rabbinic methods of dream interpretation, which seems here particularly close to *Notarikon*, find a surprising echo in modern psychological theories.

Freud's analytical method, described in his book, *Interpretation of Dreams*, uses strikingly similar tools as it gives to the dream's language precedence over its content. Here is an example of a very Rabbinic-like *Notarikon* found in Freud's work:

"One of my patients told me a short dream which ended in a meaningless verbal compound. She dreamt she was with her husband at a peasant festivity and said: This will end in a general 'Maistollmutz.' In the dream, she had a vague feeling that it was

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[32] Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine*, 75.

some kind of pudding made with maize – a sort of polenta. Analysis divided the word

into mais (maize)-toll (mad)-mannstoll (nymphomaniac, literally 'mad for men') and

Olmutz (a town in Moravia). All these fragments were found to be remnants of a

conversation she had had at the table with her relatives...along chain of thoughts and

associations lead off from each syllable of this verbal hotchpotch. " [33]

Obviously, Freud and the rabbis do not have the same agenda or intent when they

explore a dream's content. The rabbis do not see in the dream's message a remnant

from a past conversation ...or if so, the conversation took place at Sinai. They cannot

conceive of a subconscious process at play, at least in the Freudian meaning of the

term. Nevertheless, Freud and the rabbis share an understanding of a condensed

language in dreams and recognize the need to expand the minimalist and coded words

of nights' imagery.

In the rabbis' wake, Freud believes that in the dream process, *"a work of condensation*

on a large scale has been carried out. Dreams are brief, meager and laconic in

comparison with the range and wealth of the dream-thoughts.[34]" We might, therefore,

argue that Freud does treat the dream as a holy writ, applying very 'unscientific'

methods to uncover meaning.

In the 60's, a French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, famously argued that *'the*

unconscious is structured like a language.' He noted the centrality of wordplays

(puns, associations) in dream interpretation and therapeutic processes, and more

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[33] Sigmund Freud, *L'Interpretation du Reve* (Paris: Folio, 1991), 331.
[34] *Ibid.*, 313.

clearly than Freud, claimed a linkage between religious and psychoanalytic interpretation. In Lacan's view, the Jews are the interpretative people par excellence and he writes: " *Ever since the return from Babylon, the Jew is the one who knows how to read. He withdraws from the literal occurrence in order to find the interval which allows the game of interpretation.* "[35]

Notarikon literally creates 'intervals' of reading in Scripture. In the light of our research, it is fascinating that Lacan links this Rabbinic interpretative skill to Babylon (even if he means a previous Babylonian exile).

Conclusion

The research tends to show that the Babylonian Talmud constitutes a turning point in the Rabbinic understanding and use of *Notarikon*. Earlier sources seemed to define this tool as an abbreviation common to many human languages, a language convention to articulate a sentence or a word n a short form. The Babylonian Talmud develops what seems to be an 'esoteric' understanding of *Notarikon*, i.e., it becomes a tool to reveal the hidden. It is not only a way to make explicit what is only suggested. Rather, it unveils the secret essence of Scripture. In the Babylonian Talmud, is developed the idea of a Torah written in abbreviation. '*Minayin Notarikon? Min HaTorah,* ' claims B.T. *Shabbat* 105a, as it gives many examples of abbreviations in

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[35] Jacques Lacan « Radiophonie, » in *Scilicet* 2/3 (Paris, 1970), quoted in Susan Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses : The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory*, 154.

Scripture. *Notarikon* becomes a tool to reveal the hidden nature of Scripture or the veiled essence of a biblical character.

The Babylonian Talmud presents extensive use of the technique of *Notarikon* without naming it. Thus, 'secret' messages in the text are revealed. Plays on words unveil prophecies and revelations hidden in biblical words and characters' names. Sometimes, *Notarikon* is used to interpret the unclear meaning of dreams, or the deepest mysteries of life. In all those examples, it seems that the Babylonian Talmud inaugurates a more esoteric understanding of Notarikon. This trend will be strengthened in later *Midrash*im and, even more, in the Jewish mystical movements.

Finally, our research seems to witness a move toward a greater acceptance of polysemy in the Haggadic realm. Rabbis are presented as arguing over different readings and their different interpretations are preserved in the text. *Notarikon* is a tool to present multiple voices found in Rabbinic dialogue. Here again, this pattern will be strengthened in later *Midrashim*.

C- *Midrashei Haggadah:*

An Unbounded Creativity?

In later sources, suddenly the occurrences of the word *Notarikon* are multiplied. The tool is mentioned seventy times in different Haggadic *Midrashim*. It seems that this hermeneutical key is now more clearly 'labeled' and named when the rabbis use it.

1- Notarikon: a 'kosher' tool among many others.

