Teaching *Midrash*
in the Reform Jewish Day School

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

The Project

With this project, I have attempted to encourage the teaching of *midrash* in Reform Jewish day schools because Reform Judaism explicitly values studying Jewish sacred texts. Further, the text skills necessary to understand *midrash* serve to enhance the overall textual competency of its students. As such, encouraging the study of *midrash* is a contribution to the construction of students' Reform Jewish identity and their general education. This project identifies existing methods and materials for teaching *midrash*, early rabbinic interpretation of the Bible, which were originally published for use in day schools, congregational religious schools, and for adult education, and it analyzes them for applicability in Reform Jewish day schools.

The Union for Reform Judaism demonstrates its support of day school education through PARDeS (Progressive Association of Reform Jewish Day Schools). PARDeS is an organization offering full membership to day schools affiliated with at least one congregation in good standing with the Union for Reform Judaism.[1] The Union for Reform Judaism's website articulates a commitment to several values on its "What is Reform Judaism?" page.[2] Teaching and learning *midrash* aligns with three of those values.

Reform Judaism commits itself "to introduce innovation while preserving tradition."[3] Studying *midrash* is essential to fostering an understanding and modeling how

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1 "Membership Info," last accessed November 11, 2013,
   http://www.pardesdayschools.org/membership.php.
2 "What is Reform Judaism?," last accessed November 11, 2013,
   http://www.reformjudaism.org/practice/what-reform-judaism .
3 ibid.

Jewish tradition has interpreted the Bible and made it relevant to each successive generation of Jews. Students who have this foundation will be better positioned to innovate while rooted in tradition. For instance, a student might learn about a female character whom the biblical text largely ignores during a major pericope. However, when reading a *midrash* that elaborates on the pericope, the student might be excited to encounter an expanded role for this female character as a part of the rabbinic narrative.[4] If the student were to later find another text where the female characters' actions or perspectives are ignored, he or she might attempt to either identify a *midrashic* explanation or create his or her own exegesis based on the same principles as the *midrash*. Thus, a student may discover that while the biblical text ignores the roles of many women, it is not true of the broader Jewish literary canon.

Reform Judaism commits itself "to affirm beliefs without rejecting those who doubt."[5] *Midrash* provides varying perspectives on God and presents the Rabbis as engaging troubling theological questions. For both those who doubt and those who believe, studying these sources can help lessen anxiety and encourage conversation. Because the texts preserve disagreements students can agree to disagree on some theological matters and still be part of the same community.

Reform Judaism commits "to bring faith to sacred text without sacrificing critical scholarship."[6] It is not sufficient to teach *midrash* as either rabbinic fiction or fact. Rather, Reform Judaism requires a critical and scholarly approach to address the material. The student who reads the *midrash* about Honi the Circle-Drawer should not be concerned

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4 For instance, *Midrash Tanhuma Vayeira* 23 attempts to reconcile the abrupt shift from the Binding of Isaac to the death of his mother, Sarah. The *midrash* asserts that Satan visited Sarah and informed her that Abraham would have slaughtered Isaac, and that this revelation caused Sarah's death.
5 "What is Reform Judaism?"
6 "What is Reform Judaism?"

with the veracity of the narrative because the rabbinic text is not history.[7] Instead, he or she should carefully read the *midrash* to identify the author's motive and determine how the author uses this *midrash* to ridicule miracle-workers.[8] More broadly, students should learn how to identify the author's motive and the lesson that the author is trying to convey.

In addition to the specifically Reform reasons for engaging in *midrash*, I will articulate several reasons that *midrash* is an important area of study in the broader (i.e. non-Reform) Jewish day school context. In this area, I borrow heavily from Alvan Howard Kaunfer who, in the process of completing his Doctor of Hebrew Literature in Jewish Education, wrote his 1989 dissertation on "Teaching Midrash in the Conservative Day School."[9] In his introduction, he writes that *midrash* is an important literature because, in part, "values basic to [most modern denominations of] Judaism cannot be studied or taught without citing midrashic literature."[10] Foreshadowing the question of applicability for contemporary students, Kaunfer writes that, "Midrash is the enterprise of making the Bible relevant to each new generation," and that, "Midrash is central to the progress and evolution of Judaism as a religion."[11] The general rationale for teaching *midrash*, suggested in part in Kaunfer's dissertation, and the specific way that learning *midrash* factors into becoming knowledgeable Reform Jews, guide this project as it seeks to identify an answer for how *midrash* might be taught in a Reform Jewish day school. The first question to be addressed is the definition of the term *midrash*.

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7   This *midrash* is found in *Mishnah Taanit* 3:8.
8   For a description of how to read this *midrash*, see my description of Neusner's *Meet Our Sages*, Part 5, in Chapter 2, below.
9   Alvan Howard Kaunfer, "Teaching Midrash in the Conservative Day School: A Rationale and Curriculum Proposal" (D.H.L., Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1989).
10 Ibid., 1–2.
11 Ibid., 5.

The word *midrash* is often used colloquially as "Bible story," but for the purposes of this project, I am limiting classic *midrash* with four criteria: date, location, genre, and methodology. Classic *midrash* includes literature attributed to sages living between 100BCE and 600CE.[12] It includes literature composed in Palestine, the name of the eastern Mediterranean region during the Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine Periods, which some Jews call *Eretz Yisrael*, and in Babylonia.[13] Classic *midrash* is typically divided between *aggadic* and *halakhic* material. Volumes of *midrash* are usually defined as exegetical or homiletical. The individual *midrashim* that are *halakhic* in nature are primarily concerned with legal issues while those that are *aggadic* in nature are primarily concerned with non-legal issues. Collections of *midrashim* that are exegetical in nature are arranged by verse, in order to expound on the individual verses or words, while collections that are homiletical are presented as topical and as sermons. Additionally, it is important to note that these four genres are somewhat fluid, and a single *midrash* might, at times, be difficult to classify within a single genre.[14] Finally, classic *midrash* addresses exegetical and theological issues and responds to the world of its composers. That is to say, those issues that specifically arise from reading Scripture during the aforementioned time period (100BCE – 600CE).

Restrictions on Teaching *Midrash* in Day Schools

Time is the most pressing restriction on the teaching of *midrash* in Jewish day schools. A school's ability to teach *midrash* is limited by the number of instructional

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12 Classic *midrash* also includes pseudepigraphical *midrash* written after 600CE but which Jewish tradition ascribes to the earlier generation of authors.
13 Hermann Leberecht Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 2nd printing, with emendations and updates (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 240.
14 Ibid., 239–240.

hours in a given school year. Schools must balance the number of hours for Judaics with core secular subjects and electives. Core courses include mathematics, science, social studies, and English language. Elective courses would include all courses that are non-core—such as: visual and performing arts, physical and health education, and technology and occupational classes—whether those courses are selected by the school or by the student. Through conversations with leaders in Jewish day schools, I have identified that teaching *midrash* is limited by the demands of: jurisdiction, accreditation, parents, and competing subjects.[15]

Jurisdiction

Jewish day schools might operate under the jurisdiction of state educational legislation. In some states, such as Wyoming, Jewish day schools may be exempt from state common core standards: Wyoming Statute 21-2-406 (2013) exempts "Any parochial, church or religious school" from the common core standards, and Wyoming Statute 21-4-101 (2013) denies the state government "any right or authority to control, manage, supervise or make any suggestions as to the control, management or supervision of any parochial, church or religious school...." In most states, the law necessitates that all students learn certain core or elective subjects. California Education Code 48222 and Colorado Revised Statutes 22-33-104 (2013) are two examples of state laws that require students to learn certain subjects.

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15 In regards to the "conversations with leaders," I am referring to the case studies described below (1:Methodology, Case Studies).

Accreditation

In addition to legal requirements, accrediting bodies sometimes require schools to teach certain subjects. As an example, the Independent Schools Association of the Central States grants accreditation to schools that, in addition to other requirements, show "CONGRUENCE between the school's stated mission and its actual program."[16] In other words, if a school's mission articulated an emphasis on college preparation through secular academic coursework but not a similar statement about the importance of learning Jewish texts, ISACS might expect the school to teach more academically challenging courses and to lessen the time spent on Judaics. A school operating in certain jurisdictions or under an accrediting body might need to limit the time for Judaics learning. Since *midrash* is one of the Judaics topics, that school would, in turn, limit the time spent learning *midrash*.[17]

Parental Demands

Jewish day schools, like many private schools, must meet parental demands since families can elect to leave the school and withdraw financial support: families became customers for educational products and services. Parents weigh the value of Jewish day school education, in part, against the value of public schools and other private schools in the area. If a city has, for instance, a number of high caliber academic preparatory private schools, parents may pressure the Jewish day school to compete with the academic rigor of those other schools. In this case, Judaics may be relegated to a secondary (or tertiary)

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16 *ISACS Accreditation Guide: For Use in School Years 2013-2014, 2014-2015, 2015-2016*, 18th ed. (Chicago, IL: Independent Schools Association of the Central States, 2013).

17 This does not take into consideration the teaching of *midrash* within another subject area, such as Composition or Language Arts because, as I will articulate below (1:Curricular Goals), such an environment would not facilitate the reading of the text in its original language.

status in the school and receive less time and funds because the focus has to be the "secular" education.

Competing Subjects

Even in schools where parental pressure does not dictate the course of study, some Jewish day schools attempt to reach niche markets, such as fine arts, STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), or addressing students with learning disabilities.[18] For these schools, an emphasis on meeting niche needs might detract from time spent on Judaic subjects such as *midrash*.

While the aforementioned leaders of Jewish day schools identified time as the most limiting factor for teaching any specific Judaic content, they also identified teacher competency as another area of concern. Anecdotally, schools tend to hire native Hebrew speakers to teach Judaics either because of a need to fill both Hebrew and Judaics teaching positions or because of a desire for Judaics to be taught in its original language. However, many of these native speakers do not have a background in a critical and literary approach to sacred texts.[19] That is, Hebrew fluency does not guarantee a high level of Judaic literacy. Therefore, in order to promote the teaching of *midrash*, a curriculum must provide both student and teacher resources. Put slightly differently, *midrash* might be taught in this setting but the goal is teaching Hebrew not rabbinic literature.

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18 For example, the Leo Bernstein Jewish Academy of Fine Arts (Silver Spring, MD), the STEM Innovation Lab at The Jewish Day School (Bellevue, WA), and the School Literacy & Culture Project (helping students with dyslexia) at The Shlenker School (Houston, TX) are examples of Jewish day schools responding to the niche markets: fine arts, STEM, and learning disabilities, respectively.
19 c.f. below (1:Methodology, Case Studies).

Methodology

Initial Plan for Data Collection

I created this project in order to qualitatively assess the current curricular practices of Reform Jewish day schools in order to address anecdotal evidence that these schools exclude *midrash* as a curricular topic. I created an electronic survey that I distributed in the spring of 2013 to both Reform Jewish day schools and Jewish community day schools.[20] I had hoped that, by collecting data about how a large number of Reform and pluralistic day schools engaged students in the study of *midrash*, I would be able to synthesize a curriculum that could be implemented throughout the network of Reform Jewish day schools. This vehicle for data collection failed because of a lack of respondents; however, I was able to use the survey as a guide for interviews, which I describe below.[21]

This survey asked about the weekly time allotted for teaching Judaics and if the students read Jewish texts in the original language, or in translation, if at all. In addition, the survey asked for a description of the specific curriculum or curricula that the school used in fifth through eighth grade and, if the school teaches *midrash*, whether as a separate or integrated curricular area. A multiple choice question asked whether the students approached *midrash* as Bible story, literature, pious exegesis, or in another manner. The final open ended question asked the Judaics director, "Are you happy with the way that *midrash* is taught at your school?"

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20 The annotated survey is an appendix to this work. Also, it is also important that I qualify "Reform Jewish day schools," as members of the Progressive Association of Reform Jewish day schools (PARDeS). During school year 2012-2013, PARDeS included fifteen member schools of which three were located outside of the United States.

21 See below (1:Methodology, Case Studies).

Even with follow-up phone calls, only four of the Reform Jewish day schools responded to the survey. Among the small sample, the answers provided did not have uniformity except in an overwhelming negative response to the question: "Are you happy with the way that *midrash* is taught at your school?" With the small sample, I can neither report the data without compromising participant anonymity nor make statistical inferences about all Reform Jewish day schools. However, that none of the respondents was pleased with *midrash* teaching in his or her school does suggest a need for a more thorough curriculum for teaching it.

Revised Plan for Data Collection

Despite the survey setbacks, this project continues to pursue its three primary goals: identifying existing methods and materials for teaching *midrash*, analyzing them for applicability in Reform Jewish day schools, and encouraging the teaching of *midrash* in Reform Jewish day schools. In order to identify existing methods and materials, this project looks first to the various Jewish publication houses that have published lessons, textbooks, and curricula for teaching *midrash* and other rabbinic writings. It then turns to two case studies: one Reform Jewish day school and one Jewish community day school. In order to analyze curricula for applicability, this project articulates those aspects of each that align with a set of curricular goals that I articulate below.[22] Specifically, this project asks whether each curriculum teacher *midrash* in a way that furthers the goals of Reform Judaism: "to introduce innovation while preserving tradition," "to affirm beliefs without rejecting those who doubt," and "to bring faith to sacred text without sacrificing critical scholarship."[23] In order to encourage the teaching of *midrash* in Reform Jewish day

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22 c.f. below (1:Curricular Goals).
23 c.f. above (1:The Project).

schools, I have included a partial curriculum and suggestions for its implementation and completion in Chapter 3.

Case Studies: Two Schools, Two Educational Leaders

The Alfred and Adele Davis Academy is a Reform Jewish day school in Atlanta, Georgia, serving learners in kindergarten prep through eighth grade. A number of the Judaics faculty provided me a window into their classroom and described for me the way that they teach *midrash*. With this insight into one of the Reform Jewish day schools, this project seeks to identify aspects of the *midrash* curriculum that speak directly to the areas of interest and concerns of Reform Judaism.

Davis Academy's Director of Jewish and Hebrew Studies is Micah Lapidus. Lapidus is a Reform rabbi and the president of PARDeS. With Lapidus's responsibilities as educational leader for both Davis Academy and the broader North American network of Reform Jewish day schools, this project looks to him, in his leadership position, for a clearly articulated perspective regarding teaching *midrash* in Reform Jewish day schools.

Rockwern Academy is a Jewish community day school in Cincinnati, Ohio, serving learners from eighteen months through eighth grade. For over sixty years, it has served as the only non-Orthodox day school in Cincinnati. Rockwern Academy's Judaics faculty are in a particularly strong position to open their classroom environments and their curricula for teaching *midrash* for analysis. Since Rockwern Academy's population spans the spectrum of Jewish affiliation, it offers insight into how *midrash* is taught to a diverse student body. This project seeks to identify aspects of Rockwern Academy's *midrash* curriculum that could be used in a Reform Jewish day school setting.

Rockwern Academy's Head of School is David Finell. Finell earned his Masters

of Arts in Jewish Education from Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion in

1980, and after serving Jewish educational institutions for twenty-five years, HUC-JIR

conferred upon him the degree of Doctor of Jewish Religious Education, *honoris causa.*

Finell's wealth of experience in Jewish community day schools helps provide much of the

broader perspective for these institutions.

Curricular Goals

Mishnah Avot opens with the phrase: "Moses received Instruction from Sinai and

taught it to Joshua."[24] Regardless of the date that one ascribes to the authorship of Written

and Oral Torah, this *mishnah* frames the important question of which came first: Rabbinic

Judaism or pedagogy? Since my academic background is rooted in teaching and learning,

I will begin this section by considering issues about curriculum design and pedagogy

before addressing the content of *midrash.*

Leo Bradley, chair of the Xavier University Department of Educational

Leadership and Human Resource Development, suggests that when developing a new

curriculum, that the curriculum leader must base his or her work on "Other school

districts – with similar philosophy, books, resources, and technology – that have recently

developed a successful curriculum," or on "Research-based data and information on the

curricular topic."[25] This project adheres to both of these suggestions, studying other

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24 *Mishnah Avot* 1:1, my translation (purposefully using the definition of "Instruction" for the word תורה *torah* and the definition of "to teach" for the verb למסור *limsor*).

25 Additionally, Bradley suggests checking for government developed curricula or those created at educational institutions. In the first case, it is clear that neither local, state, nor federal government develops religious curriculum. In the second case, my experience in researching this topic is that many of the institutes of higher Jewish education guard their students' curricular work. For the citation, see Leo H Bradley, *Curriculum Leadership Beyond Boilerplate Standards* (Lanham, MD: ScarecrowEducation, 2004), 48–49.

schools with similar goals and researching theoretical and realized implementation of

midrash curricula.

Later in his book, Bradley writes that curriculum leaders must choose between

"backloading" or "frontloading." While sometimes, curriculum leaders must write a

curriculum that takes into consideration the existing resources, he argues that the

preferred way to design a curriculum is by "frontloading." That is to say, the curriculum

leader should first determine the curricular goals, then write the curriculum based on

needs of learners and research on the content, and finally recommend appropriate

textbooks and resources.[26] Bradley's "frontloading" aligns directly with a relatively new,

but almost ubiquitous curriculum design process, Understanding by Design, the

brainchild of educational leaders Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, which they describe in

their 1998 book by the same name.[27] *Understanding by Design* is a response to the

question: "*How do we make it more likely ... that more students really understand what

they are asked to learn?*"[28] Drawing on Bradley's leadership advice, I follow the design

process of Understanding by Design in Chapter 3 of this project. These two books were

written to guide all types of curriculum designers, but this project focuses on Jewish

education.

Joel Lurie Grishaver is a Jewish educator, cartoonist, and prolific author. In a

chapter of *The Ultimate Jewish Teacher's Handbook*, he writes about some of the

difficulties of teaching and studying *midrash*. Often it is presented outside of its context,

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26 Ibid., 59–60.
27 The phrase, "Understanding by Design," can refer to the book by Wiggins and McTighe (when italicized) or the process (when not). Also, the 1998 book has been superseded by the 2005 expanded second edition, cited below.
28 Grant P Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design*, expanded 2nd edition (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2005), 9.

its use of creative Hebrew philology might be inaccessible for an audience that is not Hebrew-literate, and *midrash* uses rabbinic jargon that requires a level of familiarity above that of mere Hebrew literacy.[29] However, Grishaver later argues that "*Midrash* is worth teaching as an end in itself, and not just as a means to an end."[30] He recommends three basic premises for teaching *midrash* in this way. "Every *midrash* starts with a question." "Every *midrash* has both an answer and a message." "*Midrash* is 'real' Torah, in that it is either "part of God's revelation, or the deep collective wisdom of the Jewish people [depending on] your theology."[31] Grishaver's way of thinking about *midrash* parallels that of Betsy Dolgin Katz, member of the Spertus faculty and former North American Director of the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School. In an earlier chapter of *The Ultimate Jewish Teacher's Handbook*, she writes that parents have become more enthusiastic about adult Jewish learning and want their children to learn Jewish texts from primary sources.[32] Like the curriculum experts above, Katz expects the curriculum designers to engage in a planning phase that includes meaningful goals. Three of the possible goals that she suggests are:

1. exploring a particular content: the text itself, a story, a law, a belief, a custom.
2. learning Hebrew vocabulary, key phrases.
3. teaching students how to study Jewish texts.[33]

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29 Joel Lurie Grishaver, "Teaching Midrash and Rashi," in *The Ultimate Jewish Teacher's Handbook*, by Nachama Skolnik Moskowitz (Denver, CO: A.R.E., 2003), 403.
30 Ibid., 404.
31 Ibid.
32 Betsy Dolgin Katz, "Teaching Texts," in *The Ultimate Jewish Teacher's Handbook*, by Nachama Skolnik Moskowitz (Denver, CO: A.R.E., 2003), 374.
33 Ibid., 376.

Katz draws from her experience with the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School to present the Melton Textonomy, a thirteen tiered approach to learning text that draws upon Bloom's taxonomy:[34]

1. Locate and read text.
2. Retell the content.
3. Restate content in one's own terms.
4. Answer factual questions based on the content.
5. Be able to define key words and phrases.
6. Interpret the text from one's own perspective.
7. Know facts about the context that are relevant to understanding the text.
8. Answer and ask analytical questions.
9. Interpret the meaning of literary elements.
10. Be familiar with a variety of commentaries from classical and contemporary sources.
11. Understand implications of the text for Judaism, Jews, and oneself.
12. Draw connections to other conceptually related texts.
13. Create counter-texts, *midrash* on both *halachic* and *aggadic* texts.[35]

Katz, in presenting this "textonomy," articulates her pedagogical goal of moving students from knowing about text to synthesizing new material based on text. This means that any curriculum that stays true to her ideas would ask students to do more than read and digest, but rather, that students would engage with and wrestle with text. One of the preeminent examples of this type of text study was encouraged by Nechama Leibowitz.

Rabbi Shmuel Peerless, in addition to being one of Leibowitz's students and a former director of the Center for Jewish School Leadership at Bar-Ilan University's

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34 Bloom's taxonomy is a method to classify levels of learning from most foundational to most complex. He used the following descriptions of the levels, in that order: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation. c.f. Benjaman S. Bloom, *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals.* (Longman Group United Kingdom, 1969).
35 Katz, "Teaching Texts," 377.

Lookstein Center, authored a book detailing the technique Leibowitz used in teaching

Jewish texts. Regarding her use of *midrash*, Peerless writes:

> Nechama did not advocate the teaching of just any Midrash in a
> haphazard fashion. Rather, she advocates the use of *Midrashim* that
> are grounded in the Biblical text and that deepen our understanding
> of the verse. She indicates that *Midrashim* which destroy the
> Biblical sentence structure or which are disconnected from the
> verses preceding and following the sentence should not be taught,
> even if they teach a very nice message. [Nechama would say that
> teachers should] help direct the students to the exegetical value of
> the *Midrashim* that are taught."[36]

In Chapter 3 of this project, I use Leibowitz's suggestion as a guiding principle for

choosing *midrashim* that explain the biblical verse in light of its context. This also allows

me to respond to Grishaver's concerns noted above. Specifically, I look to the *midrashim*

that Rashi cites in his commentary on the Torah in order to select sources that deepen

understanding of the verse without undermining the contextual meaning of the text.

In some ways, Kaunfer disagrees with the methodology of Nechama Leibowitz

when he presents *midrash* as a separate curriculum area. Whereas Leibowitz uses

midrash in relationship with Scripture, Kaunfer suggests that *midrash* is more than just a

way to understand the Bible. He writes, "Understanding *how* midrash works is as

important as understanding its ultimate purpose."[37] Following this, Kaunfer presents his

analysis of *midrashic* method in five sections: concretization of the abstract, exegetical

questions and textual difficulties, filling in missing parts of the story, *mashal* and

metaphorization, and creative expression.[38] Each of these subjects areas allows Kaunfer

to show that the *midrash* functions, not in the realm of "abstract, mathematical, logical

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36 Shmuel Peerless, *To Study and to Teach: The Methodology of Nechama Leibowitz* (Jerusalem; New
   York: Urim Publications, 2004), 24.
37 Kaunfer, "Teaching Midrash in the Conservative Day School," 74.
38 See the table of contents, and the subtitles in Ibid., 75–83.

thinking," but rather, it reduces abstract thought to concrete examples.[39] Further, the

midrashic author "saw infinite creative interpretive possibilities in each and every verse

and word in the Torah," and wrote as though "the bounds of time and space are

blurred."[40] Kaunfer writes about the pedagogical benefit of teaching *midrash*: "Its use of

story, parable, imagery, metaphor, and creative expression, suggests that midrashic

literature would relate to the young child who's [sic] own thinking is imaginative,

creative and concrete in nature.[41] Just as Kaunfer's proposal might seem contrary to the

guidelines that Nechama Leibowitz offered for which *midrashim* to teach, so too might

this project seem, to the cursory observer, like a deviation from Leibowitz's expert

opinion. I propose that the ideas of both authors— Leibowitz and Kaunfer—can be

integrated into a single project that carefully selects *midrashim* that respond to the

biblical text in context while also focusing on the textual skills necessary to understand

midrash for its own sake. To that end, the *midrashim* that I incorporate into the lesson

plans in Chapter 3 of this project respond to the biblical text without sacrificing the

integrity of the original sentence structure and, at the same time, demonstrate the the

creative and imaginative relationship with which the *midrashic* authors engage the Bible.

Both *halakhic* and *aggadic midrashim* have a place in the *midrash* curriculum, but

clearly, one must decide to give preference to one or to divide time evenly between the

two genres. In the same way that the above paragraphs show a clear preference for

exegetical *midrash* over homily, I will demonstrate, below, a preference for *aggadah* over

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39 Ibid., 75–76.
40 See Isaac Heinemann, *Darkei Ha-Aggadah* (Jerusalem: Masadah, 1970) for more about Heinemann's technique for categorizing *midrash*. Also, see Ibid., 81–82.
41 Ibid., 83.

halakhah, recognizing that even within *aggadic midrashim* one might find *halakhic* components.

In one *halakhic midrash*, from a late third-century collection, the *midrashist* relates the sayings of those who expound on *aggadah*: "If you wish to know the Creator, study *aggadah*, for by this you will know the Creator and cling to [God's] ways."[42] A later collection of rabbinic literature, the *Talmud*, describes how the Israelites were sustained in the desert: *manna* is like *aggadah* in that it draws out the human heart like one draws out water.[43] Later commentators also wrote about the benefit of studying *aggadah*.

Medieval Spanish philosopher, Rabbi Moses Maimonides, wrote in the introduction to his commentary to the tractate of *Mishnah Sanhedrin*: "There are three classes (of thinkers who differ in their interpretation of the [*aggadah*] of the Sages, of blessed memory."[44] After criticizing the first two classes because members of the first class read and understand the *aggadot* literally, and members of the second class assume that the authors of *aggadot* themselves thought of the text as literal, Maimonides praises the highest level reader of *aggadah*.[45] These readers understand that "words of [the Sages] deal with lofty matters ...[so,] they are said in the form of riddle or parable."[46] For Maimonides, attempting to decipher the deeper meanings of *aggadah* is a sign of higher intelligence and stronger commitment to Jewish learning.[47] In addition to rabbinic and medieval praise for *aggadah*, three modern authors weigh in.

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42 My abbreviated translation of *Sifre Deuteronomy* 49.

43 *B. Talmud Yoma* 75a.

44 Moses Maimonides, *Maimonides' Commentary on the Mishnah, Tractate Sanhedrin*, trans. Fred Rosner (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1981), 140.

45 Ibid., 140–142.

46 Also, I have chosen to substitute the translator's words "all men of wisdom" with "the Sages" because of Fred Rosner's footnote showing this to be another acceptable translation. Ibid., 141–142.

47 Maimonides, *Maimonides' Commentary on the Mishnah, Tractate Sanhedrin*, 142–143.

Jewish theologian and philosopher Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel addressed the importance of *aggadah* in his influential work, *God in Search of Man*.[48] He wrote that while "agada is usually defined negatively as embracing all non-legal or non-halachic parts of rabbinic literature..., only a small part of the Bible deals with the law [and] the narratives of the Bible as as holy as its legal portions."[49] In the section of his book entitled "The Fundamental Importance of Agada," Heschel argues that *aggadot* "contain an almost inexhaustible wealth of religious insight and feeling...."[50] He writes that "Halacha thinks in the category of quantity; agada is the category of quality.... Agada deals with the immeasurable, inward aspect of living, telling us *how* we must think and feel; *how* rather than *how much* we must do to fulfill our duty...."[51] That is not to say that Heschel eschews the study of *halakhah* completely: "The surest way to forfeit agada is to abolish halacha."[52] Heschel's ideas suggest that *halakhah* is important, but that *aggadah* might be more effective for creating an emotional connection between the student and the text.

Another modern scholar, Eugene Borowitz is an academic, a teacher, and the former director of the UAHC department of religious education. Drawing upon rabbinic sources, he wrote:[53]

> The great attraction of the aggadah is its wide and immediate
> appeal.... It is frequently compared to water ... but occasionally
> also to wine. The result is that it can be pleasingly taken in by
> everybody.[54]

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48 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, 1955 Reprint (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1987).
49 Ibid., 324.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid., 337.
52 Ibid., 339.
53 For information about the sources that he cites, see his notes on Chapter 1, numbers 16-18.

In his book, *Back to the Sources*, author and Jewish scholar Barry Holtz writes of *aggadah*: "We see the discontinuity of changing times influencing the theology and spiritual vision of the rabbinic mind."[55] So too, Reform Judaism attempts to make theology relevant in light of changing times. For this reason, in addition to the sources discussed above, *aggadah* is an ideal vehicle for teaching text and appreciating the rabbis' contributions during their generations, in order to help young people respond to their own generation.

To summarize, I am following the suggestions of curriculum and content experts in assessing the books in Chapter 2 and in developing the curricular model in Chapter 3.[56] The guidelines that I will use to measure each book in Chapter 2 and the model in Chapter 3 insist that students learn to read *midrash* in parallel with and as interpretation of Scripture, in its own language, whenever possible; consider the motives of the authors and compilers of *midrash* and their historical context; recognize literary styles and structures of *midrash*; identify rabbinic hermeneutics through repeated examples; and, extend their text skills from reading *midrash* to reading all religious and secular texts. Additionally, this model would focus on *midrashim* related to "commonly known Bible stories," i.e. biblical narratives that are already covered in the curriculum; emphasize *aggadah* over *halakhah*; and, include a component for teacher preparation.

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54 Eugene B. Borowitz, *The Talmud's Theological Language-Game: A Philosophical Discourse Analysis (S U N Y Series in Jewish Philosophy)* (State Univ of New York Pr, 2006), 9.

55 *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts* (New York: Summit Books, 1984), 182.

56 To further clarify, I have compiled these curricular goals into a chart that both summarizes the goals and displays how each of the assessed curricula does, or does not meet that goal. See below, 2:Summary

Findings

In Chapter 2 of this project, I describe my investigation of six potential curricula for teaching *midrash*, with the goal of assessing each curriculum for its applicability in Reform Jewish day schools, using the metrics described in the Curricular Goals.[57] Some of the curricula included material that would be applicable in a Reform Jewish day school; however, none fulfilled all of the goals. In response to this lack of a curriculum that could be implemented without change, I use Chapter 3 of this project to propose a curricular framework for teaching *midrash* in the Reform Jewish day school. Building on the guidelines from the Curricular Goals, Chapter 3 begins with a skeleton curriculum for a (school) year-long course taught in parallel with a *parashat hashavua* class.[58] Then, building on this framework, I provide detailed lesson plans for the first six sessions, which pertain to exegetical material about the merit and deeds of the patriarchs and matriarchs.[59]

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57 See above (1:Curricular Goals).

58 That is, to say, in conjunction with a weekly class dedicated to the Torah reading for the week. This would allow students to have familiarity with the biblical narrative to which the *midrashic* text is responding.

59 Specifically, the exegetical material about Abram/Abraham, Isaac, Jacob/Israel, Sarai/Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel.

Chapter 2 – Current Models for Teaching Midrash

Jewish day schools (and congregational religious schools) have used a number of different text books and curricula to teach *midrash* in the last few decades. I have relied on three sources to identify available materials for analysis: the bibliographies of articles and the comprehensive *A Bibliography of Jewish Education in the United States*, advice from teachers and librarians, and by contacting one of the major Judaics curriculum providers for day schools.[60] In this chapter, I describe each of the texts, present example material from the text, and, drawing upon the Curricular Goals from Chapter 1, articulate why this text does, or does not, meet the goals for a Reform Jewish day school.

Gersh – Mishnah, Midrash, Talmud

Release and Course Sequence

In the mid-1980s, Harry Gersh wrote a three volume series published through Behrman House. According to his biography, found on the back cover of the three books, Gersh wrote this series in seventies with no formal Jewish education. Instead, his experience comes from the realm of writer: "After service in the Navy during World War II, he returned to a variety of writing jobs: union newspapers, interpreting Jewish casework agencies, political speechwriting, corporate report writing, radio and television scriptwriting."[61] Each of the three volumes, written by Gersh, are accompanied by study

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60 Norman Drachler, *A Bibliography of Jewish Education in the United States* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press in association with American Jewish Archives, 1996).
 I am specifically indebted to the time and assistance of Dr. Jason Kalman and Dr. Richard Sarason of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Rabbi Micah Lapidus and the Judaics faculty of Alfred and Adele Davis Academy, Dr. David Finell and the Judaics faculty of Rockwern Academy, Andrea Rapp of the Isaac M. Wise Temple library, and Miriam Cohen, coordinator for Tal Am.
61 See the back cover of Harry Gersh, *Midrash: Rabbinic Lore* (West Orange, NJ: Behrman House, 1985).

questions by Robert L. Platzner. Unlike Gersh, Platzner has an academic background. According to his biography, he "is an Emeritus Professor of Humanities and Religious Studies ... [and] the author of numerous articles on literary and religious subjects."[62] Each of them contributed to this three volume work.

In the order of their release, the three books in this series are titled: *Mishnah: The Oral Law*, *Midrash: Rabbinic Lore*, and *Talmud: Law and Commentary*.[63] Because of the nature of this project, we will focus on the second volume and its *Teacher's Edition*, both of which were published in 1985.[64] The Behrman House website recommends this book for students in high school through adulthood.[65] This project analyzes its contents for applicability in the Reform Jewish day school.

Contents

Chapters

The single volume, *Midrash: Rabbinic Lore*, consists of twelve chapters. The first chapter is a long introduction and each of the subsequent eleven chapters consists of a single *midrash*, explanatory notes, and study questions. Following the spelling in this text, the names of the latter eleven chapters are:

1.　　Babylonian Talmud Pesahim 25b

2.　　Sifra Behar Sinai 5

3.　　Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 61b

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62 Platzner's biography is found on the back cover of: Robert Leonard Platzner, ed., *Gender, Tradition, and Renewal* (Oxford; New York: Peter Lang, 2005).

63 Harry Gersh, *Mishnah: The Oral Law* (New York: Behrman House, 1984).
Gersh, *Midrash*.
Harry Gersh, *Talmud: Law and Commentary* (West Orange, NJ: Behrman House, 1986).

64 Harry Gersh, *Midrash: Rabbinic Lore - Teacher's Edition* (New York: Behrman House, 1985).

65 http://www.behrmanhouse.com/store/ as of November 24, 2013.

4. Pesikta De Rab Kehana Piska 27:9

5. Babylonian Talmud Baba Metzia 59b

6. Mekhilta Baḥodesh Yitro 5

7. Babylonian Talmud Taanit 7ab

8. Pesikta De Rab Kehana Piska 10:10

9. Midrash Rabbah Ecclesiastes 7:13

10. Jerusalem Talmud Kiddushin 1:7

11. Midrash Rabbah Song of Songs 1:4[66]

Presentation Overview

In the introduction to the student volume, Gersh presents a detailed description of `midrash`. In this description, Gersh asserts that *midrash* is a preferred response to Scripture because of sacred status of Scripture and the perceived inability for human authors to edit divine text:

> All serious books raise more questions than they answer. Certainly the book taken most seriously by Jews, the Bible, raised a multitude of questions. Even those parts of the book that seemed easy to understand raised questions of who and how and why. But this was no ordinary book to be made clearer by rewriting and adding and rearranging. The Scriptures came to the Jews directly from God.[67]

Gersh defines a timeline for *midrash*, stretching back to the eighth century BCE and explains that the earliest *midrashim* were transmitted orally.[68] Since he bases this on non-extant text that he imagines as the sources for classic *midrash*, this seems unable to substantiate. For Gersh, the purpose of *midrash* was to elaborate on biblical narratives to

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66 Gersh, Midrash, 1. NB Gersh does not number his chapters, and I have included these numbers to help facilitate discussion, below.

67 Ibid., 3.

68 Ibid., 3–4.

provide the Jewish population with "superheroes" and they "allowed the Jews a degree of freedom of speech, not permitted by their foreign overlords."[69] In the introduction, Gersh also describes the purpose of *midrashim* by presenting abbreviated *midrashic* texts, which he does not complete in the introduction, and which he does not include in the other chapters of the book.[70] Gersh does not include in his introduction his rationale for choosing the *midrashim* in this collection nor his goals.[71] The most detailed explanation that Gersh offers is the introductory note in the *Teacher's Edition*:

> This course, for Grade 8 – Adult, is based on eleven midrashim. After each midrash, the book provides questions and blank lined pages where students can write their answers. They can also use the space to take notes on the text and on class discussions, just as the Rabbis of old used notebooks to record their deliberations on the law.... This Teacher's Edition contains answers to the study questions.... We believe that this notebook technique and this Teacher's Edition represent an exciting departure for serious religious school and adult education classes....[72]

True to the description above, the *Teacher's Edition* does not include any pedagogical insights for the teacher or framing activities to use in the class. The next three sections show how Gersh presents different types of texts. However, it is important to note that neither the introduction, the chapter text, and the *Teacher's Edition* all lack one important piece of information about the *midrashic* texts: they do not explain the sources. For instance, when Chapter 2 presents *Sifra Behar Sinai* 5, Gersh never explains that *Sifra* refers to "a halakhic midrash on Lev[iticus], which ... comments on all of Lev

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69 Ibid., 5.
70 See the story of Solomon splitting the stones for the Temple on: Ibid.
71 Ibid., 3–7.
72 Gersh, *Midrash - Teacher*, 1.

verse by verse...."[73] I would argue that knowing the character of the source material is

essential to understanding the *midrash* that it contains.