Midrash Tanhuma –HaNidpas (8th-9th Century C.E.) presents the highest number of
occurrences. The word Notarikon appears there fourteen times. These are often
repetitions of examples presented in earlier Midrashim. For example, in Tanhuma
Parashat Balak: 10, we find an interpretation already encountered in the Babylonian
Talmud:

הנה אנכי יצאתי לשטן כי ירט הדרך נוטריקון יראה ראתה נטתה, ד"א ירט
בגימטריא בא"ת ב"ש מגן,

The verb yarat (from Numbers 22:32) is interpreted as " (the ass) feared (yar'a), saw
(raata), and went astray (nateita). It is then followed, in this Midrash, by another
possible interpretation, a 'davar acher', that offers a reading of the verb through the
method of At-bash. This is another interpretative tool that allows the reader to replace
a letter with another in an inversion of the Hebrew alphabetical order (e.g. aleph and
taf become interchangeable). In this Midrash, Notarikon is, therefore, one among
other possible ways of reading the verse. It does not claim to be the one and only true
reading.

In Midrash Tanhuma HaNidpas - Parashat Massei: 2, the text comments on a verse
with the help of another verse, taken from the Book of Psalms. This intertextual
reading intends to clarify the journey of the Israelites thought the desert. The source
from Psalms says: " You led (nacheita) the flock of your people through Moses and
Aaron. " The verb is read as a Notarikon:

אלה מסעי בני ישראל, זשה"כ נחית כצאן עמך ביד משה ואהרן (תהלים עז),
מהו נחית לשון נוטריקון רבי אליעזר אומר נסים עשית להם חיים נתת להם ים
סוף קרעת להם, תורה נתת להם ביד משה ואהרן, רבי יהושע אומר נפלאות
עשית להם, חרות נתת להם, ימינך הושיע אותם תלוי ראש נתת להם ביד משה
ואהרן, רבי עקיבא אומר נוראות עשית בשונאיהם חרון אף שלחת בהם ונלחמת
בהם תהומות כסית עליהם ביד משה ואהרן, רבי אומר נביאים העמדת מהם
חסידים העמדת מהם ישרים העמדת מהם תמימים העמדת מהם ביד משה ואהרן

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This is the journey of the Israelites...Scripture says: 'You led the flock of Your people

through Moses and Aaron'. What is nacheita? A Notarikon: "Rabbi Eliezer says: You

performed miracles (nissim) for them, life (chayim) you gave them, the Sea of Reeds

(yam) you separated for them, Torah you gave them through Moses and Aaron.

Rabbi Joshua says: You did wonders (nifla'ot), you gave them freedom (cherut), your

right hand (yemincha) saved them, you gave them uplift (talui rosh) through Moses

and Aaron.

Rabbi Akiva says: Terrible things (nora'ot) you did to their enemies, fury (charon af)

you sent them, you fought them (nilchamta), you threw them into the abyss (tehumot)

through Moses and Aaron.

Rabbi says: You brought Prophets (nevi'im) among them, Pious (chassidim),

Righteous (yesharim) and Pure people (temimim), through Moses and Aaron.

This passage offers four different readings of a verse by four different leading rabbis

of their generations: First, the most famous pair of interlocutors in the tradition, Rabbi

Eliezer and Joshua, followed by Rabbi Akiva, the champion of Midrashic reading, and

finally Rabbi. Each reading sounds like a mnemonic, an educational tool to remember

Jewish history, through a *Piyyut* on God's power that brings forth praises for God's intervention in our ancestors' history.

A similar pattern is found in *Midrash Tanhuma Parashat Vayechi*: 9.

"פחז כמים לפיכך אל תותר", מהו פחז נוטריקון ר' אליעזר אומר פחזת חטאת זנית, ר' יהושע אומר פחזת חסכת עול מצוארך זעת מן החטא, ר' יהודה מסרס את התיבה זעת חרדת פרח חטאתך, דבר אחר פחז פסעת על דת חללת בכורתך זר שעשית כמים

This passage comments Jacob's blessing to his son Reuben (Genesis 49: 4). There, Jacob's first born is defined as *'Unstable(pachaz) like water.'*

This is a Notarikon. Rabbi Eliezer says : " You hastened (pachazta), you sinned (chatata), you committed adultery (zanita)."

Rabbi Joshua says: "You hastened (pachazta), you removed the yoke (of heaven) from your neck (chasarta awl metsavarecha), you did recoil from sin (zeeta min hachet)."

Rabbi Yehudah 'castrates' the word, i.e., reads it backward: "You recoiled (zeeta), you did tremble (charadeta), your sin has flown (parach chataecha)."

Another interpretation: " you trampled upon the law (pasata al da'at), you desecrated your birthright (chilalta bechortecha), you acted in alien ways (zar she assita)."

A similar interpretation was already found almost word for word, with just a few

variations, in Bereshit Rabbah Parasha 99 (5th century C.E.):

רבי אליעזר אומר: פחז"ת, השלכת עול מעל צוואריך, זע יצרך עליך, ר' יהושע
אומר פחז חטאת זנית, ר' לוי אמר פחז סרסהו, זעת חרדת פרח חטא מעליך,
ד"א פחז פסעת על דת, חללת בכורתך, זר נעשית.

Here again, four different (leading) Rabbinic authorities come to interpret in a poetic

way on Reuben's harsh blessing. The point is clearly not to define who has the right

interpretation, but rather to bring different mnemonic traditions to the reader's mind.

Here, *Notarikon* seems to be a pedagogic tool. It teaches about another episode of the

biblical narrative (in this case, Reuben's relationship with Bilhah) in a very poetic

way. It also raises questions about the possibility of repentance.

The same *Midrash*, Bereshit Rabbah, presents in another chapter (parasha 97) an

exegesis on that same biblical passage, but this time offers a slightly different light on

the narrative:

פחז כמים נוטריקון הוא פחיתה חניתה זניתה, וכי ראובן זנה, חס לצדיק, אלא כשמתה לאה אמו הביא

יעקב בלהה והושיבה על המיטה, וכיון שראה ראובן קינא ועמד והפך את המיטה, והעלה עליו הכת' כאילו

שכב אותה.

Unstable as water: It is a Notarikon *of 'you lowered, you placed, and you committed*

adultery'. Reuben sinned? God forbid that a righteous would do that! When his

mother Leah died, Jacob brought Bilhah and placed her on Leah's bed. When Reuben saw that, he became jealous, stood up and exchanged the bed. Scripture described this as if he slept with her.

This time, the interpretation of the verse is not attributed to any specific Rabbinic authority. Instead the *Notarikon* is expanded and interpreted in order to protect Reuben's honor. The Haggadic creativity recaptures his innocence and transforms the literal or obvious negative meaning of the verse into a positive one. *Haggadah* embellishes the status of a biblical character.

In those different examples, it is clear that *Notarikon* has evolved and the nature of the tool seems to have changed. As it becomes more clearly Haggadic, it gains freedom of interpretation and the rabbis becomes more "daring" in their reading. It is clearly not used in order to reconcile diverging opinions, but rather to present creatively and poetically different points of view.

It is also important to note that in the last examples we analyzed, there is a recurrent pattern: Four rabbis disagree on the interpretation of a verb and break it into four different words. It is striking that two rabbis keep being mentioned. In every example we quoted, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua are named in the *Machloket*. They are probably the most famous pair of interlocutors in the Talmudic tradition. But their diverging reading of *Notarikons* is even more fascinating as we remember the famous episode of Achnai's oven.

These rabbis put forth and embody the two sides of the argument. The famous case deals with the question of who has the right interpretation and what is the power of the

dialectic to reach *halachic* conclusions. Rabbi Eliezer represents, as we said, a more

conservative posture, the 'ancient world' of prophecy in which divine intervention sets

the truth. Rabbi Joshua, contrastingly, represents the new order of the *Beit Midrash*,

where the (Rabbinic) majority rules through the dialectic of argument. Here, these two

men are still pictured as arguing. But in our examples, the point is no longer to prove

who is right. Rather, the argument is edited in order to underscore the value of

Rabbinic pluralism.

Midrashei Haggadah present other extended uses of *Notarikon*. In Midrash on

Psalms– Chapter 5, the Rabbinic source interprets a verse, combining two

hermeneutical methods: *Notarikon* and *Gematria*. Commenting the title of the psalm,

Mizmor LaMenatzeach El Hanechilot, it says:

[למנצח אל הנחילות. אמר ר' יהושע בן לוי הנחילות] לשון נוטריקון, ה' חמשה
חומשי תורה, נ' חמשים יום בין פסח לעצרת, ח' שמונה ימי מילה, י' עשרת
הדברות, ל' כנגד שלשים צדיקים כאברהם, שאין העולם חסר מהם, שנאמר כה
יהי"ה זרעך (בראשית טו ה), ונאמר ואברהם היה יהי"ה (שם /בראשית/ יח
יח), בגימטריא תלתין.

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said : *Hanechilot* is a language of *Notarikon:*

He- like the 5 books of the Torah;

Nun- like 50 days between Pesach and the Atzeret (Shavuot);

Chet- like 8 days of circumcision;

Yud- like the 10 Commandments;

Lamed- for 30 righteous people like Abraham, the world is not lacking them as it is written in Gen. 15.5 : "Your descendants will be like this" (*ko yiheye zarecha*)."