Chapter 2 – Sifra Behar Sinai 5

This chapter begins with a full page, grayscale image, captioned: "The midrash as

it appears in an 1860 edition of *Sifra* (printed in Bucharest). Photographed at the New

York Public Library."[74] Most of the image is grayed-out and the individual *midrash* is

presented in solid black; however, the Hebrew characters are grainy. The translation of

the Hebrew text is presented on the facing page in large font.[75] This *midrash* asks what

one's responsibility is to his fellow in a life-threatening situation (such as only having

enough water for one to survive a trip in the desert). Gersh frames this as an ongoing

moral question which he calls the "lifeboat question."[76]

Gersh reframes the *midrash*, reminding students that the sages predated

environmentalism.[77] Instead of considering the abstract, the *midrashic* author used the

concrete example of the two people walking in the desert. Gersh asks readers to do the

opposite: how can this *midrash* be used in an abstract manner? He states that moderns

solve moral dilemmas that are "almost as important as life and death" using the same

guidelines as the *midrash*; however, his example does not immediately pertain to life and

death: "If a factory with 400 employees has to cut back to 250...."[78] Gersh writes that the

moral lesson learned through this *midrash* is that, whenever possible, people make

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73 Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 260.
74 Gersh, *Midrash*, 16.
75 Ibid., 17.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid., 18.
78 Ibid., 18.

decisions that protect life, and if not all can be saved, then the decision should be made objectively.[79]

The seven study questions at the end of the chapter ask students to form or voice their opinions about the text, about the moral lesson, and about global issues. For instance, the penultimate question asks, in part, a question that liberal and conservative Americans approach in very different ways:

> Is it reasonable, and consistent with the teachings of this midrash
> for the wealthier nations to sacrifice some portions of their wealth
> to provide adequate food supplies to poorer regions? Are
> prosperous peoples responsible for those who are less prosperous?
> Up to what point?[80]

While the content could be very engaging, Gersh misses an opportunity. In his *Teacher's Edition*, he could advise teacher about how to talk about political issues without advocating for one party. Or more broadly, he does not take advantage of this series as a learning opportunity for both students and teachers. As we assess other selected chapters from Gersh's book, we will see that this is a consistent issue.

Chapter 9 – Midrash Rabbah Ecclesiastes 7:13

This chapter also begins with the translation opposite a grainy picture taken of the primary source at the New York Public Library.[81] The *midrash* from this chapter presents God introducing Adam to the Garden of Eden and commanding him: "...Do not corrupt or destroy My world...."[82] Like the earlier chapter, Gersh begins the explanation with a nod to environmentalism. He points out the conflict between the idea that God created the

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79 Ibid.
80 Ibid., 19.
81 Ibid., 52–53. According to the caption, the picture is: "...Late nineteenth century Midrash Rabbah (printed in Vilna)."
82 Ibid., 53.

world for humanity's sake and the idea that humans are merely the caretakers of God's world.[83] He ends his commentary on this *midrash* by first providing a summary of rabbinic opinion: "The Sages didn't hold with fasting for the sake of fasting, with celibacy, with asceticism in general."[84] Then Gersh provides a source text from *B. Talmud Nedarim* 41b that illustrates the same concern: "One who imposes on himself [a vow of abstinence] is like a man who ... drives a sword into his own body."[85] However, the statement from the Talmud is only tangentially related to the original *midrash* from *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* . Here, Gersh had the opportunity to write about the context of this *midrash* in the broader scope of *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* Chapter 7, let alone the rest of *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 7:13, which ends with Adam being told that his sin would cause Moses to die.[86]

The study questions from this chapter hint at the larger question of how to read texts. The first question, for instance, asks, "Why does the author of this midrash go back to the story of the Garden of Eden just to make a point about the environment? ... What does he gain by beginning his sermon with the first human?"[87] However, Gersh does not give any suggestions in the *Teacher's Edition* about how to facilitate a conversation about this topic nor how to systematize this type of reading.

Chapter 11 – Midrash Rabbah Song of Songs 1:4

The final chapter of this book also draws its *midrash* from *Midrash Rabbah*. In this case, the *midrash* references the revelation at Sinai, and presents God asking the Jewish people for collateral (in the form of their descendants) as proof they will carry out

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83 Ibid.
84 Ibid.
85 Gersh's translation of *B Talmud Nedarim* 41b, including the square bracketed text.
86 *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 7:13.
87 Gersh, *Midrash*, 54.

the Law.[88] Gersh explains the purpose of this *midrash* in the shortest description from any chapter in his book. First, he states: "For every midrash about honoring the old, there is a story about the importance of children to Israel."[89] He presents other examples from biblical and rabbinic texts to support this statement. For instance, he quotes *Lamentations Rabbah* 1:5 which tells of the reluctance of God to send his presence with the Jewish people during exile, until: "When the children went into captivity, the Shechinah went with them."[90]

The discussion question that follows the explanatory notes addresses one of the hermeneutics used in *midrash*: the anthropomorphizing of God:

> One of the common literary conventions that governs the writing of midrashim is the practice of humanizing God.... [This midrash does not paint] a particularly exalted picture of the Lord of the Universe. Some people might even think that it is degrading: that it drags God down to our level, rather than lifting us up to His. Do you agree with this criticism? How would the midrashist have answered it?[91]

According to Gersh's description about the two *midrashim*, he seems to speaking about a broken *mashal*. That is to say, Gersh could use this text to talk about how the *midrashic* author uses parable to make God's actions more understandable to the human audience by casting God in the role of a human. This would be another opportunity to include background information in the *Teacher's Edition* to facilitate such a discussion.

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88 Ibid., 61.
89 Ibid.
90 Ibid.
91 Ibid., 62.

Applicability for Teaching Midrash in Reform Jewish Day Schools

This volume of Gersh's series could be used to help students learn *midrash*. It provides both the Hebrew text and an accessible English translation. At times, it considers the motives of the authors, and notes structural and hermeneutical elements of the *midrash*. Some of the *midrashim* are related to biblical narratives.

The Hebrew text is difficult to access: it is neither clearly printed nor vocalized. The biblical stories are not included in the text, nor referenced directly, meaning that these *midrashim* are not read as exegesis of the Bible. The motives, hermeneutics, and text reading skills are not purposefully put in the forefront. Gersh does not provide any teacher guidance outside of answers for the study questions.

Gersh uses the *midrashim* to teach Jewish values, and while values are an important part of Jewish learning, he sacrifices textual learning in order to reach that goal. For Gersh, *midrash* is a tool to understand Jewish values and not something to be studied for its own sake. This runs contrary to the primary goal of this project.

All three volumes in the series follow the same structure and could be used by a teacher as supplemental material. However, the texts and presentation do not fulfill the requirements posed for a viable curriculum for teaching *midrash* in the Reform Jewish day school.

Release and Course Sequence

During the last decade, Ronald Isaacs authored two texts in a series by URJ Press (formerly UAHC Press).[92] Isaacs received ordination from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and is the rabbi of a Conservative synagogue in New Jersey. He also earned a doctorate in instructional technology, and according to his biography, he thinks of himself as the "teaching rabbi." It may come as a surprise that he chose to publish through the North American Reform Movement's URJ Press, knowing that the targeted audience of the book would be Reform Jews. In the introduction to the first book, he mentions that it is the first book that he published through UAHC (now URJ) Press.[93] According to private email correspondence, Isaacs chose this publication house because "The URJ materials were always published with good taste and aesthetics."[94]

The first book, *A Taste of Text*,[95] focuses on introducing students to rabbinic text while the second book, *A Taste of Torah*,[96] introduces students to narratives within the Pentateuch. This work will focus on the first volume because of its potential applicability to teaching *midrash* in the Reform Jewish day school. According the the description of this book at Google Books, it is "Aimed at high school students,"[97] and, according to the

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92 This is not meant to exclude Isaacs other books, including his text-based book: Ronald H Isaacs, *Entering the Biblical Text: Exploring Jewish Values in the Torah* (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV Pub., 2001).
93 Ibid., v.
94 Ronald H. Isaacs, "Email for Rabbi Isaacs," April 3, 2014.
95 Ronald H Isaacs, *A Taste of Text: An Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (New York, N.Y.: UAHC Press, 2003).
96 Ronald H Isaacs, *A Taste of Torah: An Introduction to Thirteen Challenging Bible Stories* (New York, N.Y.: URJ Press, 2006).
97 http://books.google.com/ as of November 24, 2013.

introduction, "is to afford students an opportunity to read and study various text that express Jewish ethical principles...."[98]

Contents

Chapters

The sixteen chapters of this volume read like a list of Jewish values; the English titles are:

1. Jewish Healing: Visiting the Sick

2. Friendship: Acquire a Friend

3. Hospitality

4. Parent-Child Relationships

5. Repentance

6. Saving a Life

7. Kindness to Animals

8. Honesty and Truth

9. Life after Death

10. Care of the Body

11. Marriage

12. Stealing and Returning Lost Property

13. Ecology

14. Old Age

15. Honoring the Dead and Comforting Mourners

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98 Isaacs, *A Taste of Text*, xi.

16.   Speech and Language[99]

Presentation Overview

Isaacs makes clear his guiding principles for each chapter within the introduction:

> First, the ... text is presented.... [The second] section provides some
> background material that helps ... make the text more
> understandable. The next section ... includes material that
> represents a sampling of various Jewish views related to the
> particular topic of that chapter. The [fourth] section ... contains a
> variety of quotations culled [from Jewish sources] throughout the
> ages... [related] in some fashion to the topic.... The final section of
> each chapter ... provides students with questions to answer and
> issues to ponder or debate.[100]

Isaacs uses the introduction to provide background on the material being studied; he

spends two and a half pages describing the Talmud and *midrash*.[101] In terms of how he

views the authorship of the material, Isaacs presents the names that Jewish rabbinic texts

cite, but leaves room for academic disagreement: "Rabbi Y'hudah HaNasi ... is thought to

be the editor of ... the Mishnah.... The main editor of the Gemara is generally assumed to

be Rav Ashi.... The final revision and editing [of the Talmud] were most likely

undertaken by Ravina...."[102]

Isaacs also makes a disclaimer at the end of his introduction: he wanted to provide

vocalized Hebrew text for all the sources but was not always successful in finding

them.[103] When I inquired of Isaacs as to his reason, he wrote: "Since I never was an

expert in vocalizing texts, I felt it best not to vocalize."[104] In the following sections, this

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99 Ibid., vii.
100Ibid., xi–xii.
101Ibid., ix–xi.
102Ibid., x.
103Ibid., xii.
104Isaacs, "Email for Rabbi Isaacs."

project presents four of the chapters from *Taste of Text* to determine the overall

applicability of this volume to teaching *midrash* in the Reform Jewish day school.

Chapter 3 – Hospitality

Chapter 3 begins with a parallel Hebrew and English *midrash*, from *Avot D'Rabbi Natan* 7, comparing Job's hospitality to Abraham's hospitality.[105] Isaacs presents

background on the story of Job so that the reader can understand why Job would make

the plea and how God's response justifies God's punishment of Job.[106] In the next section,

Isaacs presents Jewish views on hospitality including Abraham's example, Ibn Ezra's

warning to treat a stranger righteously, and the biblical imperative to remember that the

Jews were strangers in Egypt.[107] At the end of the chapter, Isaacs presents questions to

help the reader better understand the text by relating it to his or her own life. Some

examples include:

> 3. What are some ways that you try to make a guest feel
> comfortable in your home?
> 5. If you ate a meal in another's home as an invited guest and did
> not find the food appetizing, [what would you do]?
> 9. Read [the *midrash*, Leviticus Rabbah 9:3]. What can you learn
> from this story about the way a host and guest ought to interact
> with each other.[108]

Chapter 8 – Honesty and Truth

This chapter opens with a *midrash* from Genesis Rabbah[109] just before the creation

of humanity wherein the angels—or the anthropomorphized attributes of God—argue

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105Isaacs, *A Taste of Text*, 15.
106Ibid., 16.
107Ibid., 16–17.
108Ibid., 19–20.
109Genesis Rabbah 8:5.

over whether God should create humans.[110] In the background section, Isaacs retells the

midrash in more detail.[111] In "Honesty and Truth: What Does Judaism Say?," Isaacs

points out biblical commandments for truth and examples of acts of truth, the Talmud's

statement that "the Holy One hates a person who [deceives]," and the Jewish concept that

omission is commission of sin.[112]

Isaacs also discusses the counter-argument: "the white lie." He cites the rabbinic

understanding that God lied to Abraham to protect him from Sarah's insult in Genesis 18,

and Isaacs quotes *Bava M'tzia* 23b-24a, which provides certain permitted cases of

lying.[113] In the section on quotations, Isaacs presents *midrashic* and talmudic text as well

as citing the Zohar and Nachman of Bratzlav.[114] The questions at the end pry into ethical

behavior and compassion, for instance:

> A man is told by a doctor that his sister is dying of a life-
> threatening disease. The patient has a maximum of one year to
> live. Should the truth be told to her by her brother, or should it be
> modified to spare her mental anguish? What values come into play
> in this decision?[115]

Chapter 13 – Ecology

Chapter 13 presents the *midrash* from Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13[116] about God

charging Adam to not destroy the world.[117] In presenting the background to this *midrash*,

Isaacs indicates to the reader the juxtaposition of this *midrash* to the biblical

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110Isaacs, *A Taste of Text*, 47.
111Ibid.
112Ibid., 48.
113Ibid.
114Ibid., 49.
115Ibid., 49.
116This *midrash* is also presented above, in Gersh. I included it in both places, in part, to allow a
    comparison between the two presentations.
117Isaacs, *A Taste of Text*, 73.

commandments: "be fruitful and multiply, filling the earth and subduing it."[118] He boils

down the *midrash* to one final sentence: "How the Jewish people interact with the

environment is part of our very mission as Jews."[119]

Issacs speaks of what Judaism says about ecology, first, through the modern lens.

He points out how the issue is more pressing today, and how moderns are aware of types

of pollution that were unknown in the ancient world. He connects the charge of

ecological-mindedness to biblical principles, to rabbinic insults for the squanderer, and to

the words of sages in the most recent centuries. In this case, he quotes Rabbi Samson

Raphael Hirsch's charge to use natural resources as if they are a loan from God.[120]

Making the topic personal, Isaacs asks several questions at the end of the chapter,

including:

> 3. What are some ways in which we waste natural resources in our
> homes, schools, and synagogues?
> 8. Do human beings bear the sole responsibility for the quality of
> life on earth?
> 10. How can observance of Shabbat make any difference in how
> people treat the environment during the rest of the week?[121]

Chapter 14 – Old Age

This chapter presents a short *midrash* from *B. B'rachot* 8b, where honoring elders

who have lost their memory is equated to revering both sets of tablets from Sinai.[122]

Isaacs's background information both reiterates the story as well as reminds readers of the

biblical account wherein Moses destroyed the first set of tablets.[123] In presenting the

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118 Ibid.
119 Ibid.
120 Ibid., 74–75.
121 Ibid., 77.
122 Ibid., 79.
123 Ibid.

Jewish view of respect for the elderly, Isaacs cites Leviticus 19:32 and the related

postings in modern Israeli buses, "where people are encouraged to give up their seat for

an elderly person."[124] Isaacs goes on to discuss the state of geriatric care in Jewish

communities throughout the generations and even in America.

Seemingly in contrast to the learning in this chapter, the second question that

Isaacs asks readers is: "...We do not seat as a judge in the Sanhedrin an old man or a

eunuch or one who is childless. Can you think of an explanation for this ruling?"[125] And,

Isaacs asks learners to reflect on how they can treat their elders, when he asks: "What are

various ways in which one can give honor to the elderly?" and "What are some special

things that grandchildren might choose to do for grandparents to show them the special

honor that Judaism recommends?"[126]

Applicability for Teaching Midrash in Reform Jewish Day Schools

Isaacs has created, in *A Taste of Text*, a compelling program for learning

midrashic material. He consistently provided the best[127] available Hebrew text, using

clear and age-appropriate English that is very close to the Hebrew meaning. Isaacs

presented questions that include considering how these texts apply to the modern student.

And, although he has no specific teacher material, the background information and

guiding questions would help a teacher lead a group through this volume.

Most of the *midrashim* in the book do not relate to the Bible, and Isaacs does not

provide the biblical narrative for those texts that do. The book presents *midrashim* as a

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124Ibid., 80.
125Ibid., 82.
126Ibid.
127See above, the disclaimer that he makes in his introduction. The best texts would be vocalized Hebrew texts with parallel English translation.

method to transmit Jewish values and not as a subject area that should be studied for its own sake. To this end, Isaacs usually does not ask the reader to consider the motives of the authors nor does he press them to identify the structure of the *midrashim*. Isaacs does not discuss the rabbinic hermeneutics found in the *midrashim*. Additionally, Isaacs cites a number of non-*midrashic* sources that could confuse students with regard to content and chronology because they are not introduced in any formal manner. Examples include Isaac's citation of the Medieval writings of Abraham Ibn Ezra in Chapter 3 and his citation of both the thirteenth century kabbalistic text, the Zohar and Nachman of Bratzlav (who died in 1810) in Chapter 8. While several aspects of this book would be very helpful for a teacher of *midrash*, it does not, at present, meet the requirements for a curriculum for teaching *midrash* in the Reform Jewish day school.

Neusner – Meet Our Sages, etc.

Release and Course Sequence

Jacob Neusner is a prolific author, a rabbi who was ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, and the preeminent scholar of rabbinic Judaism and texts. Neusner has written nearly 1000 books on Jewish subjects, most of which deal with rabbinic literature. In addition to his Ph.D. from Columbia University, he has been awarded "10 honorary degrees [and] 14 academic medals and prizes."[128] During the end of the 1970s, Neusner wrote *Meet Our Sages,*[129] *Learn Mishnah,*[130] and *Learn Talmud*[131]

128"Bard College | Faculty," last accessed March 3, 2014,
    http://www.bard.edu/academics/faculty/faculty.php?action=details&id=648.
129Jacob Neusner, *Meet Our Sages* (New York: Behrman House, 1980).
130Jacob Neusner, *Learn Mishnah* (New York: Behrman House, 1978).
131Jacob Neusner, *Learn Talmud* (New York: Behrman House, 1979).

and published them through Behrman House.[132] The three books were designed to "introduce [readers] to the oral Torah"[133] during grades 6-9."[134] Each of the three volumes approaches its subset of material in a topical manner so that a student learns "Who are Our Sages," "How do Sages Study Torah," "What is Mishnah," "The Common and the Ordinary," "A Complete Passage of Talmud," and "The Talmud Speaks to Us About Beliefs and Deeds."[135]

Within each of the parts, and their constituent chapters, Neusner provides exposition about the title topic, frequently includes a source text in both Hebrew and English, and poses several guiding questions to challenge learners to both recall information from the chapter and to apply it to their personal lives. In the following sections, I will detail several sections from the three volumes, in volume order.