Yiheye equals 30 in *Gematria*.

This *Midrash* offers a very innovative interpretation of Scripture, combining letters and numbers very creatively.

2- Notarikon: A Support to Minhag or Halachah.

In late *Midrashim, Notarikon* is never used to derive legal decisions or to counter an existing *Halachah.* It is clearly applied to Haggadic interpretations. Nevertheless, it is sometimes used to support an existing custom (*Minhag*) or a legal interpretation. There seems to be very few cases of this use of Notarikon in late sources. In *Midrash Haggadah* (Buber) to Exodus 21, one reads an interpretation of the beginning of the parasha (verse 21:1) *ve-eile hamishpatim* :

ד"א ואלה המשפטים. נוטריקון ה' הדיינים. מ' מצווים. ש' שיעשו, פ' פשרה, ט' טרם, י' יעשו, מ' משפט.

Another reading (davar acher): Hamishpatim is a Notarikon. The letter He stands for the judges (hadayanim), mem for 'commanded' (metsuvim), shin for 'to achieve' (sheyaasu), pe for 'a compromise' (peshara), tet for 'before' (terem), yud for 'they enact' (yaasu), mem for 'judgment' (mishpat).

This creative reading is defined as an alternative interpretation (*davar acher*). It comes to support an existing legal advise for the judges. Clearly, it does not claim that the source of the *Halachah* is the verse itself, but it offers a 'poetic' legal support to an existing custom. Interestingly, in this case, a creative interpretation comes to confirm and support the Halachic system.

Another *Notarikon* of this kind is found in *Midrash Haggadah* (Buber) to Exodus-Chapter 27:

ומהו מזבח נוטריקון מ' מחילה. ז' זכות. ב' ברכה. ח' חיים.

What is the meaning of ' altar ' (mizbeach)? The letter Mem stands for forgiveness (mechilah), zayin for the merits (zechut), bet for blessing (berachah), and chet for life (chayyim).

Here again, the *Notarikon* expands on what stands behind one biblical word. The author bypasses the obvious root of the word *zavach* : to sacrifice, as he suggests that in reality, the word's letters reveal its true 'power'. In this case, the altar possesses great powers: As inscribed in its letters, it can bring forgiveness, blessings, etc.

3- _Notarikon_: _A Revealer of the Hidden Essence._

In the Haggadic _Midrashim_, _Notarikon_ is often used to reveal implicit elements of the story or the essence of a character, through the vector of language. In _Midrash Haggadah_ to Genesis 37, we read a commentary about Joseph stripped coat (_ketonet passim_):

ד"א פסים נוטריקון על הצרות שהגיע לו. פוטיפר. ס' סריס פרעה. י' ישמעאלים. מ' מדינים:

According to this alternative reading (_davar acher_), the word passim can be read as the acrostic of the troubles that awaited Joseph, i.e., Potifar, Pharaoh's chamberlain, the Ishmaelites and Midianites. This _Notarikon_ acts as a seemingly a prophetical tool. The reader knows the rest of Joseph's story but is suggested that the rest of the story was predetermined and encoded in Scripture.

A similar pattern of language-prediction is found in other passages of _Midrash Haggadah_. In the _Midrash_ on Genesis 41, for example, Joseph's Egyptian name is interpreted in the following way:

The name _Tsofnat Paaneach_ (given by Pharaoh to Joseph in Genesis 41:45) is broken down, letter by letter, and expanded to mean that _"Joseph is one who sees (tzofe), saves (pode), is a prophet (navi), supports (tomech), is thoughtful (pikeach), clever (arum), intelligent (navon), and wise (chacham)."_

No authorship is attributed to this _Notarikon_ that draws on the entire Joseph narrative and includes it in his very name. His Egyptian identity is made up of the different

roles he played in the story, his many qualities and essence. One word prophesizes the rest of the narrative. *Notarikon* comes to reveal the hidden essence.

In the same chapter (Genesis 41), a similar pattern is used in order to analyze Osnat's character. The biblical narrative does not say much about Joseph's wife. Midrash Haggadah comes to fill in the data lacking about her:

אסנת בת פוטיפרע. א' אן כשם הגדול שגדל בו. ס' סתירה היתה בשביל יפיה. נ' נוהמת וצועקת שיצילנה מיד פוטיפרע. ת' תמה היתה במעשיה: בת פוטיפרע. והלא בת דינה היתה.

Osnat bat Potifar: Alef as On, the great name with which she was born, Samech as it was an insult (setirah) to her beauty, Nun as she spoke (nohemet) and screamed for him to save her from Potifar, Tav as she was perfect (tamah)in her deeds. Daughter of Potifar: But wasn't she the daughter of Dina?

Again here, an acrostic reading of a character's name comes to reveal her true essence. It prefigures what the reader knows (or wants to believe) about that character. In this case, Osnat is meant to become the mother of two tribes (Ephraim and Menashe) and the Rabbinic interpretation sheds a very positive light on this foreign character. The *Notarikon* comes to define her foreignness to her own culture and her greatness. The Haggadic tool fills in the gap of Scripture and embellishes the biblical narrative. The last sentence also preserves another *Midrash* about Osnat, suggesting that she might be Dina's daughter. This idea, found in different other sources, also removes Osnat from her controversial origin as it reintroduces her into the Israelites' family tree.

In these last two examples, it is important to notice the Hebrew interpretation of non-Hebrew names (*Tsofnat Paaneach* and *Osnat*). These audacious interpretations say a lot about the perception of foreign languages by these authors. Even the names given in Exile are seen as having a Hebrew essence. The idea that the Egyptian language hides Hebrew information fits a particular linguistic theology found in Midrash Rabbah. As noted earlier, many passages in *Bereshit Rabbah* refer to Hebrew as a perfect, original language that served as a blueprint for all other languages. [36] Therefore, the exercise of *Notarikon* becomes relevant: even non-Hebraic roots can be deconstructed into Hebrew sub-units.

We already encountered this phenomenon in the Babylonian Talmud. There, some words that are probably of foreign origin were already interpreted as Hebrew composites. For example, in B.T. *Megillah* 12a, one reads an interpretation of the word *karpas* as:

כרפס אמר רבי יוסי בר חנינא כרים של פסים

The word *karpas* (Esther 1:6) is broken into two pieces by Rabbi Yosi ben Chanina, to mean *karim shel passim*, stripped cushions. Similarly, in B.T *Yoma* 28b, the word *damesek* is read as '*dole u'mashke*' (He pours and offers to drink). In B.T. *Eruvin* 21a, *taltalim* is read as *talei talim*. In B.T. *Niddah* 61b, the word *shatnez* is *shave toy venoz*[37].

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[36] See, for example, *Genesis Rabbah* 18:4.
[37] This pattern is explained in the commentary of *Torah Temima* (Hearot Esther, perek 1:61):

שאין שורש בלשון הקודש יותר מג' אותיות, ועל המרובעים והמחומשים יאמר הבחור (סוף מאמר ד')
שהם מלשונות אחרות, ויש אומרים שהם מורכבים, וכפי הנראה הדעה הזאת האחרונה קבלו גם חז"ל

The *Midrash,* an anthology of different Midrashim collected over time, goes even further and suggests that sometimes, Hebrew words and Hebrew names can be understood as a *Notarikon* of foreign words. It presents the idea of common roots and mutual fertilizations between languages, as if all of them somehow emerged from a unique place.

For example, in Genesis Rabbah 71:8, it is suggested, through a *Notarikon*, that the Hebrew name Naftali is rooted in Greek language:

ותאמר רחל נפתולי אלהים נפתלתי וגו', נופתי פתיתי תליתי אחותי עלי, א"ר יוחנן נינפה היה לי לעשות לפני אחותי

Commenting on Genesis 30:8 ("With great wrestling have I wrestled with my sister"), *R. Yochanan claims that Rachel said: "I should have been made a bride (nimfa in Greek).* The rabbis do not hesitate here to derive Hebrew names from Greek words.

Conclusion

Researching the uses of the term *Notarikon* in the Haggadic *Midrash*im has shown that the patterns that emerged in the Babylonian Talmud are strengthened in these later documents. For example, *Notarikon* becomes a tool of Haggadic creativity that is used as a powerful mnemonic and poetic tool: biblical narratives and characters

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"The roots of the Holy Language (Hebrew) do not have more than three letters. When there are four or five letters, it is said that they are words of foreign origin. Others say that they are a combination of Hebrew words. Apparently our sages accepted that idea."

suddenly flourish through the expansion of words and letters. Words are divided and expanded in the poetic interpretation of biblical passages.

In a verb like *nacheita* (in Psalm 77:21, interpreted in Midrash Tanhuma - Buber), different rabbis manage to read the miracles God performed, the parting of the Sea of Reeds , the gift of Torah and the plagues placed upon to the Egyptians. The rabbis clearly do not believe that this metatext is truly hidden behind the literal text. But their suggested interpretation acts as an '*asmachta*', a support to their theology of reading: everything in the text is linked and unified. Their *Midrash* comes to tie together even more strongly the different layers of the sacred narrative. It strengthens the intertextual nature of their interpretation. It also acts as a powerful pedagogical tool as it reiterates the account of stories and myths. Finally, it is written as a kind of *piyyut*, a liturgical poetry that demonstrates their love for the text.