Contents

Chapters

The first volume of this series, *Meet Our Sages*, is 128 pages long, and includes six parts, each divided into short chapters:

1. Who are Our Sages?

2. How do You Become a Sage?

3. What do Sages Do?

4. How do Sages Study Torah?

5. How do Sages Pray?

132The other titles, *Learn Mishnah*, 1978, and *Learn Talmud*, 1979, were published before this title, but
    Neusner refers to them as the "two that follow" in the series (per his Preface to *Meet the Sages*).
133Neusner, *Meet Our Sages*, 7.
134http://www.behrmanhouse.com/store/ as of November 24, 2013.
135Selected titles from among the parts of the three volumes, in presented order (*Sages*, *Mishnah*, *Talmud*).

6. Our Sages and Ourselves[136]

The second volume of this series, *Learn Mishnah*, is 136 pages long, and includes four

parts. The first part serves as a larger introduction to the material, in lieu of any formal

introduction in the volume, and the subsequent parts are subdivided into chapters with

texts and their analysis. The four parts have the following titles:

1. What is Mishnah?

2. The Common and the Ordinary

3. The Holy and the Extraordinary

4. Making Mishnah[137]

The third, and final, volume of the series, *Learn Talmud*, is 166 pages long, and

includes five parts. The first part serves as an introduction to the context of the texts and

the remaining four parts each focus on a couple of texts and their analysis. The names of

the parts are:

1. What is the Talmud?

2. Talmudic Analysis of *Halakhah*

3. A Complete Passage of Talmud

4. The Talmud Speaks to Us About Deeds and Beliefs

5. The Talmud Speaks to Us About Beliefs and Deeds[138]

Presentation Overview

Neusner presents the sages as real men who lived in such a way as to embody

Torah and therefore to become examples and teachers.[139] This presentation spans this

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136Neusner, *Meet Our Sages*, 8.
137Neusner, *Learn Mishnah*, 1.
138Neusner, *Learn Talmud*, 2–3.
139Neusner, *Meet Our Sages*, 13.

series and includes the sources of classical *midrash*. Neusner lays out a plan in *Meet Our Sages* to help students acquaint themselves with the sages and how the sages process text:

> First, we shall ask what questions we want a story to answer....
> Second, we shall read the story, line by line.... Third, we shall
> stand back and read the story from beginning to end.... Fourth, we
> shall discuss the meaning of the story.... Finally, we shall try to
> draw out of the story the important truth for ourselves.[140]

The sections below look to two of the six parts of *Meet Our Sages* to examine whether Neusner fulfills the goal of approaching text with questions and ultimately applying the learning to one's modern life. Following the examination of the two parts of *Meet Our Sages*, we move to Neusner's next work, *Learn Mishnah*. Just as in *Meet Our Sages*, Neusner outlines a plan for understanding the sages, so too does Neusner articulate a plan in *Learn Mishnah* to understand the individual texts that he presents in this volume:

> First we read the Mishnah and make certain we know the meaning
> of its words. Second we read the Mishnah to learn its meaning as a
> poem.[141]

Most of the text in this volume functions, appropriately, to discuss Mishnah. And while some *mishnayot* contain *midrashic* material, only one of the examples from *Learn Mishnah* directly relates to the curricular questions that are the foundation of my work. After examining the two parts from *Meet Our Sages*, we continue with the chapter of *Learn Mishnah* that contains *midrashic* material.

The final volume of this series, *Learn Talmud*, follows the same presentation as its predecessor, *Learn Mishnah*, but expands each of the *mishnayot* with talmudic explanation. Neusner presents texts that are *halakhic*, *aggadic*, and ones that are

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140Ibid., 17.
141Neusner, *Learn Mishnah*, 5.

comprised of both types. His reason: "In a given chapter of the Talmud, you are likely to find *halakhic* and *aggadic* discussion (in that order)."[142] This volume of exploring talmudic text can be summarized by the penultimate paragraph of the introductory chapter:

> But your work is not so easy. You have to understand the *halakhic* passage and the *aggadic* passage. And then you must ask yourself how the one and the other are related.[143]

Having summarized the three volumes of the series, we move to the individual examples from each of the volumes.

Meet Our Sages, Part 4

In Part 4 of *Meet the Sages*, Neusner asks the title question: "How do sages study Torah?" He begins, in Chapter 14, by posing a question for the upcoming story: Do the Jewish people need additional revelation after Torah?[144] Neusner explains, in this chapter, the reason for the question and the ramifications of either answer. Then, he offers several guiding questions to the student.[145] The questions begin with comprehension and review ("2. In what way is a sage like a prophet?") to application ("10. Do people nowadays believe that events of nature reveal something supernatural? ... What are the sorts of meanings people might come up with?").[146] After allowing students the opportunity to reflect on the exposition, the next chapter presents the text.

142Neusner, *Learn Talmud*, 11.

143Ibid., 12.

144Neusner, *Meet Our Sages*, 77.

145Ibid., 77–79.

146Neusner, *Meet Our Sages*; *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* (London : Philadelphia: SCM Press ; Trinity Press International, 1990), 79.

Chapter 15 presents the *midrash*[147] of Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua, and the

Bat-Kol in the *beit midrash*[148] from *B. Bava M'tzia* 59a-b.[149] Neusner first rewrites the

story in modern English. He then presents the text in parallel Hebrew and English and

provides a word key for forty of the words or expressions from the text. Chapter 15 ends

abruptly after the text with the analysis in the next chapter.

Neusner uses Chapter 16 to conclude the analysis of the *midrash* from *B. Bava*

M'tzia 59a-b by dissecting the story into its constituent parts. He shows that the structure

of this *midrash* consists of three parts: "The first sets the stage for the second.... The

second sets the stage for the third.... And the third resolves the problem of the whole."[150]

Neusner, explaining the value of structure, points out the importance of climactic

storytelling through situating the moral in the "high point of the pattern."[151] Neusner also

addresses the content of the *midrash* by describing key features—in this case, the *Bat Kol*

as revelatory agent, the juxtaposition of natural proof to logical deduction, and the

biblical verses used as proof text—to ensure that students with varying levels of Judaic,

Hebrew, and historical knowledge have similar access. He concludes this chapter with

guiding questions, like in Chapter 14.[152]

The final chapter of Part 4, Chapter 17, readdresses the same *midrash*. Unlike the

previous chapter, where Neusner explained the structure and content of the *midrash*,

Chapter 17 hinges on relating the *midrash* to the reader's life. He poses that the argument

between the sages in the *midrash* was not lofty, and Neusner presents a parallel in a

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147Typically, we refer to a "self-contained logical unit of rabbinic discussion..." as a *sugya* (Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 51.

148The *Bat-Kol* (or echo of the Divine voice). The *beit midrash* (or study house).

149Neusner, *Meet Our Sages*, 80–83.

150Ibid., 87.

151Ibid.

152Ibid., 84–88.

modern issue: "It is as if you had a big fight in your synagogue about whether the president... sits on the left hand or on the right hand of the rabbi."[153] Neusner also shows how this *midrash* establishes a level of authority for the sages through pious deduction that outweighs the authority of new revelation.[154] Helping the reader to see the mastery of the author's presentation, Neusner asks the student to reflect on this question: "Why does the story seem complete without our knowing the topic of the dispute?"[155]

The eighteen pages of Part 4 present a brief reading of one *midrash* in the context of the Talmud. In it, Neusner clearly follows his own rubric to provide the reader with a background question for the *midrash*, to read the text for individual content and as a whole, to understand the meaning of the *midrash*, and to make the text meaningful.[156]

Meet Our Sages, Part 5

A second example from the first volume is *Meet the Sages*, Part 5: "How do sages pray?" In the three chapters, Neusner again follows his methodology for acquainting the reader to the sages. The title question, "How do sages pray," indicates the chief concern that Neusner attempts to resolve through another *midrash* found in rabbinic literature. He begins Chapter 18 by addressing the term dignity as it applies to sages.[157] Then he juxtaposes the idea of a sage who has dignity for himself to the idea of a miracle worker, who plays the prominent role in the upcoming *midrash*.[158]

The second chapter of Part 5 presents the *midrash* of Honi the Circle-Drawer from *Mishnah Taanit* 3:8. In this chapter, Neusner discusses the way that dignity manifests

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153Ibid., 90.
154Ibid., 91.
155Ibid., 93.
156Ibid., 17.
157Neusner, *Meet Our Sages*, 97.
158Ibid., 99.

itself in a predictable relationship in contrast to a "relationship of demands and threats [that] is unpredictable."[159] Like the texts in other chapters, Neusner presents this *midrash* in parallel Hebrew and English with a word key for unusual words and phrases. Like other chapters with a text, this one ends abruptly after the word key.[160]

The final chapter of Part 5 explains how the *midrash* works. Neusner divides the *midrash*, structurally, into five scenes: Honi boasting, too little rain, too much rain, too long, Honi boasting and resolution.[161] Neusner draws parallels between the unfulfilled boast in the first scene and the unresolved boast in the final scene; Honi, Neusner writes, "begs like a kid, but a kid should learn to grow up."[162] This explanation also provides the relevant moral lesson for the reader who may learn to bring dignity into his or her relationships and to not use threats or boasts in an attempt to control the situation.

Although Part 5 is shorter than the previous example: in terms of length of *midrash*, number of pages and number of chapters, Neusner is able to use the shorter text to further illustrate the thinking of the rabbinic author, to explain the way that the *midrash* is presented, and to make it relevant to the reader.

Learn Mishnah, Chapter "What a Day!"

Neusner begins this chapter with an explanation of the importance of certain days, and specifically the day of Yom Kippur.[163] He uses this explanation to introduce the text of Mishnah Yoma 8:9, which Neusner presents first as a complete text in Hebrew with a word key.[164] Then, he divides the *mishnah* into two sections. In the first, Neusner presents

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159Ibid., 101.
160Ibid., 101–104.
161Ibid., 107–108.
162Ibid., 110.
163Neusner, *Learn Mishnah*, 85.
164Ibid., 86–87.

text about forgiveness on Yom Kippur found in some High Holiday *Mahzorim*.[165] In the

second section, Neusner presents a *midrash* wherein Rabbi Akiva offers two biblical texts

that compare God to the *mikveh*.[166] After offering this *midrash*, Neusner writes about

personal relevance for the two sections of Mishnah Yoma 8:9.[167]

This volume of the series, per its title, is directed at learning Mishnah which, in

general, are not *midrashic* in character. Finding material from this volume to illustrate a

continuation of *midrashic* reasoning from the first volume proved difficult, and I do not

use the material from this book in the analysis, below.

Learn Talmud, Part 3

The third part of *Learn Talmud*, "A Complete Passage of Talmud," illustrates

some of the core ways that this volume approaches talmudic text. Part 3 begins with a

chapter titled, "I Didn't Really Mean It," which presents the beginning of Mishnah

Nedarim 9. Neusner uses the chapter on this Mishnah to explain the context of the

rabbinic text, detail the need for the ruling on vows, clarify the technical terms that the

text uses to describe vows, and present some modern examples of the permissibility of

making and breaking vows.[168] The chapter continues with the text of the Mishnah in two

parts, each presented in parallel Hebrew and English with a word key.

In Chapter 10, Neusner shows how the Talmud explains the meaning of the

Mishnah. Specifically, he points to a comment in the Mishnah[169] that two talmudic rabbis

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165i.e. Chaim Stern, *Gates of Repentance the New Union Prayerbook for the Days of Awe*, gender-inclusive edition (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1996), 324.Richard N. Levy, *On Wings of Awe: A Machzor for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur* (B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundations, 1985), 266.

166Neusner, *Learn Mishnah*, 91.

167Ibid., 92–93.

168Neusner, *Learn Talmud*, 44–46.

169The general talmudic phrase: *mai* X (מאי זה), and in this case: *mai "ain nᵉdarim"*? (מאי אין נדרים)

analyze.[170] He presents vocalized Hebrew[171] parallel to an English translation and accompanied by a word key. Directly after the passage, Neusner explains the text to the reader to ensure that both the technical language and the structure of the argument are clear.[172]

Chapter 11 continues to present part of the talmudic response to Chapter 9 of Mishnah Nedarim. In this case, Neusner demonstrates that the Talmud draws upon Scripture to affirm the statements made by the earlier rabbis of the Mishnah. Specifically, in the section of Talmud presented, the rabbis of the Talmud assert that their predecessor knew about a case of vows from the Torah which he applied to this case.[173] Neusner explains this part of the text, which he calls "a complicated passage,"[174] in summary of the parallel Hebrew and English translation of this section of the talmudic passage.[175] The remainder of this chapter presents a tangential discussion about people "who are as good as dead."[176]

For the purposes of this paper, Chapter 12 provides the most relevant content. Neusner named this chapter, "Expanding the Explanation," and he presents both *halakhic* and *aggadic* content that follow the talmudic passages in the preceding chapters of *Learn Talmud*. Beginning with expository notes, Neusner presents the next two sections of the talmudic discourse including both law and lore in sequence. In short, Neusner says of the lore in Talmud:

170Neusner, *Learn Talmud*, 50.
171Depending on classification systems, we could call this Middle Hebrew 2 or Aramaic, as with much of *l'shon Talmud*. Since this does not detract from the overall discussion, we will continue to use the word Hebrew to describe the language of these texts.
172Neusner, *Learn Talmud*, 50–54.
173Ibid., 57.
174Ibid.
175Ibid., 56–57.
176Ibid., 59.

> The *aggadah* is more than an amusing story. It is a serious tale and makes an important point. The point is precisely the same as the purpose of the *halakhah*.... Both say the same thing. But one says its truth as an abstract rule.... The other says its truth in a concrete way.... The Talmud's arrangers and writers present the two together....[177]

The Talmud is not a work of *midrash* but includes *midrash* as both *halakhic* and *aggadic* material. However, the Talmud's arrangers, by placing these materials into the commentary of the Mishnah, remove some of the framework that makes *midrash* unique. In fact, Neusner makes this point clear at the end of the next chapter when he writes: "[Talmud] exercises other sorts of freedom as well. The *aggadic* tale ... surely exists on its own ... and not merely to serve our Talmudic discussion...."[178]

In the final chapter of this part of *Learn Talmud*, Neusner presents the previous texts as a whole and asks the reader to decide whether his divisions were appropriate. He reiterates the opening question of the volume: "What is Talmud?," and he provides four answers aligned with the discussion throughout Part 3.[179] His conclusion allows the reader to continue other talmudic passages in this volume.

Learn Talmud, Part 5

Part 5 of *Learn Talmud* is an extension of the *Learn Mishnah* chapter, "What a Day!" It draws upon the same source text—Mishnah Yoma 8:9—and shows how the Talmud comments on this text. When detailing that chapter of *Learn Mishnah*, this paper discussed the *midrashic* component of the latter section of the Mishnah, so we will not detail the introductory chapter of Part 5.

177Ibid., 67.
178Ibid., 84.
179Ibid., 82–84.

Chapter 20, "Explaining the Mishnah," presents four sections of talmudic commentary to the Mishnah. Each one of them includes *midrashic* components that either cite Scripture or are purely *aggadic* in character. Neusner, in keeping with the premise of this volume, does not approach the texts from this perspective. Instead, he focuses on how this components function in the broader reading of the talmudic passage. For instance, he writes, "The story is not told at random or without purpose. It is part of a careful discussion of the notion that if you have a grievance, don't keep it in."[180]

The remainder of Part 5 and this volume are dedicated to reiterating the broad theme of the rabbis' approach to Yom Kippur and how modern Jews utilize the same sentiments. He writes using phrases that make the text relevant to a modern audience.

Applicability for Teaching Midrash in Reform Jewish Day Schools

In this series, Neusner presents a purposeful plan of study. A student could, in three subsequent years (or even terms), approach each of the volumes sequentially. In writing this series, Neusner used a spiral curriculum to present the sages, their work, and ongoing expansion of that work. The series as a whole assumed only that the students were Jewish and that their level of English comprehension was of a middle grade level. Neusner presented all Hebrew text with vowel pointing and he provided a word list after each reading with all words that were not proper nouns. And, although he presented the Hebrew text, a student without Hebrew decoding skills could further rely on the translation. In a classroom environment, a teacher could use the parallel texts from the individual chapters or the Hebrew-only text from the back of the book. Neusner did not make sweeping statements of faith or practice meaning that his series could be studied

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180Ibid., 136.

without the possible shaming of students who can not see their experience in the text. Further, each chapter drew upon the content from the previous chapters and alluded to more information that would be answered in either the subsequent chapters or the subsequent volume(s). From a pedagogical standpoint, this creates a sense of comfort with the material for students of various backgrounds and levels of Hebrew reading ability.

All three volumes present the source text in both languages; however, since Neusner's examples do not draw upon Scripture in its context, and he does not provide the context to the student. Neusner does point out the possible motives of the author(s) and compiler(s) of the text and directs the student to the structure of the text in order to understand its message. In general, Neusner does not point out hermeneutical statements in the text. Also, Neusner does not connect the reading of rabbinic text with the possible ways one might read other religious or secular texts.

Neusner presents the rabbinic texts based on the specific goal of understanding the sages, their concerns, and how the dilemmas in the text relate to the modern student. These goals are very appropriate, and they provide an alternate direction to the model that I presented in the introduction. Specifically, Neusner draws upon texts that relate to certain themes while I suggest focusing on biblical narratives with which students will already have familiarity. Also, Neusner does not provide any guidance for teachers which, I assert, is a necessity for this field. However, Neusner's primary focus is to teach the rabbinic texts as an important subject area—aligned directly with the goals of this project. Unfortunately, this series is dedicated to the study of rabbinic literature as it is ultimately canonized into the Mishnah and Babylonian Talmud. While the first volume is

general enough to use in a class on *midrash* and some of the texts in the other two volumes would be appropriate in such a class, the presentation of the latter two volumes are not. This series provides good resources for the teacher of *midrash*, but does not satisfy the requirements of this project.

Rossel, et al – The Book of Legends for Young Readers

Release and Course Sequence

Seymour Rossel is an independently ordained rabbi, author of Jewish texts, and president of his own publication house Rossel Books.[181] According to his biography on the Rossel Books website, he has written over 30 books and edited around 300.[182] Rossel wrote a two volume series called *Sefer Ha-Aggadah – The Book of Legends for Young Readers*, published by UAHC Press in 1996 and 1998, respectively. In the year between, UAHC Press published a *Teacher's Guide* and *Activity Book* for the first volume, written by other authors.