In other examples, *Notarikon* serves to reveal a character's essence, his true identity or the role he plays in the story. Joseph's Egyptian name, for example, is read as in indication of the role he will play in the narrative (savior, provider*)*, and Eliezer's origin (*Damasek*) is read as an indication of his close relationship with his master Abraham.

In each case, the Rabbinic interpretation acts as the marker of prophetic hints hidden in Scripture. *Notarikon,* in these sources, offers a more 'esoteric' reading of Torah: revealing the secret to be interpreted. Again, it is unclear if the rabbis truly believe in the 'literal' existence of this metatext hidden behind the text. Their interpretation seems to serve a pedagogical and mnemonic role. *Notarikon* acts as a support for their theology of a consistent unified narrative where no detail is irrelevant.

Later in Jewish History, the mystical movements will use this type of esoteric reading of Torah as a pillar for their understanding of tradition. In mystical hermeneutics, for example, particularly in ecstatic Kabbalah, Notarikon, Gematria and Temurah become central tools to reveal the hidden meaning of sources.[38]

The idea of a holy Hebrew language that served as a blueprint for other languages seems to be particularly present in haggadic *Midrashim*. Words of foreign origins are broken into Hebrew roots through *Notarikon*. In other cases we studied, the tool comes to suggest that our patriarchs were polyglots and did use foreign words in Scripture. In both cases, Hebrew and foreign languages seem to be intertwined in Rabbinic interpretation, as if they emerge from a common source.

Another pattern we noticed in the Babylonian Talmud is the acknowledgment of a pluralism of interpretation. *Midrashei Haggadah* often feature different rabbis arguing for different interpretations. No opinion is presented as right versus wrong, and the multiple readings and understandings are not reconciled. Polysemy appears in a positive light. It is nevertheless important to note that these rabbis are most often famous Rabbinic authorities. Their status seems to legitimate their divergent opinions. Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua are almost always part of the debate over the interpretation of verses, an interesting opposition in the light of the famous episode of Achnai's oven, in which both of them played a central role. Haggadic creativity is, therefore, legitimized in those Midrashim, but restricted to authoritative figures, whose faithfulness to the original source is seen as uncontested.

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[38] Joseph Gikatilla (1248-1325) wrote a book entitled *ginat egoz*, *The Nut Garden*. The term "Ginat" is an acronym for Gematria, Notarikon and Temurah, the central techniques used by the mystics to delve into the depths of Torah, symbolized by a "nut" (*egoz*).

PART III

Conclusion:

The Voices of the Rabbis and the Silence of Scripture

In their attempt to frame the interpretation of Scripture, the rabbis developed specific hermeneutical tools (*middot*). Among these tools, *Notarikon* is often perceived as one of the most daring rules of rabbinic interpretation. This rule enables the interpreter to divide Scriptural words into pieces or to expand them in an acrostic. Thus, for example, in the Babylonian Talmud (*Berachot* 57a), the word *lulav* (Palm Tree) can be read as *lo-lev* (He has a heart). In B.T. *Shabbat* 105a, the very first word of the Ten Commandments *Anochi*, "*I*" is expanded in acrostic form to mean a full sentence: *Ana Nafshi Ketivat Yehaveit*, "*I myself have given the script.*"

This audacious tool seems to open the path to infinite freedom of interpretation. To understand its limits, we have researched the historical evolution of its uses in the Talmud and early Midrashim, wondering when, how and by whom Notarikon is used in traditional sources. (I decided not to research its use in medieval rabbinic literature and in kabbalistic writings, even though *Notarikon* becomes there a very central tool of mystical interpretation. This work remains to be done).

Whereas the word *Notarikon* is almost never mentioned in early Talmudic and Midrashic sources, it seems to become more common and legitimate in later Midrashim.

The word does not appear in the Tosefta (2nd century C.E.). It is mentioned only once in the Mishna (2nd century) and the Palestinian Talmud (4th century), but not in the context of an interpretation of Scripture.

A major evolution in the use and understanding of *Notarikon* seems to take place at the time of the Babylonian Talmud. Edited at the end of 5th century C.E., this document refers, for the first time, to the biblical origin of this hermeneutical rule.

מנין ללשון נוטריקון מן התורה :

What is the origin of *Notarikon*?

It comes from the Torah (B.T. *Shabbat* 105a).