The first volume of the series has the same name that I used for the title of the series[183] and presents a selection of rewritten *aggadic* tales from the first section of Bialik and Ravnitzky's work of a similar name.[184] According to the introduction of this volume, Rossel is presenting "legends about the Bible and its main characters and events."[185] The Activity Book, as the name implies, provides activities for students to demonstrate their

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181 I have been unable to verify that Rossel was ordained by a *beit din* of three rabbis in New York, in the year 2000.

182 "About Seymour Rossel," last accessed March 3, 2014, http://www.rossel.net/About_Rossel.htm

183 Seymour Rossel, *Sefer Ha-Aggadah: The Book of Legends for Young Readers* (New York: UAHC Press, 1996).

184 Hayyim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky, *The Book of Legends = Sefer Ha-Aggadah: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. William G. Braude (New York: Schocken Books, 1992).

185 Rossel, *Sefer Ha-Aggadah*, x.

ability to recall information from the primary text.[186] The *Teacher's Guide* claims that it

was "written to maximize the usefulness of this book of legends for young readers as an

educational resource."[187] Rossel's second volume uses the sub-title, "Tales of the

Sages,"[188] which correlates with the second part of the Bialik and Ravnitzky book. The

Google Books web service describes the primary texts as a "collection [that] has been

rendered in appealing modern language and richly illustrated in full color for readers ages

8-12."[189]

Before considering the presentation and pedagogical relevance of these books, I

first address the source material, the background of the authors, and a content issue.

Bialik and Ravnitzky were "two leading representatives of the Hebrew renascence in

Russia" at the turn of the twentieth century.[190] Their goal was to restore the "'beautiful

palace' in which 'the spirit and souls of the Jews permanently dwelled' ... to its original

state of 'pristine glory.'"[191] Bialik and Ravnitzky had to choose which *midrashim* they

would include in *Sefer Ha-Aggadah*. David Stern writes in the introduction to William

Braude's translation:

> Bialik and Ravnitzky spent three years combing through the
> entirety of Rabbinic literature in order to select what appeared to
> them 'the best' of aggadic tradition—best, that is, in *their*
> judgement, which, though in general highly reliable, certainly
> reflected the biases of their age.... [For instance,] if the two halves
> of what seemed to them a single *Aggadah* were found in separate
> sources, they combined them. When the aggadic passages were in

186Ann D Koffsky, *Activity Book for Sefer Ha-Aggadah: The Book of Legends for Young Readers.* (New York, N.Y.: UAHC Press, 1997).

187Ellen Singer, *A Teacher's Guide to Sefer Ha-Aggadah: The Book of Legends for Young Readers* (New York: UAHC Press, 1997), v.

188Seymour Rossel, *Sefer Ha-Aggadah: The Book of Legends for Young Readers, Volume 2* (New York: UAHC Press, 1998).

189http://books.google.com as of November 24, 2013.

190Bialik and Ravnitzky, *The Book of Legends*, xvii.

191Ibid.

Aramaic... they faithfully translated them into a contemporary
Hebrew....[192]

Whether Rossel began with the Hebrew text—albeit, sometimes a translation of Aramaic
—or Braude's English translation, the presentation of *Sefer Ha-Aggadah* is a rewritten
narrative, and Rossel's books mirror that presentation. In some ways, Bialik and
Ravnitzky's book—and by extension, Rossel's—makes studying the structure and literary
aspects of the *midrashic* text very difficult.

Contents

Chapters

Each of the two volumes consist of twelve chapters, and within each chapter,
Rossel relates three *aggadic* tales. However, these two texts, by themselves, are not
arranged as text books and contain neither guiding questions nor analysis by the author.
In contrast, the *Teacher's Guide* provides a framework for using the first volume in a
classroom setting. The author of the *Teacher's Guide*, "Ellen Singer[,] is a freelance
writer who specializes in Jewish subjects. She received her master's degree from the
Jewish Theological Seminary... and has worked in the field of Jewish education for over
sixteen years."[193] In the introduction to the *Teacher's Guide*, Singer offers a seven-part
guide for approaching each chapter of Rossel's first volume:

1. Biographies of the Tale's Protagonists...

2. Background for the Teacher...

192Ibid., xviii–xix.

193Singer's book doe not offer a biography of the author, but by contacting URJ Press, I was able to
identify a second book that she coauthored. This quote is taken from that book: Ellen Singer and
Bernard M. Zlotowitz, *Our Sacred Texts: Discovering the Jewish Classics* (New York, N.Y: URJ Press,
1992), back cover.

3.   Motivational Action or Starter...

4.   Classroom Discussion...

5.   Classroom Activities...

6.   Family Discussion Activities...

7.   Answer Key....[194]

Since the first volume, with the *Activity Book* and *Teacher's Guide*, can be construed as a curriculum, while the second volume cannot, this project focuses on the former. Those texts are relatively short: Rossel's first volume is 67 pages long; the Activity Book is 60 pages long; and, the *Teacher's Guide*, with twelve chapters to match the text, is 40 pages long.

Presentation Overview

Rossel's two volumes can only be considered a curriculum when partnered with tools for planning lessons such as Singer's *Teacher's Guide*. With this addition, Rossel's first volume becomes a model for teaching *midrash*. From the earliest lesson, Singer presents the *midrashim* from a literary perspective: "These are not explanations that we have to take literally. Rather we learn from them that ancient peoples, just like people today, sought to order their lives by providing answers to some very basic life questions."[195] Singer approaches the text as if writing a detailed lesson plan—providing background information for the teacher, suggesting framing questions, and offering activity and discussion ideas. However, it is important to note that Rossel's book does not include the Hebrew text nor a citation of the source of the *midrash*. Instead, he relies on a brief bracketed numbering system that the careful reader can use to find his source within

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194Singer, *A Teacher's Guide to Sefer Ha-Aggadah*, v.
195Ibid., 1.

Sefer Ha-Aggadah. In other words, a student who reads the rewritten *midrash* in Rossel's book would need to decipher the bracketed numbers, find the *midrash* in Bialik and Ravnitzky's text (or Braude translation), and use that book to determine the source text. In the following sections, I will outline two of the chapters of Rossel's first volume through the instructional voice of Singer's *Teacher's Guide*.

Chapter 5 – "A Time to Pray, A Time to Act"

In six pages, including one full-page illustration, Rossel presents three *midrashim* under the title, "A Time to Pray, A Time to Act." The first and longest *midrash* centers around the Exodus from Egypt whereby Nahshon leads the people into the Sea of Reeds through courage of faith. The second *midrash* describes the water on either side of the Sea of Reeds coaxing the Egyptian horses to enter. And, the final *midrash* tells a parable to explain God's reason for giving *manna* on a daily basis.[196]

Rossel placed this chapter between an *aggadah* about the burning bush before, and an *aggadah* about revelation at Sinai after; following the arrangement in Bialik's *Sefer Ha-Aggadah,* Rossel is narrating the Bible in its own sequence. Rossel's concern for structure ends there; the text is accessible for youth, but not explained. To address pedagogical concerns means turning to Singer's *Teacher's Guide.*

Chapter 5, in the *Teacher's Guide,* is three pages long.[197] Singer begins with a biography of Moses as a leader learning to lead, connecting the first *midrash* to Moses's earlier actions and the actions that he takes in this *midrash.*[198] In the next section, she presents context for the teacher:

196Rossel, *Sefer Ha-Aggadah,* 24–29.
197Singer, *A Teacher's Guide to Sefer Ha-Aggadah,* 15–17.
198Ibid., 15.

> Moses, Pharaoh, and the Children of Israel all play central roles in
> the three stories in this chapter. But the primary role is occupied by
> God, as the shaper of our destiny when we leave Egypt and begin
> our experience in the wilderness. In these stories, God is
> characterized as both an external force and an internal one.[199]

Singer helps the teacher see how this context is applicable for all three stories in

the chapter.[200] Since her audience is the classroom teacher, Singer then presents an

opening activity for the class session; in this case, she recommends students brainstorm

examples of the two title options: When should one pray? When should one act?[201]

Assuming that the teacher and class have read the text after the opening activity, Singer

continues with a single prescribed classroom discussion question followed by five

optional questions. The prescribed question, is both multipart and moves students from

recalling information in the text to putting the students in the place of the character:

> How did Moses respond to the situation at the Sea of Reeds?
> Which did he choose, prayer or action? Can prayer be a form of
> taking action? Why? Why not?[202]

Singer also provides three classroom activities for the teacher. Understanding that

teachers might not have a strong base knowledge, she provides significant assistance in

the prompts. For instance:

> In "A Time to Pray, A Time to Act," we are taught the importance
> of prayer *and* action. Bring *siddurim* to class and, together with the
> students, examine *bakashot*, which are special prayers of request
> contained within the text of our main prayers like the *Amidah*.
> *Bakashot* also thank God for many such qualities....[203]

199Ibid.
200Ibid.
201Ibid.
202Ibid.
203Ibid., 16.

The *Teacher's Guide* provides three activities that the teacher can send home to engage the family in discussion and answers to the activities in the *Activity Book*.[204] The *Activity Book* has five activities for Chapter 5, presented on five pages.[205] The first activity is a short paragraph missing key words which are given in a word bank below. Students are reminded, "As you've done in earlier chapters, fill in the blank spaces...."[206] The second activity asks students to write an acrostic prayer using their names as the key letters.[207] The third activity is a stylized maze to guide the twelve letters from one end of the Sea of Reeds to the other, spelling the name of the hero, Nahshon of Judah.[208] The fourth activity is page of questions drawing upon the *midrash* and the rabbinic dictum "Say little, do much" from Pirkei Avot:[209]

> What do you think is the meaning of each of the sayings: "Actions speak louder than words"; "Say little, do much"?
> Did Nahshon follow these sayings? Did Moses?
> Which do you think is more important, prayers or actions?
> List three actions you think are "louder than words." Explain your choices.[210]

The final activity asks students, in order to advertise for *manna* on God's behalf, to draw a product picture and, "List 3 selling points."[211]

Chapter 8 – Deborah, Woman of Light

Chapter 8, "Deborah, Woman of Light," is one of the shortest chapters in Rossel's book with only four pages of text.[212] The chapter presents three *midrashim* relating to a

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204Ibid., 17.
205Koffsky, *Activity Book for Sefer Ha-Aggadah*, 21–25.
206Ibid., 21.
207Ibid., 22.
208Ibid., 23.
209Mishnah Avot 1:15, although the *Activity Book* does not cite the dictum.
210Koffsky, *Activity Book for Sefer Ha-Aggadah*, 24.
211Ibid., 25.
212There is also a full-page illustration on a fifth page in this chapter.

female protagonist. The first *midrash* asks how Deborah received the honorific, "Woman of Light."[213] The second *midrash* fills in the reason for Ruth's verbosity when saying to her mother-in-law, "Where you go I shall go....,"[214] by providing dialog between the two women.[215] The final *midrash* of this chapter provides a parable to explain Hannah's prayer to God in the opening of I Samuel.[216] Unlike the earlier chapters, Rossel breaks the biblical sequence in presentation, perhaps to link the three female protagonists together. Although this chapter follows an introduction to the time of the Judges, the *midrash* from Ruth does not fit into the order of the Hebrew Bible.[217] However, this presentation does match Bialik's ordering of the same *midrashim* in *Sefer Ha-Aggadah*.[218]

In the *Teacher's Guide*, Singer begins by describing the biblical women protagonists of these three *midrashim*. She includes:

> This story highlights [Deborah's] wisdom and helps explain why she was chosen by God.... Noaomi is quick to make certain that Ruth's decision is based on more than a daughter-in-law's devotion.... [Hannah's] prayers are answered with the birth of an especially blessed son.[219]

In the next section, Singer provides context for the teacher. Compared to the other eleven chapters, this is among the longest of the contextual descriptions provided in the book.[220] This might be because of the expected ignorance of teachers surrounding these biblical stories which are canonized outside of the Pentateuch. The opening activity for this

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213Rossel, *Sefer Ha-Aggadah*, 41–43.
214Ruth 1:16.
215Rossel, *Sefer Ha-Aggadah*, 43–44.
216Ibid., 45.
217The Masoretic Text presents the Pentateuch, the prophetic books, and the sacred writings, in that order. The biblical accounts of both Deborah and Naomi are part of the prophetic literature whereas Ruth is a book from the sacred writings.
218Deborah, Ruth, and Naomi are presented in Section I, Chapter 6, Numbers 20, 47, and 54, respectively.
219Singer, *A Teacher's Guide to Sefer Ha-Aggadah*, 25.
220Ibid.

session consists of asking students to name historical Jewish women who would be considered "great," and to define "greatness."[221]

Singer presents a single prescribed discussion topic for the classroom: "Do you think Deborah, Naomi, Ruth, and Hannah were great women of Jewish history? Why? Why not?"[222] This discussion point connects the opening activity to the *midrashim* in this chapter. It also introduces for the outside observer a question of delimiting biblical narrative, *aggadic* material, and history. As with other chapters, Singer presents other optional discussion questions. Following classroom discussion, Singer presents three activities for the classroom. All three activities are time consuming and require additional supplies; in excerpt, they are:

1. In consultation with your art teacher, have the students make candles... [and] raise money for *tzedakah* by selling their candles....
2. In consultation with your art teacher, have the students make their own *mezuzot*....
3. Have the class make sandwiches... to give to the homeless....[223]

Chapter 8 of the *Teacher's Guide* continues with three family discussion questions focused on Torah study, conversion, and the role of Jewish women in the family, respectively.[224] And, the chapter closes with the answers to the *Activity Book*.[225]

The *Activity Book* provides five activities for Chapter 8.[226] The first activity consists of finding the appropriate words in the word bank to fill in the blanks of a

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221Ibid., 26.
222Ibid.
223Ibid., 26–27.
224Ibid., 27.
225Ibid.
226Koffsky, *Activity Book for Sefer Ha-Aggadah*, 36.

descriptive paragraph.[227] This is the same opening activity as each of the other chapters, and the author agrees: "Here we go again!"[228] The four focus questions of the second activity ask students to consider leadership traits and includes two narratives outside of the scope of Rossel's text: "Name the leader you admire most. What qualities does he or she have that you admire? What qualities did Joseph have? Why did God pick Deborah to be a leader? Why did God pick Moses to be a leader?"[229] The third activity asks students to consider the positive consequences of a single good deed.[230] The fourth activity is a board game for two students to ask one another questions about the stories in Rossel's text.[231] The final activity, called "Focus on Prayers of Request," asks students to "compose a prayer asking God for something you consider important enough to pray for."[232]

Applicability for Teaching Midrash in Reform Jewish Day Schools

This series, taken as a whole, has some promising features for applicability in a Reform Jewish day school. It meets the three general needs that I posed above:[233] relates to "common Bible stories," focuses on *aggadah*, and includes teacher training. The first volume with the *Teacher's Guide* focuses exclusively on *midrashim* around biblical narrative. Six of the twelve chapters consist of *midrash* related to biblical events from Creation through Revelation at Sinai. All of the text is *aggadic* in nature, making it more accessible for students. And, Singer's detailed lesson plans go a long way toward

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227Ibid.
228Ibid.
229Ibid., 37.
230Ibid., 38.
231Ibid., 39.
232Ibid., 40.
233c.f. above, (1:Curricular Goals).

educating a teacher who might be less familiar with one or more of the narratives or may feel uncomfortable designing activities around the topics. However, certain needs that I articulated earlier are not met by this model.

The text does not ask students to read the *midrash* in parallel with the biblical narrative. This could be remedied by the teacher's direction. Additionally, the original text is never considered a part of the lesson. The level of obfuscation between the source text that Bialik and Ravnitzky cite through their creative, albeit pious, reweaving, and finally Rossel's translation for young people, means that students are not studying *midrash*, per se, but stories. Further, neither Rossel nor Singer probe into the motives of the authors or compilers of the work except insofar as to say that *aggadah* provided a means to teach morals.[234] Neither author attempts to deconstruct the *midrash* from a structural or literary perspective nor do they consider the hermeneutics used in the text.

The *Activity Book* does not seem to be on the same level as the *Teacher's Guide* in terms of pedagogy or student age appropriateness. While the expected audience is students aged 8-12, the activities, illustrations, and level of repetition appear to be targeted toward only the youngest students in the range. For instance, as I pointed out above, each chapter begins with a fill-in-the-blank paragraph with word key.

Some of the material in the *Teacher's Guide* would be easily adapted into a curriculum that meets the needs expressed above. Specifically, the lesson planning elements—dividing the material into reading, generating discussion, and asking families to consider larger questions—and the specific questions that Singer poses, are sound pedagogical tools. While the individual *midrashim* and their grouping would be appropriate for such a class, the presentation would need to be changed to include biblical

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234c.f Rossel, *Sefer Ha-Aggadah*, ix. and Singer, *A Teacher's Guide to Sefer Ha-Aggadah*, v.

material, attention to hermeneutical principles, and an eye for structure. Additionally, depending on the language skills of the students, using the original language for the *midrashim* might be appropriate. So, while this series presents strong lesson plans for its own goals, it does not satisfy the requirements of this project.

Simon, et al – The Rabbis' Bible

Release and Course Sequence

Between 1965 and 1975, Behrman House Publishing released a three volume text titled *The Rabbis' Bible* with student activity books and teacher resource books. The three authors of this series were Solomon Simon, Morrison David Bial, and Abraham Rothberg. The primary author, Simon, primarily wrote Yiddish books and authored this series in the last years of his life. His coauthor for the first two volumes, Bial was a congregational rabbi who, according to the announcement of his memorial service, was so deeply committed to Jewish education that his congregation named its religious school in his honor.[235] Simon's coauthor on the third volume, Rothberg, was primarily noted as a fiction writer. The *New York Times*, announcing his death in 2011, wrote that his background was in English literature and creative writing.[236] Surprisingly only one of the three authors had a background in Jewish education or Jewish religious texts.

The three volumes, titled *The Torah*, *The Early Prophets*, and *The Later Prophets*, presents what the preface to Volume I describes as, "an abridged version of the [biblical

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235Ferdie De Vaga, "Memorial Service to Honor Rabbi," *Ocala Star-Banner*, July 29, 2004, accessed March 7, 2014, http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1356&dat=20040729&id=bwJQAAAAIBAJ&sjid=AwkEAAAAIBAJ&pg=6591,6348564 .

236Dennis Hevesi, "Abraham Rothberg, Who Wrote of Golem and Stalin, Dies at 89," *New York Times*, April 18, 2011, accessed March 7, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/14/books/abraham-rothberg-who-wrote-of-golem-and-stalin-dies-at-89.html?_r=0 . NB there is a date inconsistency between the web address and the print date.

text]...."[237] Behrman House designed the first volume for grades 5-6, the second volume for grades 7-8, and the third volume for grades 8-9.[238] According to the Behrman House website, this text "bridges the gap between Bible stories and scholarly exegesis. A sampling of the [biblical text] is illuminated by traditional commentary keyed to the text, which appears directly beneath it on every page."[239]

Contents

Chapters

The first volume of this series, *The Torah*, is a 221 page abbreviated Pentateuch which is divided into five sections by biblical book and subdivided based on individual biblical accounts. For the book of Genesis, Simon and Bial present eleven chapters: "Creation," "Cain and Abel; Noah," "Abram," "Sodom and Gomorrah," The Binding of Isaac," "Jacob and Esau," "Jacob and Rachel," "Joseph and his Brethren," "Joseph in Egypt," and "Israel in Egypt." In contrast, Exodus is represented by seven chapters in this volume, Leviticus by two chapters, and Numbers and Deuteronomy are each assigned four chapters. To put it another way, Genesis and Exodus,[240] which compose almost half of the material of the Pentateuch, are two-thirds of the content of this volume.[241] This may indicate a desire to focus on biblical narratives that are the most familiar to students.

The second volume of this series is called *The Early Prophets*, and it too presents an abbreviated biblical text. In this case, Simon and Bial divide the book into six chapters in parallel with the biblical books: Joshua, Judges, I Samuel, II Samuel, I Kings, and II

237Solomon Simon and Morrison David Bial, *The Rabbis' Bible: The Torah* (New York: Behrman House, 1966), 3.
238http://www.behrmanhouse.com/store/ as of November 24, 2013.
239http://www.behrmanhouse.com/store/ as of November 24, 2013.
240As well as the six introductory pages: title, bibliographic material, preface, and table of contents.
241Simon and Bial, *The Rabbis' Bible: The Torah*, 5–6.

Kings. Each of the biblical books includes three, four, five, or six chapters dedicated to individual biblical accounts. In total, this volume includes 28 chapters in 231 pages.[242]

The Later Prophets is the final volume of this series, and while Simon continues to be the primary author, he is joined by Rothberg in place of Bial. As its name indicates, this volume covers the prophetic literature in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve Minor Prophets. However, the chapter layout varies from the earlier volumes. *The Later Prophets* is divided into sections named after biblical books, but these are the numbered chapters. Additionally, the number of chapters for each biblical book varies; each of the minor prophets has one chapter while Isaiah and Jeremiah each have five chapters and Ezekiel has three.[243]

In all three books, Simon et al use bracketed numbers to introduce each *midrash*, and at the end of the book, these numbers function like endnotes to denote the source texts. Since the curricular goals for this project pair *midrash* with *parashat hashavua*, the following sections present material from the first book only; however, this is representative of the other two volumes.[244]

Presentation

The *Teacher's Guide* begins with the warning: "This is a book of examples and suggestions, not a curriculum."[245] Each chapter describes how teachers might approach the material through the headers: Aim, Text, Approach, Lesson, Modifications, Alternate Lessons, and Homework.[246] Additionally, the *Teacher's Guide* indicates for the teacher

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242Solomon Simon and Morrison David Bial, *The Rabbis' Bible: The Early Prophets* (New York: Behrman House, 1966), 7–9.

243Solomon Simon and Abraham Rothberg, *The Rabbis' Bible: The Later Prophets* (New York: Behrman House, 1966), "Contents."

244c.f. above, (1:Curricular Goals).

245*Teacher's Guide for The Rabbis' Bible Volume 1: Torah* (New York: Behrman House, 1969), 5.

246c.f. *Teacher's Guide for The Rabbis' Bible Volume 1: Torah*, 22–27.

the pages in the text book that correspond to the individual chapter, the subset of pages

upon which the lesson will focus, the *midrashim* upon which the lesson will focus, and

the pages in the *Resource Book* that correspond with the text book and *Teacher's Guide*.

The *Resource Book* is out of print, and I was unable to acquire a copy for this project.

Chapter 3 – Abram

This chapter includes the abbreviated biblical narrative of Genesis 11 – 16.[247]

Simon and Bial's subheadings denote the primary pericopes in this chapter: "From Shem

to Abraham [sic]," "Abram Arrives in Canaan," "Abram Parts from Lot," "Abram in

Battle with Four Kings," "God's Covenant with Abram," and "Ishmael is Born."[248] In the

section "From Shem to Abraham," the biblical text provides the lineage to Abram and

one of the three associated *midrashim* describes the events of "Abram and the Idol Shop,"

wherein the young Abram upsets two customers that attempt to buy idols from his

father's store.[249] Simon and Bial cite *Genesis Rabbah* 38:18 as the source of this *midrash*

while the Vilna edition of Genesis Rabbah lists it as 38:13 and Albeck's critical edition

lists it as 38:25.[250] Later in the same chapter, in the section "Abram Arrives in Canaan,"

the biblical text includes the sentence:

> So Abram took his wife Sarai, and his nephew Lot, with all their
> possessions that they had accumulated, and the souls that they had
> acquired in Haran; [3] and they set out for the land of Canaan; and
> into the land of Canaan they came.[251]

247Simon and Bial, *The Rabbis' Bible: The Torah*, 23.
248Ibid., 23–31.
249Ibid., 25–26.
250Both accessed through the *Bar-Ilan Responsa Project*. For the citation, see Ibid., 222.
251Ibid., 27.

Since the page heading indicates the source of the biblical text—in this case, "GENESIS

12:3, 5-7, 9—the reader can easily identify this verse as Genesis 12:5 by looking in a

Bible.[252] The bracketed number three—[3]—corresponds to a text below the line:

> [3] THE SOULS THEY HAD ACQUIRED: All the wise men of
> the earth together could not create a mosquito. Yet we read that
> Abram was "acquiring souls, [sic]" (the Hebrew refers to "the
> souls he created"). How does one "create souls"?
> He who brings a person near to God is as though he had created
> him, answers the Midrash....[253]

The other half of the *midrash* is inconsequential to the analysis of this book.

Simon and Bial provide, in this *midrash,* one example of how they translated the

midrashim. In the biblical text, they retain the JPS translation of "souls ... acquired."[254]

However, in the *midrash,* they point out the Hebrew meaning, to which the *midrashic*

author is responding. In this example, like the previous one, Simon and Bial's citation of

Genesis Rabbah 39:21 does not correlate to either the Vilna or Albeck editions of

Genesis Rabbah.[255] Although this project does not criticize the editing of the book,

students benefit from well cited sources in that they would be able to find the original text

and that they learn about the importance of citation in scholarly literature.

The *Teacher's Guide* suggests that students read the first four pages of the biblical

text and the first five *midrashim.*[256] It states the aim: "To emphasize Abram's iconoclasm ;

to make the idea of iconoclasm relevant and attractive to the students, and to explore its

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252Ibid.
253Ibid.
254*The Holy Scriptures According to the Masoretic Text* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1917).
255In the Vilna edition, the *midrash* is included in *Genesis Rabbah* 39:14; in Albeck, *Genesis Rabbah* 39:5. Both were found through the *Bar-Ilan Responsa Project.* For the location of Simon and Bial's citation, see Simon and Bial, *The Rabbis' Bible: The Torah,* 222.
256The first four *midrashim* are all labeled [1], and Simon and Bial present them as a single narrative. c.f. *Teacher's Guide,* 22.

implications."[257] The *Teacher's Guide* also uses the heading, "Approach," to describe how the teacher might use the text and introduces the lesson: "The Biblical text tells us the bare essentials.... The Midrashim fill in some of the details.... The lesson explores the danger of new ideas both to the established order and to those who propound the new ideas, as well as the rewards for the latter. It then brings the matter as close to home as possible for the students."[258] The lesson is presented, primarily, as a list of eight questions with some suggested answers, all of which are based on the *midrash* text and not the biblical narrative.[259] The questions begin with recollection—"Why did Nimrod persecute Abram and his family?"—move toward application—"Iconoclasm is lonely.... How was Abram able to endure all that happened to him"—and even trying to make it relevant —"What can all of this have to do with your students? ... It may be hard for them to imagine other circumstances [than living in a place with freedom of speech]...."[260] The *Teacher's Guide* provides some structure for the teacher and even alternatives for the plan.[261] This allows for maximum flexibility in lesson planning but also risks making the lesson difficult to concretize.

Applicability for Teaching Midrash in Reform Jewish Day Schools

This series provides the best example of reading *midrash* in parallel with Scripture. A student who reads the biblical text, encounters a footnote, and can immediately read the *midrash* on the bottom of the page. Further, the individual *midrashim* are cited at the back of the book, which means that that the text is not

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257Ibid.
258Ibid., 22–23.
259Ibid., 23–26.
260See questions 2, 5, and 7 in Ibid., 23–25.
261Ibid., 26–27.

unnecessarily cluttered but does point students in the correct direction for locating the source material. As noted above, both examples above are inaccurately cited, and a student would need to investigate further to find the correct material.[262] In addition to the parallel nature of the *midrashim* and the biblical text, this curriculum also focuses on common Bible stories, focuses on *aggadah*, and includes teacher material. This curriculum does not present the original language text nor does it seek to understand the motives of the authors of *midrash*. Additionally, this curriculum does not explicitly discuss the literary style of the *midrash*. This curriculum provides a good basis for developing an appropriate curriculum for a Reform Jewish day school, but would need to address those three areas to fit the needs of this project.

Tal Am – Curriculum Material

Background Information

I contacted Tal Am in February 2014 because their curriculum is used by a number of Jewish day schools in the United States. From this conversation, Tal Am provided me with twenty-four small books—which they call modules—that students use during grades 2-4, and which Tal Am thought would best demonstrate how they integrate *midrash* into the curriculum. From the conversation, I also learned that Tal Am does not dictate which modules are used by individual teachers or schools and that *midrash* is not an explicit value of the Tal Am curriculum.[263]

Half of the twenty-four modules are part of the second grade curriculum, nine are part of the third grade curriculum, and the final three are part of the fourth grade

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262This is not to say that all citations in the book are inaccurate; however, checking all of the citations is an endeavor that is beyond the scope of this project.

263Miriam Cohen, Tal Am Interview, Telephone, February 19, 2014.

curriculum. Almost half of the modules are part of the *parashat hashavua* component of Tal Am; the remainder help teach Shabbat or holidays. All of the modules that I received are copyright between 2005 – 2011, and they are typically only available to schools that subscribe to the Tal Am curriculum.

The Tal Am Hebrew and Judaic Studies curriculum is designed to be taught in Hebrew using Hebrew language books. This project, however, is targeted for English readers who may or may not have strong Hebrew reading skills. I have translated the titles of the various modules in an Appendix and use the English names throughout the text of this project.

According to the Tal Am website, their "mission is to create a Hebrew and Heritage curriculum in a unifying language and unique voices, to develop Jewish knowledge and identity in our learners, and to implement the curriculum through state-of-the-art professional development for their educators."[264] They claim no denominational affiliation, and while most of the illustrations depict people dressed in a more modest—or Modern Orthodox—manner, there is an illustration of egalitarian worship.[265]

Contents

For the list of all modules that I received, see the Appendix.

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[264]"About us -> Mission," last accessed February 19, 2014, http://www.talam.org/mission.html .

[265]In one module, the story is that of a class of students who recall lighting Shabbat candles; all males in that module wear *kippot* and women dressed modestly. However, in a second module, two girls visit their synagogue and with mixed seating and with—I think—a female prayer leader wearing a *tallit* and *kippah*. See, respectively: Gila Zayit and Chava Shimon-Cassirer, *Hadlakat Nerot Shabat Babayit Sheli (Lighting the Shabbat Candles at Home)* (Montreal: Tal Am, 2006), 5–17; Gila Zayit and Chava Shimon-Cassirer, *Shi`urei Bayit Bshabat?! (Homework on Shabbat?!)* (Montreal: Tal Am, 2006), 11.

Example 1 – Where did They Go in Parashat Lech L'cha?

This example covers one of the modules for second grade that is part of the *parashat hashavua* series. According to the front cover, this module is designed for studying *Parashat Lech L'cha*, in Genesis 12-17.[266] The first page of the book shows a teacher asking her students: "Why did Abram's father Terah leave Ur of the Chaldees?"[267] The next 13 pages relate the *midrash* of a young Abram smashing the idols, Terah and his family fleeing because of a royal decree, and an older Abram convincing others to come to Canaan with him.[268] The last page of this book presents the original text of the *midrash* as it appears in *Genesis Rabbah* chapters 38 – 39.[269] The *midrash* answers a question in the biblical text—namely, why did God choose Abraham—but, the teacher would need to have covered the biblical narrative with another module or from the Bible.

If we ignore the first and last page of the module—the teacher and the source text —the *midrash* is adapted significantly from the original text to modern Hebrew. It also abbreviates the *midrash*. In both the original *midrash* and the rewritten *midrash*, Abram is left alone in the store and, some time later, Abram shatters the idols. However, in the original *midrash*, Abram derides two customers for attempting to purchase idols, and finally between those two acts.[270] However, it is important to note that the rewritten *midrash* is mostly faithful to the original.

266Gila Zayit and Chava Shimon-Cassirer, *L'an Halchu bLech L'cha? (Where Did They Go in Parashat Lech L'cha?)*, 2nd printing (Montreal: Tal Am, 2011), front cover.

267For this page and all other text in Tal Am, this is my translation. Ibid., 3.

268Ibid., 4–19.

269Ibid., 20.

270See the jump in the narrative between pages 5-6 in contrast to the original *midrash* on page 20. Zayit and Shimon-Cassirer, *Where Did They Go?*.

Example 2 – The Tale of the Ladybug

This example covers one of the modules for fourth grade that is part of the Jewish Year series, and specifically addresses the holiday of Passover. While the Hebrew is of a higher level and the font smaller, the module is presented very similarly to the other example. The module opens with a modern character observing nature to determine if Spring has arrived.[271] She realizes that Spring has arrived and marvels at the beetle who turns out to be a talking ladybug.[272] The remainder of the module relates to students that the reason that this ladybug is named *parat moshe rabeinu* (Cow of Moses our Rabbi) is due to the role of ladybugs during Moses's lifetime.[273] The student who glances briefly at the inside back cover of the module will see that, like in Example 1, two *midrashim* are included.[274]

A more observant student might see that the two source texts—*Midrash Tanhuma, Vayakhel* 4 and *Exodus Rabbah* 1:18—do not relate to the story in this module. The text from *Midrash Tanhuma* comments on Exodus 1:16 ("If it is a [Hebrew] boy, kill him") and says that Pharaoh only cared about the sons because he had received a prophecy that a male child would deliver the Hebrews from Egypt.[275] The other text, from *Exodus Rabbah*, also relates to the prophecy that the Hebrews' deliverer would be born on a certain day and that he would meet his end due to waters. The *midrash* says that Pharaoh feared all children born that day—Hebrew and Egyptian—and had them cast in the waters of the Nile to fulfill the prophecy. The *midrash* concludes by saying that the

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271Gila Zayit and Chava Shimon-Cassirer, *Ha'agada Shel Parat Moshe Rabeinu (The Tale of the Ladybug)*, 2nd printing (Montreal: Tal Am, 2008), 3.
272Ibid., 4–5.
273Ibid., 6–24.
274Ibid., inside back cover.
275Ibid.

aforementioned "waters" referred to the Waters of Meribah of Numbers 20 that were the downfall of Moses according to the biblical narrative.[276] According to Tal Am, this *midrash* was invented by their staff to explain the Hebrew name of the ladybug in a *midrashic* style.[277] The module does not specify that the text is not a classic *midrash* and presents the story in the same way that the *midrashim* are presented in other modules. This could lead to confusion for the student.

Applicability for Teaching Midrash in Reform Jewish Day Schools

Tal Am selected the material for review based on my questions about how *midrash* factored into the Tal Am curriculum. While Cohen said that Tal Am only used *midrash* tangentially during the interview, the materials are a positive sign that they are rewriting *midrashim*—at an appropriate Hebrew level—for their students. If the *midrashim* are taught in conjunction with *parashat hashavua*, this Curriculum does satisfy the requirement that *midrash* is taught in relationship with the biblical text. Additionally, the original sources of the *midrashim* are provided and all of the materials were based on *aggadic* exegetical *midrashim*.

Tal Am missed an opportunity with these resources in that they could have asked students to read the original text with a word key to help students translate obscure (or Aramaic) words into modern Hebrew. They could have still used illustrations and explanatory narrative around the text, but focused on learning how the *midrash* functions. Additionally, the material from Tal Am do not address the literary elements of *midrash* nor the motivations of it's authors.

276Ibid.
277Cohen, Tal Am Interview.

The biggest issue that interferes with the ability to use the Tal Am materials to teach classic *midrash* as a curricular topic is the inability to distinguish between story that is a faithful translation of the *midrash* into Modern Hebrew, creative changes to the *midrash* to facilitate student learning, and wholly new *midrashim* that are invented by modern writers. The Tal Am motive seems to be, first and foremost, Hebrew language learning over text-skills. That method would not work for the goals of this project.

Summary of Current Curricular Models

Chart

This chart depicts the six potential curricula investigated by this project in relation to the rubric created in Chapter 1: Curricular Goals. Each of the columns represents one of the six curricula, which I investigated for this project, named for the authors (or in the case of Tal Am, the name of the curriculum). With the exception of the final row of the table, each row represents whether a goal, which I earlier identified as important, is fulfilled by the curriculum. The final line of the table describes the motive of each curriculum. None of the six curricula fulfill the needs of this project as set forth in the Curricular Goals. For details on each curriculum, see the above sections in Chapter 2.

	Gersh	Isaacs	Neusner	Rossel, et al	Simon, et al	Tal Am
Students will learn to...						
read *midrash* in its original language	Included, but unvocalized and difficult to read	Almost always included	Yes	No, and the material is "rewritten"	No	Inconsistent, sometimes rewritten
read *midrash* in relationship with Scripture	No	No	No	Not explicit	Yes	Inconsistent
consider the motives of the author(s) / compiler(s) of *midrash*	Sometimes	No	Yes	No	No	No
recognize the literary styles and structures	Sometimes	No	Yes	No	No	No
identify rabbinic hermeneutics (examples)	Inconsistent	No	Inconsistent	No	No	No
extend their text skills from reading *midrash* to reading other texts	No	No	Not explicit	No	No	No
The curriculum will include...						
a focus on *midrashim* related to biblical narratives already in the curriculum	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Sometimes
an emphasis on *aggadah* over *halakah*	Yes	Yes	Includes both	Yes	Yes	Yes
a component for teacher preparation	No (answers to study questions)	No (some material in student book)	Book is written like a lesson plan	Yes	Yes	Only through training sessions
The motive of the curriculum is...	Ethics	Ethics	Text skills	Youth access to legends	Reading narratives to "fill in" Bible	Answer questions that arise from the Bible and traditions

Details

Two of the six curricula include *midrashim* that stem from biblical narratives that
might already be included in a standard *parashat hashavua* class. These two curricula,
written by Rossel, et al and Simon, et al, do not meet a number of other requirements.
Neither curriculum includes the original language of the *midrash*, nor considers the
motivation of the author of the *midrash*, nor teaches the rabbinic hermeneutics that are
found throughout *midrash*.