The Babylonian Talmud presents many examples of *Notarikon* (biblical abbreviations) in Scripture, suggesting that the Torah is indeed written in a condensed form, as an abbreviated version waiting to be expanded. Many tractates frequently use the tool without naming it. Words are divided or expanded by interpreters who decode, through this tool, the hidden messages in the sources. With the Babylonian Talmud, *Notarikon* becomes a legitimate way to fill in the gaps of biblical narratives. It also serves a more 'esoteric' goal: *Notarikon* is needed to reveal a character's true essence. For example, in B.T. *Yoma* 28b, Abraham's servant, Eliezer, is 'revealed' as a spiritual heir to his Master, through the interpretation of his origin: *Damesek* becomes *dole umashke mitorat rabbo*. Eliezer is the one who invites others to drink from his master's Torah, i.e., transmits his wisdom. The destiny of biblical characters is often read as predetermined by the letters of their names, or inscribed in Scripture itself. *Notarikon* becomes a vehicle to reveal the hidden and the mysterious. The rabbis also use it in order to reveal messages of dreams, probably borrowing this technique of dream interpretation from the surrounding Hellenized world. Tractate *Berachot* 56b and 57a features many examples of dreams' contents expanded by rabbis to reveal their true message. For the rabbis, just like for modern psychoanalysts, the language of the dream is believed to carry its interpretation in a condensed state.

In later (Haggadic) *Midrashim, Notarikon* is more frequently mentioned and used. The tool often comes to enhance an haggadic debate between different interlocutors. It comes to represent the plurality of rabbinic voices, the multiples interpretations given on a text or a verse. In their rabbinic debates, *Notarikon* is not used to distinguish a true interpretation from a mistaken one, but rather to present unresolved dialectics, in a pedagogical and mnemonic way. Different rabbis offer their reading and understanding of a biblical narrative. This is, for example, how *Midrash Tanhuma (Parashat Massei*: 2) voices four different rabbinic opinions on a verb from Psalms 77:21: " *You led (nacheita) the flock of your people through Moses and Aaron.* " Each of them reads acrostically a different list of miracles and wonders God performed for the Israelites in the Biblical narrative.

This particular example invites us to reflect on the limits, set by the rabbis, of a tool that seems to open infinite interpretations. Whereas in early sources, *Notarikon* is perceived as a potentially dangerous method (In Sifrei Devarim 1:1, Rabbi Yose ben Dormaskit accuses Rabbi Yehudah of 'twisting Scripture' with the use of this method), it seems that in later sources, the legitimacy of *Notarikon* is no longer questioned. Nevertheless, its use is clearly restricted to specific cases and conditions: First, it is used in haggadic contexts only. *Notarikon* always fills in the gaps of narrative pieces, i.e., it never has legal implications. If it does, it only comes to support an existing Halachah (*asmachta*).

Second, the debate between different rabbinic interpretations seems to serve a mnemonic and pedagogical goal, more than a true hermeneutical one: the rabbis do not argue in order to prove their point, to define right from wrong, but rather to teach and create a poetic unity between different parts of Scripture.

Finally, the identity of the rabbis involved in this debate is essential: most of the time,

the most authoritative rabbinic figures of their time are presented as using *Notarikon*

(Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Joshua and Rabbi Akiva are often part of the discussion). Their

high status and great authority seem to legitimate their daring reading of Scripture. In

their mouths, audacious interpretation seems to be permitted.

It is also important to note that the culture of *machloket* (debate) emphasized in the

Babylonian Talmud might not give a true account of the rabbinic discussions of their

time. The arguments attributed to these great rabbinic figures might be the product of

a late editing of the Babylonian Talmud. [39]The Stammaim, the late editors, might have

partly retrojected these patterns of debate and attributed them to ancient authorities, in

order to ground the legitimacy of these hermeneutical rules.

The question of polysemy (multiple meanings attributed to a text) and infinite

openness of interpretation in rabbinic sources has been a very attractive topic for

scholars in recent years. Literary theory critics and deconstructionist philosophers

have found in Midrash a model for their theories of infinite textual significance. The

supposed indeterminacy of Midrash is what made it so attractive to many

contemporary theoreticians as they wonder: can a text have infinite meanings? Is there

a "true" original meaning? Is the 'reader' (or the rabbi) creating meaning or

discovering it?

Even though unresolved rabbinic *machloket* presents some similarity with these

modern questions, many differences set the disciplines apart. Among them, stands the

rabbinic principle of *ein mikra yotsei miyadei peshuto*, Scripture never loses its plain

sense. By asserting the permanence of the *peshat* (literal meaning) of the text,

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[39] See Boyarin, *Border Lines : The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*, 151.

regardless of what sense the *derash* (interpretation) derives from the language, *" the rule provides a charter for freely proceeding with interpretation, for regardless of the content of the Midrash, the peshat of the biblical text retains its fundamental authority. Indeed, it is this assertion that distinguishes the midrashic celebration of the polysemous nature of the biblical text from the apparently similar work of the deconstructionists. The Rabbinic tradition can be as free as it is with interpretation because it has a theological foundation, the God-determined, never vitiated meaning of the Bible's words."* [40]

If these theological foundations are indeed what framed interpretative freedom in traditional rabbinic hermeneutics, we need to ask ourselves about the frames of our contemporary interpretations. In a time of multiple Jewish denominations and theological standpoints, what are the limits of textual interpretation?

This question seems particularly relevant to the Reform Movement. Among our principles, stands the idea that religious interpretation is not restricted to the 'leading rabbinic figures' of our time. Interpreting Scripture is not only a tool in the hands of today's "Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua". Just as we recognize the value of individual interpretation, we also do not restrict it to the haggadic realm but accept the legal implications of our reading of Scripture. How, then, do we define our interpretative boundaries?

The study of *Notarikon* leads us precisely to these theological introspections. One might argue that the tool itself is of no relevance in contemporary Jewish life. After

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[40] Borowitz, Eugene, The Talmud's theological language game, p. 135

all, who today would take seriously these wordplays and rabbinic puns? Indeed, the Thirty-Two *Middot* of Haggadic Interpretation are not taught today in Orthodox circles. Many Yeshiva students I met acknowledged these rules are not part of their curriculum, as these *middot* have no Halachic relevance. Even in liberal circles, tools like *Notarikon* are often ignored: Interpreting each and every letter of Scripture as a coded language implies a particular theology that is not easy to reconcile with liberal beliefs. How does one juxtapose the idea of a perfect Torah with Biblical criticism and JEPD scholarship? An in-depth analysis of other rabbinic *middot* would undoubtedly enrich the conclusion of this thesis. A research on audacious rabbinic tools, such as *Gematria* (the study of the numeric correspondence of words) or the use of the expression '*al tikra ela*' (the change in the vocalization of Scripture or even in letters of the text) could be the subject of future reflections.

But it seems to me that the audacious rabbinic interpretations of *Notarikon* have much to teach us about our theological points of view. As we journey on a religious and intellectual path, we constantly face the challenge of interpretative boundaries. We strive for academic rigor and an ability to approach our sources critically. Yet, we find in these sources, *midor le dor*, from generation to generation, our spiritual inspirations, and the source for the relevant and nurturing interpretations in our lives. We are living this religious paradox of looking at a text that is both a perfect and human document, enabling ourselves to 'derash' on the humanly re-constructed.

In Sifra *Tazria* (Parashat *Negaim*:13), we read an interpretation of a verse of Leviticus (13:47): "*When a disease occurs in a fabric (ve-habeged), either a wool or linen*

fabric." Rabbi Eliezer, the interpreter of many *Notarikons*, offers here a commentary on the letters that compose this verse. He derives many Halachot from the addition of two letters, *vav* and *he (ve-ha)*, before the word "fabric" (*beged*), suggesting that these two letters come to teach something about the nature of this specific fabric, and the conditions of contamination.

But his interlocutor, Rabbi Ishmael, loses patience and says:"*You say to Scripture: Silence until I create a Halachic Midrash!*" Rabbi Eliezer answers him: "*Ishmael, you are a Mountain Palm!*"

This dialogue, in many ways, symbolizes the theological crossroads we stand at in our approach to Scripture. It summarizes our own dilemma and internal dialogue as we approach our sacred texts.

The question raised by this *Midrash* is "Does Rabbi Eliezer truly believe that his interpretations of letters in Scripture are inherently found in the verse?" Or to state it more broadly: "Does the reader, in his act of interpretation, serve the needs of the Bible…or does he use the Bible to serve his own needs?"

This is what Rabbi Ishmael suggests when he accuses Rabbi Eliezer of silencing Scripture. But aren't we all silencing Scripture when we offer a new interpretation to an old text? Aren't we always imposing our worldview on the pre-existing text? When do we start using Scripture in order to serve our personal, social or political agenda?

Rabbi Eliezer, however, does not accept that point. He calls Ishmael a 'mountain Palm', i.e., a tree that does not bear fruit. In other words, interpretative restriction

might lead to barenness. Intellectual rigorousness or strict faithfulness to literal meanings might be unproductive or even destructive.

The tension expressed in this *Midrash* places two core principles in opposition: faithfulness to the written text and interpretative creativity. As modern interpreters, we have to keep moving between the voices we impose on the text in the name of our spiritual quest... and the dry barenness we might experience when we are led only by academic rigor.

Our theology at HUC is taught with History and Midrash. It is a constant dialogue between the voices of tradition and change, spirituality and intellectual honesty, creativity and faithfulness.

We are told in a *Midrash* that our ancestors placed the broken pieces of the tablets and the whole second set they received, side by side in the Ark. [41] Just as broken words and whole ones could dwell in one sacred place, may we be able, as we study our texts, to break the words of Scripture and to keep them intact.

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[41] B.T. *Menachot* 99a, and B.T. *Berachot* 8a.

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