In contrast to the curricula offered by Rossel, et al and Simon, et al, Gersh and
Isaacs include the original Hebrew text of the *midrash*, but teach the material as a values
curriculum rather than a *midrash* curriculum. Like Rossel, et al and Simon, et al, their
curricula do not consider the motivation of the author of the *midrash*, nor teach the
rabbinic hermeneutics that are found throughout *midrash*. Additionally, they draw
material from several *midrashic* collections without explaining the sources and do not tie
the lessons to familiar biblical narratives.

The only curriculum that can be certain of its learners' Hebrew levels is Tal Am because Tal Am is a combined Hebrew and Judaics course of study. However, the staff of Tal Am does not leverage this skill set. That is to say, since the curriculum is designed in tandem with a Hebrew curriculum, the curriculum's author could point out features in the Hebrew that students without the Hebrew background might not be able to access. Additionally, the Tal Am booklets could present the *midrash* in its original language and help students read it through a Hebrew-to-Hebrew word bank, in effect helping them discover connections between rabbinic Hebrew (and Aramaic) and modern Hebrew.

One curriculum approaches *midrash* as a literature to be analyzed. Each book within Neusner's series teaches text skills, and as such, it includes the original language sources, points out literary style and structure, and presents itself as a set of lesson plans. Neusner's series is primarily interested in teaching students about the world of the rabbinic sages and how *Mishnah* and *Talmud* function. While he does examine some *midrashic* texts, this is not the focus of his work. As such, his approach is useful but he does not provide enough *midrashic* source material for this to be used in Reform classrooms for the teaching of *midrash* as a content area.

Chapter 3 – Proposal

Background

This proposal recommends a *midrash* curriculum taught in conjunction with a weekly *parashat hashavua* class. The American school-year—as if one could speak so broadly—closely parallels the Hebrew year, in that the *Yamim Noraim*, *Sukkot*, and *Simchat Torah* usually occur within the first two months of the new school year. Since *Simchat Torah* begins anew the cycle of yearly Torah readings, schools can begin teaching *parashat hashavua* with *Bereshit*, the first Torah portion.

This new *midrash* curriculum begins two weeks later with *Parashat Lech L'cha* in order to address a logistical concern. Students may not have time around the holiday of *Simchat Torah* to learn the first two *parashiyot hashavua*. As an example, *Simchat Torah* occurred on Thursday, September 23, 2013, leaving students only three possible learning days without considering any special programming for the holidays.[278] The following week may be the first full week of class during the school year. This logistical issue likely makes it difficult for a teacher to establish a classroom routine and begin the study of text in a regular fashion.

Scope

Creating an entire curriculum is beyond the scope of this project; however, this chapter is intended to help facilitate its creation. Specifically, a structure and six sample

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278While some Jewish calendar sources assign eight days to Sukkot, the Reform Movement has held that seven-day biblical holidays should be celebrated for seven days. Therefore, Sukkot occurred September 19-25, 2013 and September 26 marked the combined Sh'mini Atzeret and Simchat Torah. One example of a calendar with an eight-day Sukkot can be found at (http://www.hebcal.com) and an example of the Reform calendar can be found at (http://www.reformluach.com).

annotated lesson plans are provided. These lessons address the curricular goals from Chapter 1. Students will learn to read *midrash* in its original language, to read *midrash* as it relates to the Bible, to consider the motives of the author(s) and compiler(s), to recognize the literary styles and structures, to identify rabbinic hermeneutics with examples, and to extend their text reading skills from *midrash* to other texts. Additionally, the curriculum focuses on *midrashim* related to biblical narratives already in the school curriculum, emphasizes *aggadah* over *halakhah*, and offers a component for teacher preparation.

Drawing on those curricular goals, the structure and sample lessons are intended to help teach *midrashim* for the following *parashiyot*: *Lech L'cha, Vayeira, Chayei Sarah, Tol'dot, Vayeitzei,* and *Vayishlach*. These six *parashiyot* include most of the pericopes about the seven Hebrew patriarchs and matriarchs: Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, Leah, and Rachel.[279] These lessons assume a weekly class session, conducted in parallel with a *parashat hashavua* class, with no missed weeks due to planning, holidays, or weather. Whenever possible, the *midrashim* are selected in accordance with the first *midrash* that Rashi cites in his commentary to that *parasha*.[280] This decision relies on Nechama Leibowitz's method, which Shmuel Peerless has described: "She advocates the use of Midrashim that are grounded in the Biblical text and that deepen our understanding of the verse."[281] As students may learn to read the *parasha* with Rashi during subsequent years, studying Rashi's rabbinic sources in these sample lessons provides the students a

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279Though I include seven names, Abraham begins as Abram, Sarah begins as Sarai, and Jacob also has the name Israel. Also, one could argue that Abram is introduced at the end of *Parashat Noach* (Gen 11:26-11:32) or that Jacob still plays a part during the Joseph Novella (Gen 37:2 – 50:26), but for the purposes of this model, I am not including those chapters.

280When Rashi does not cite *midrash* or selects *midrash* that would not be appropriate for this audience, I have selected from *midrashim* to which Rashi had access.

281Peerless, *To Study and to Teach*, 24.

solid foundation for later studies. This is what is meant by "spiral curriculum," a method

for encouraging learning by revisiting material at different levels and building on former

learning.

Sources

The *midrashim* incorporated in the six lessons draw from three collections:

Genesis Rabbah, Midrash Tanhuma (printed version), and *Midrash Tanhuma* (Buber).

According to Strack and Stremberger, *Genesis Rabbah* is one of the oldest collections of

exegetical *midrashim*, probably written in the early fifth century, and it explains words

and phrases in Genesis using *aggadah*, aphorism, and parable.[282] The other two sources

are both called *Midrash Tanhuma*. The "printed version," which Strack and Stremberger

call the "standard edition," and the "Buber edition" represent two recensions of similar

homiletical *midrashim* on the Pentateuch.[283] While the two recensions are very similar for

the books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, the *midrashim* connected with

Genesis and Exodus diverge.[284] Strack and Stremberger date origin of *Midrash Tanhuma*

to the beginning of the fifth century but note continued development over the course of

the next few centuries.[285]

Through all of the lessons, I relied the Bar-Ilan Responsa Project for the Hebrew

text. I have pointed all of the Hebrew texts, sometimes with the assistance of the online

resource, Wikitext, because students need to access the Hebrew text directly and pointing

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282Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 277, 279.
283Ibid., 303.
284Ibid.
285Ibid., 305.

makes this easier for them to do so.[286] I drew upon three translations for this project and adapted the translations in terms of formatting, presentation, and sometimes word choice.

Berman, Samuel A. *Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu: An English Translation of Genesis and Exodus from the Printed Version of Tanhuma-Yelammedenu with an Introduction, Notes, and Indexes*. Hoboken, NJ: KTAV Pub., 1995.

Neusner, Jacob. *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis - A New American Translation, Vol 2-3*. Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1985.

Townsend, John T. *Midrash Tanhuma Vol. 1*. Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav Publishing House, 1989.

Layout

In the lessons, below, each lesson is framed with four elements: Objectives, *P'shat, Remez,* and *D'rash*. Each lesson begins with Objectives to clearly articulate the pedagogical and content goals of that lesson. The three latter headers are used relatively faithfully to the typical way that the sages approached the material. *P'shat*—usually meaning the contextual meaning of the biblical text—is the header for the second section, which describes a way to read the biblical text with students and the questions that might arise, either organically from the students, or through teacher guidance. The third section is identified as *Remez*, which usually indicates a hint of deeper understanding. This section presents a set of questions that the rabbis have about the biblical text in order to engage students in the *midrash*. This section addresses specific difficulties that might arise from reading the *midrash* and includes short selections from the *midrash*. The final heading is *D'rash*, which is the same root as *midrash*, includes the entire text of the *midrash* with appropriate biblical source material. This section does not include any annotations as they are found in the previous sections.

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286 "ויקיטקסט", last accessed March 11, 2014, http://he.wikisource.org .

The goals articulated at the beginning of each lesson and the guiding questions offered in the *P'shat* and *Remez* sections are examples of the kind of learning that is envisioned based on the curricular goals and pedagogical research discussed in Chapter 1. Because of the individual nature of each classroom, teachers should feel encouraged to ask questions that are age-appropriate, factor in the *parashat hashavua* lesson from earlier in the week, and take advantage of the different learning styles of each student.

Lesson for Parashat Lech L'cha

Objectives

During the course of this lesson, students will...

*   Generate appropriate questions based on the close reading
   of biblical text,
*   Investigate the textual reason for the questions that the
   Rabbis asked, and
*   Identify *midrashic* hermeneutics:
   gezera shava and *gematria*.

P'shat

Parashat Lech L'cha follows *Parashat Noach* and moves from the primeval

history of the world to the specific history of the Hebrews, beginning with Abram (later

Abraham). The Reform Judaism "Learn Torah" website provides the following summary

for Genesis 12:1 – 17:27.

*   Abram, Sarai, and Lot go to Canaan. (12:1-9)
*   Famine takes them to Egypt, where Abram identifies Sarai
   as his sister in order to save his life. (12:10-20)
*   Abram and Lot separate. Lot is taken captive, and Abram
   rescues him. (13:1-14:24)
*   Abram has a son, Ishmael, with his Egyptian maidservant,
   Hagar. (16:1-16)
*   God establishes a covenant with Abram. The sign of this
   covenant is circumcision on the eighth day following a
   male baby's birth. (17:1-27)[287]

The lesson below focuses on the first pericope of the *parasha*—that is, Abram's

call to leave his home and move to Canaan with God's promise of a three-fold blessing of

wealth, progeny, and land. The first three verses of the *parasha* say, "Adonai said to

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[287]"Lech L'cha," last accessed March 10, 2014, http://www.reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/lech-lcha .

Abram, 'Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse him that curses you; and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you.'[288] Before reading Genesis 24:1, the teacher should address the following issues that might arise in classroom discussion.

These three verses speak to a reward that seems intangible—blessing. Also, the biblical text does not say, "If you do these things, then God will grant these blessings." Rather, it says, "Do these things. God will grant these blessings." These verses are not conditional, but rather prescriptive and descriptive. Additionally, the three verses form a sort of introduction to the upcoming narrative. When students read these verses, they may ask about the nature of the blessing. In Genesis 12:1, God promises Abram land. Specifically, God directs Abram to an unspecified location. The teacher has the opportunity to guide students by asking about the location of the land and the implied promise. In other words, if the teacher asked students where Abram would be moving based on this verse, students might immediately say Canaan / Israel. In a few verses, those students would have their suspicions confirmed, but this is an opportunity to reframe the point of asking the question. Students need to read each pericope and each verse carefully to see if the questions are answered within the verse. In this case, God does not identify a specific location. Likewise, God does not, in this verse, promise that Abram will inherit the land. Only in Genesis 12:7, is this promise made.

Genesis 12:2 offers as many as four promises, depending on how it is read. One student might understand the entire verse to mean that God will make Abram a great

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288Genesis 12:1-3, adapted from the NJPS translation.

nation and that the rest of the verse specifies the manner; another student might think that God will make Abram a great nation and also that God will make Abram's name great; a third student might agree with the last sentiment but think that the first mention of blessing is God acting on Abram while the second mention of blessing is a passive summary of the verse; and another student might consider all four statements to be unique promises. The teacher is in the position to entertain all of these possibilities and to affirm each of them. Students who suggest an answer should be asked to justify their answer, and all four options are justifiable. The *midrash*, below, is particularly concerned with this verse.

The final verse of this section, Genesis 12:3, presents a punishment and reward system for all other human beings based on how they treat Abram. This verse completes God's command to Abram and students may ask about how or why God would bless or curse other nations. Also, they may want to know if cursing is literal or symbolic for treating Abram (and potentially his nation) in a negative manner. Note that within the three verses, the root for bless, (בָּרַךְ), is used four times. Although the *midrash* below does not comment on this feature, others do.[289] The *midrash* below is primarily concerned with another verse that also uses this root.

The other biblical verse that is important for this *midrash* is Genesis 24:1, from *Parashat Chayei Sarah*. In its context, Genesis 24:1 begins a transition in the biblical narrative from Abraham's lifetime to Isaac's marriage and subsequent generations. It says that "Abraham was now old, advanced in years, and Adonai had blessed Abraham in all things."[290] Students should read this verse and be guided to ask additional questions: how

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289*Midrash Genesis Rabbah* 39:11 – Four uses of the root for bless foretell the four matriarchs.
290Genesis 24:1, adapted from the NJPS translation.

old is old; why does the text give a second ambiguous age statement; and, what is the nature of Abraham's blessings are examples of some of the questions that the teacher could guide students to ask. The motive of the author is not easily reconstructed, but the question about blessing brings us back to the verses in *Lech L'cha*, and they specifically help modern students identify the questions that the Rabbis asked.

Remez

Rashi cites this *midrash* in his commentary to Genesis 12:2, but its original context is as exegesis on *Parashat Chayei Sarah* in the collection of *aggadic midrashim* called *Midrash Tanhuma*, and it is found in the Buber rescension of that work.[291] In a class on a specific book of *midrash*, as opposed to a component of *parashat hashavua*, two features of this *midrash* would need to be addressed. First, the introductory *d'var acher* should be assessed for why the compiler juxtaposed this *midrash* to the one before. Second, although in this curriculum the *midrash* is abridged after a single resolution of the opening question: "What is the meaning of, 'Abraham was old,'" in its context in *Midrash Tanhuma*, the rest of the *midrash* might be important to understanding the literary unit.

The *midrash* presented in the *D'rash* section includes four independent *midrashim*. The first *midrash* argues that Abram's name change to Abraham indicates that Abraham is the one for whom this world and the world to come were created. The second *midrash* argues that the choice of, "I will make you...," indicates that God uses Abraham as a new Creation. The third *midrash* understands the enlargement of Abraham's name in

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291For information about collection and rescension, see the introduction to this chapter, 3:Sources.

light of its new numerical value (*gematria*). The final *midrash* answers the question of

when God blessed Abraham.

Midrash Tanhuma *Chayei Sarah* 6	מדרש תנחומא (בובר) פרשה חיי שרה סימן ו

1.
   A. Another *drash*: Now Abraham was old means he acquired two worlds.
   B. In the beginning, his name had been Abram; and now, a *hei* (ה') was added to it since he had inherited two worlds. For by his merit, this world and the world to come were created.
   C. R. Halafta bar Kahana said: It is written: Such is the story of heaven and earth when they were created (הבראם). These are the letters which spell "Abraham." So, due to him this world and the world to come were created.
	דָּבָר אַחֵר וְאַבְרָהָם זָקֵן שֶׁקָּנָה שְׁנֵי עוֹלָמוֹת. בָּרִאשׁוֹנָה הָיָה שְׁמוֹ אַבְרָם, וְעַכְשָׁיו נוֹסַף לוֹ ה', שֶׁיָּרַשׁ שְׁנֵי עוֹלָמוֹת, שֶׁבִּזְכוּתוֹ נִבְרְאוּ הָעוֹלָם הַזֶּה וְהָעוֹלָם הַבָּא. אָמַר רַבִּי חֲלַפְתָּא בַּר כַּהֲנָא, כְּתִיב אֵלֶּה תוֹלְדוֹת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ בְּהִבָּרְאָם. הֵן הֵן הָאוֹתִיּוֹת שֶׁבְּאַבְרָהָם. הֲרֵי שֶׁבִּזְכוּתוֹ נִבְרְאוּ הָעוֹלָם הַזֶּה וְהָעוֹלָם הַבָּא.

The first *midrash*, contained in 1A-1C, tries to determine the nature of the

unspecified blessing by using the rabbinic hermeneutic tool called *gematria*. Specifically,

the Rabbis point out that the numerical meaning of the name Abraham is 248, which is

the same numerical value of the word *hib'aram* ([heaven and earth's] creation).[292] More

specifically, the same letters occur in both words, but in a different order. One of the

difficulties that comes from reading 1B in translation is the inability to accurately

translate the dual meaning of the letter *hei*. Specifically, the Hebrew does not differentiate

between the meanings: "his name had been Abram; and now, a *hei* was added..." and that,

"his name had been Abram; and now, 5 was added...." The fact that Hebrew letters have

both a consonantal value and a numerical value is used by the Rabbis of this *midrash* and

might be overlooked by somebody reading in translation.

292Since each Hebrew consonant has a numerical value, one can add up the value of Abraham's name
(אברהם): *alef* = 1, *bet* = 2, *resh* = 200, *hei* = 5, *mem* = 40, *in toto* 248. These are the same letters as in
the word *hib'aram* (הבראם).

2.	הוּא שֶׁאָמַר לוֹ הקב"ה
A. It was he to whom the Holy One said: I will make you a great nation. Why did he not say to him: "I will establish you" instead of, I will make you?	וְאֶעֶשְׂךָ לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל, לָמָה לֹא אָמַר לוֹ וַאֲשִׂימְךָ אֶלָּא וְאֶעֶשְׂךָ? אָמַר רַבִּי בְּרֶכְיָה
B. R. Berekhyah the Priest said in the name of his father, R. Hiyya, who spoke in the name of Rav Judah bar Ezekiel and his masters on behalf of our masters in the Diaspora: The Holy One said to Abraham: I am creating you as a new creation and renewing you.	הַכֹּהֵן בְּשֵׁם רַבִּי חִיָּיא אָבִיו, שֶׁאָמַר בְּשֵׁם רַב יְהוּדָה בַּר יְחֶזְקֵאל וְרַבּוֹתָיו מִשּׁוּם וְרַבּוֹתֵינוּ שֶׁבַּגּוֹלָה, אָמַר הקב"ה לְאַבְרָהָם, אֲנִי בּוֹרֵא אוֹתְךָ בְּרִיָּה חֲדָשָׁה וּמְחַדְּשֶׁךָ.

The second *midrash*, labeled 2A-2B, is concerned with a single word: the biblical text says, "I will make of you a great nation...." Contrast this with other biblical narratives: Regarding Ishmael, "I will make a nation of him, too..."[293] and the promise to Jacob, "I will make you there [in Egypt] into a great nation...."[294] The English word, make, correlates to different words. In the text that this *midrash* cites, the word is `asa (do, make) and in the other two texts, the word is *sam* (assign, place). The word `asa, when not used in the simple meaning of "doing," seems reserved for acts of creation. God says, "Let us make man in our image..."[295] and "...I will make a fitting helper for [the first man]."[296] The Rabbis are concerned with this inconsistency, and use the second *midrash* to resolve it. Instead of saying, for instance, that either word could be used, they instead put words in God's mouth.

In the second part of this *midrash*, 2B, includes a long attribution to rabbinic authorities: "R. Berekhyah the Priest said in the name of his father, R. Hiyya, who spoke in the name of Rav Judah bar Ezekiel and his masters on behalf of our masters in the

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293Genesis 21:13, translation from NJPS.
294Genesis 46:3, translation from NJPS.
295Genesis 1:27, translation from NJPS.
296Genesis 2:18, translation from NJPS.

Diaspora...." This attribution cites three rabbis by name and the collective authority of

"his masters [and] our masters in the Diaspora." The teacher can use this as an

opportunity to discuss with students reasons that authors might cite their sources, relating

this to their language arts or English composition class and to general academic writing.

Modern writers cite sources, in part, to prove that the information is factual, to help

readers find more information, or to describe how the author came to his or her

opinions.[297] The teacher and students may also discuss whether any of these reasons

might have guided the author of the *midrash*.

The last statement of this second *midrash* indicates that God renewed Creation

through Abraham. **What does this mean? Why is it important?.**

3.

| A. I will enlarge your name. R. Judah the Levite in the name of R. Shallum said: The Holy One said to Abraham: I am making your name the number of body-parts within you. Just as there are 248 body parts, so your name (will be) 248. | וַאֲגַדְּלָה שְׁמֶךָ, אָמַר רַבִּי יְהוּדָה הַלֵוִי בְּשֵׁם רַבִּי שָׁלוֹם אָמַר, הקב"ה לְאַבְרָהָם, אֲנִי עוֹשֶׂה שְׁמֶךָ לְמִנְיַן אֵבָרִים שֶׁבָּךְ, מַה אֵבָרִים רמ"ח, אַף שִׁמְךָ רמ"ח. |

The third *midrash*, 3A, demonstrates that the Rabbis question the meaning of the

phrase, "I will enlarge your name." This *midrash* is related to the first in that both seek to

interpret Abraham's new name using *gematria*, the rabbinic hermeneutic tool wherein the

numerical value of a word links it to other words with the same numerical value. In this

case, the *midrash* connects "Abraham" to rabbinic assumption of the number of body-

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297Adapted from "Sources and Citation at Dartmouth College," Dartmouth College, 2008, last accessed
April 20, 2014, http://writing-speech.dartmouth.edu/learning/materials/sources-and-citations-
dartmouth .

parts (248).[298] Although the Rabbis do not cite other meanings for 248 in this *midrash*,

rabbinic literature also uses the number 248 as is the number of positive commandments,

the numerical value of the word for compassion, and the numerical value of the word for

womb.

4.		
	A. I will enlarge your name and you shall be a blessing. When did he show him the blessing? In his old age, as stated: Now Abraham was old <and Adonai had blessed Abraham in everything>.	וַאֲגַדְּלָה שְׁמֶךָ וֶהְיֵה בְּרָכָה, אֵימָתַי הֶרְאָה לוֹ הַבְּרָכָה בְּזִקְנוּתוֹ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר וְאַבְרָהָם זָקֵן >בָּא בַּיָּמִים וַה' בֵּרַךְ אֶת־אַבְרָהָם בַּכֹּל<.

The final *midrash*, 4A, returns to the opening biblical source, Genesis 24:1. It

connects the phrase from Genesis 12:2, "I will enlarge your name and you shall be a

blessing." with the opening phrase, "Now Abraham was old and Adonai had blessed

Abraham in everything." This *midrash* uses the rabbinic hermeneutic tool of *gezera*

shava, **CHECK WITH RS** which allows a reader to find the same word in two different

verses and to infer that the two verses are therefore interconnected. In this case, both

Genesis 12:2 and Genesis 24:1 include the notion of God blessing Abram / Abraham. The

midrash asserts that these two verses are connected in that the blessing that God had

promised Abram in the earlier verse was only realized in his old age and through a name

change.

These four *midrashim* that connect to the biblical verses seem at once both

interconnected and disparate. Since the source material comes from the same verses and

the different *midrashim* explain the same phrases, they seem to be the same. However,

the different goals of each of the *midrashim*—the reason for Abram's name change vis-à-

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298Since each Hebrew consonant has a numerical value, one can add up the value of Abraham's name
(אברהם): *alef* = 1, *bet* = 2, *resh* = 200, *hei* = 5, *mem* = 40, *in toto* 248.

vis the world and world to come, the explanation of the verb 'asa in this verse in light of its use in Creation, the reason for Abram's name change vis-à-vis the number of body-parts in rabbinic literature, and the connection between Genesis 12:2 and Genesis 24:1 through the common usage of the word blessing—illustrate that they have individual concerns.

The final topic that a teacher should cover with students is how this *midrash* reflects the Rabbis responding to their world. That is to say, what is the motivation for the author to give these three explanations: God created this world and the world to come because of the merit of Abraham, God reset Creation by means of Abraham, and God changed Abraham's name to reflect the number of body parts?

What is my point about the rabbis' using this to address their world?

D'rash

The Parasha Says

> **בראשית יב**
> (1) וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־אַבְרָם לֶךְ־לְךָ מֵאַרְצְךָ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַרְאֶךָּ: (2) וְאֶעֶשְׂךָ לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל וַאֲבָרֶכְךָ וַאֲגַדְּלָה שְׁמֶךָ וֶהְיֵה בְּרָכָה:
> (3) וַאֲבָרֲכָה מְבָרֲכֶיךָ וּמְקַלֶּלְךָ אָאֹר וְנִבְרְכוּ בְךָ כֹּל מִשְׁפְּחֹת הָאֲדָמָה:
>
> **Genesis 12** (1) Adonai said to Abram, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. (2) I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. (3) I will bless those who bless you and curse him that curses you; and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you." (NJPS)

בראשית ב

(4) אֵלֶּה תוֹלְדוֹת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ בְּהִבָּרְאָם....

Genesis 2 (4) Such is the story of heaven and earth when they were created.... (NJPS)

בראשית כד

(1) וְאַבְרָהָם זָקֵן בָּא בַּיָּמִים וַה׳ בֵּרַךְ אֶת־אַבְרָהָם בַּכֹּל:

Genesis 24 (1) Abraham was now old, advanced in years, and Adonai had blessed Abraham in all things.

Midrash Tanhuma *Chayei Sarah* 6	מדרש תנחומא (בובר) פרשה חיי שרה סימן ו
1. A. Another *drash*: Now Abraham was old means he acquired two worlds. B. In the beginning, his name had been Abram; and now, a *hei* (ה') was added to it since he had inherited two worlds. For by his merit, this world and the world to come were created. C. R. Halafta bar Kahana said: It is written: Such is the story of heaven and earth when they were created (הבראם). These are the letters which spell "Abraham." So, due to him this world and the world to come were created.	דָּבָר אַחֵר וְאַבְרָהָם זָקֵן שֶׁקָּנָה שְׁנֵי עוֹלָמוֹת. בָּרִאשׁוֹנָה הָיָה שְׁמוֹ אַבְרָם, וְעַכְשָׁיו נוֹסַף לוֹ ה', שֶׁיֵּרֵשׁ שְׁנֵי עוֹלָמוֹת, שֶׁבִּזְכוּתוֹ נִבְרְאוּ הָעוֹלָם הַזֶּה וְהָעוֹלָם הַבָּא. אָמַר רַבִּי חֲלַפְתָּא בַּר כַּהֲנָא, כְּתִיב אֵלֶּה תוֹלְדוֹת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ בְּהִבָּרְאָם. הֵן הֵן הָאוֹתִיּוֹת שֶׁבְּאַבְרָהָם. הֲוֵי שֶׁבִּזְכוּתוֹ נִבְרְאוּ הָעוֹלָם הַזֶּה וְהָעוֹלָם הַבָּא.
2. A. It was he to whom the Holy One said: I will make you a great nation. Why did he not say to him: "I will establish you" instead of, I will make you? B. R. Berekhyah the Priest said in the name of his father, R. Hiyya, who spoke in the name of Rav Judah bar Ezekiel and his masters on behalf of our masters in the Diaspora: The Holy One said to Abraham: I am creating you as a new creation and renewing you.	הוּא שֶׁאָמַר לוֹ הקב"ה וְאֶעֶשְׂךָ לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל, לָמָּה לֹא אָמַר לוֹ וַאֲשִׂימְךָ אֶלָּא וְאֶעֶשְׂךָ? אָמַר רַבִּי בְּרֶכְיָה הַכֹּהֵן בְּשֵׁם רַבִּי חִיָּיא אָבִיו, שֶׁאָמַר בְּשֵׁם רַב יְהוּדָה בַּר יְחֶזְקֵאל וְרַבּוֹתָיו מִשּׁוּם וְרַבּוֹתֵינוּ שֶׁבַּגּוֹלָה, אָמַר הקב"ה לְאַבְרָהָם, אֲנִי בּוֹרֵא אוֹתְךָ בְּרִיָּה חֲדָשָׁה וּמְחַדֶּשְׁךָ.
3. A. I will enlarge your name. R. Judah the Levite in the name of R. Shallum said: The Holy One said to Abraham: I am making your name the number of body-parts within you. Just as there are 248 body parts, so your name (will be) 248.	וַאֲגַדְּלָה שְׁמֶךָ, אָמַר רַבִּי יְהוּדָה הַלֵּוִי בְּשֵׁם רַבִּי שָׁלוֹם אָמַר, הקב"ה לְאַבְרָהָם, אֲנִי עוֹשֶׂה שִׁמְךָ לְמִנְיָן אֵבָרִים שֶׁבָּךְ, מַה אֵבָרִים רמ"ח, אַף שִׁמְךָ רמ"ח.
4. A. I will enlarge your name and you shall be a blessing. When did he show him the blessing? In his old age, as stated: Now Abraham was old <and Adonai had blessed Abraham in everything>.	וַאֲגַדְּלָה שְׁמֶךָ וֶהְיֵה בְּרָכָה, אֵימָתַי הֶרְאָה לוֹ הַבְּרָכָה בְּזִקְנוּתוֹ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר וְאַבְרָהָם זָקֵן <בָּא בַּיָּמִים וַה' בֵּרַךְ אֶת־אַבְרָהָם בַּכֹּל.>

Lesson for Parashat Vayeira

Objectives

During the course of this lesson, students will...

* Generate appropriate questions based on the close reading of biblical text,
* Compare *midrash* to other genres of literature,
* Investigate the textual triggers for the questions that the Rabbis asked, and
* Consider how the compiler repurposed material.

P'shat

Parashat Vayeira continues the patriarchal narrative and is most famous for including the *Akeida*. The Reform Judaism "Learn Torah" website provides the following summary for Genesis 18:1 – 22:24.

* Abraham welcomes three visitors, who announce that Sarah will soon have a son. (18:1-15)
* Abraham argues with God about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. (18:16-33)
* Lot's home is attacked by the people of Sodom. Lot and his two daughters escape as the cities are being destroyed. Lot's wife is turned into a pillar of salt. (19:1-29)
* Lot impregnates his daughters, and they bear children who become the founders of the nations Moab and Ammon. (19:30-38)
* Abimelech, king of Gerar, takes Sarah as his wife after Abraham claims that she is his sister. (20:1-18)
* Isaac is born, circumcised, and weaned. Hagar and her son, Ishmael, are sent away; an angel saves their lives. (21:1-21)
* God tests Abraham, instructing him to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah. (22:1-19)[299]

299"Vayeira," last accessed March 10, 2014, http://www.reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/vayeira .

This lesson focuses on the two opening verses of the *parasha* which begin the pericope of Abraham's noteworthy hospitality scene: "Adonai appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre; he was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot. Looking up, he saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them and, bowed to the ground."[300] The biblical narrative seems somewhat disjointed. When God appears to Abraham in the first verse, the text gives no indication of any action or speech. This descriptive sentence and the transition to the second verse leave several gaps that students might be able to articulate. The teacher can ask students to create a chart of 'actors' and 'actions' for the first two verses.

Actor	Verse 1	Verse 2
God	Appeared	Ø
Abraham	Sitting	Looking Seeing Running Bowing
Three men	Ø	Standing

Figure: Example of chart to help students recognize that God stops acting after Genesis 18:1.

The next ten verses are full of action. Abraham, the three men, and Sarah interact with one another by speaking, preparing food, and eating together. Only as the men are about to leave, in Genesis 18:13, does the author again mention God. A teacher should ask students about the possible meaning of introducing God in the first verse and not mentioning God for the subsequent eleven verses. Possible answers could include: (1) since the three men are angels, God appears as those three angels;[301] (2) the pericope is broken, in that God's appearance might have been expected to continue with a

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300Genesis 18:1-2, adapted from the NJPS translation.
301c.f. Rashbam's commentary to Genesis 18:1.

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conversation between Abraham and God, and the story about the three men was added

into a narrative that would have read: "Adonai appeared to [Abraham] by the terebinths

of Mamre; he was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot. Now Adonai

said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, since Abraham is to become a

great and populous nation and all the nations of the earth are to bless themselves by

him?"[302]

A second issue is the context of the biblical narrative. According to Rashi and

others, this pericope takes place on the third day following Abraham's self-circumcision.

Since the last chapter of Genesis ends with Abraham circumcising himself, Ishmael, and

his male servants, rabbinic tradition (including Rashi) reads the two pericopes as

occurring within a short time. Other *midrashim* seek to explain the reason for God's

appearance and the visit from the three men on the third day after his circumcision, but

for the purposes of this lesson, it is only important for students and teacher to recognize

that Abraham's circumcision is forefront in the mind of the Rabbis.

The next issue that should be raised is that of pronouns. Whether reading religious

or secular texts, readers who encounter a pronoun attempt to identify the person being

referenced. Often, when reading in one's native language, this resolution might be

subconscious. This lesson (and subsequent lessons) ask students to pay particular

attention to pronouns because the Rabbis will use pronouns as a trigger to ask questions

about the biblical text.[303] In Genesis 18:1, Abraham is not mentioned by name. Only by

reading this line as a continuation of Genesis 17, or by reading Genesis 18:6 back into the

first few verses of the chapter, can the reader know (assume) that Abraham is the

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302Genesis 18:1, 18:17ff.
303c.f. below, 3:Lesson for *Parashat Vayeitzei*.

character. Likewise, the phrase, "... he was sitting at the entrance to the tent ...," is also ambiguous; it could refer to Abraham or God.

For the purpose of discussing the *midrash*, students need to know the meaning of the phrase *b'elonei mamre*, which the New JPS Tanakh translates as, "by the terebinths of Mamre." The word *elon*, as 'tree' or a type of tree is clear, but students may not know that Mamre is one of Abraham's allies. By reading Genesis 14:13, students will have a passing knowledge of Mamre, Eshkol, and Aner. One final question of interest is why these three men are not considered major biblical characters. According to Genesis 14, they help Abraham win a war and the *midrash* considers them important to the biblical narrative, however anecdotally, we do not teach about Mamre, Eshkol, and Aner.

Remez

Rashi's concern stems from the question of why God would appear "by the terebinths of Mamre" instead of in a holy place such as Sinai / Horeb. He cites the *midrash* in the printed version of *Midrash Tanhuma* which consists of a single *midrashic* narrative. He may have chosen this *midrash* because he reads this pericope as occurring three days after Abraham circumcises himself and the *midrash* below deals with Mamre's role in Abraham's circumcision.

1.

A. By the terebinths of Mamre. Why did the Holy One, appear by the terebinths of Mamre? Because He does not withhold a reward for any of His creations.	בְּאֵלֹנֵי מַמְרֵא. וְלָמָּה בְּאֵלֹנֵי מַמְרֵא יִתְבָּרַךְ שְׁמוֹ שֶׁל הקב"ה? שֶׁאֵינוֹ מְקַפֵּחַ שָׂכָר שֶׁל כָּל בְּרִיָּה.
B. <...>	
C. Hence it is written: Adonai appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre.	הֲדָא הוּא דִכְתִיב: וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו ה' בְּאֵלֹנֵי מַמְרֵא.

The *midrash* begins with the question and answer: "Why did the Holy One,

appear by the terebinths of Mamre? Because He does not withhold a reward for any of

His creations." In the opening statements of the *midrash*, in 1A, the *midrash* has already

told us that the appearance of God in this particular place is a reward for somebody,

presumably Mamre. The *midrash* consists of three sections. The first part is an

introduction. The third part, 1C, is a concluding statement reiterating the above. The

middle of the *midrash* tells a story that seeks to explain the biblical verse. The teacher

can draw parallels between this method and what the students have learned in a

composition class. For instance, a strong paragraph might have a thesis, three points, and

a conclusion; a five paragraph essay typically consists of an introduction, three points,

and a conclusion.

Unlike last week's lesson, this lesson is about *midrash* and the genre of drama.

The reader should note how the *midrash* does not describe any of the scene except for the

dialogue between the characters. Compare this, for instance, to a novel or short story

which might describe the weather, the clothing, or at least the time when the events were

meant to occur. Then compare it to a play wherein dialogue is the vehicle for most of the

information.[304]

<table>
<tr>
<td colspan="2">1.

   A. <...></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Abraham had three friends: Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre. And when the Holy One told him to circumcise himself, he consulted each of them.</td>
<td dir="rtl">שְׁלֹשָׁה אוֹהֲבִים הָיוּ לְאַבְרָהָם: עָנֵר אֶשְׁכּוֹל וּמַמְרֵא. וְכֵיוָן שֶׁאָמַר לוֹ הקב"ה שֶׁיִּמּוֹל, הָלַךְ לָקַחַת מֵהֶם עֵצָה.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. He went to Aner and said: "The Holy One said, 'Do such and such.'" <Aner> responded: "Do you want to cripple yourself so severely that, when the relatives of the kings whom you killed attack you, you will be unable to flee from them?"</td>
<td dir="rtl">הָלַךְ אֵצֶל עָנֵר, אָמַר: כָּךְ וְכָךְ אָמַר לִי הקב"ה. אָמַר לוֹ עָנֵר: בַּעַל מוּם רוֹצֶה אַתָּה לַעֲשׂוֹתְךָ שֶׁיִּהְיוּ קְרוֹבֵיהֶן שֶׁל הַמְּלָכִים שֶׁהָרַגְתָּ בָּאִין וְהוֹרְגִין אוֹתְךָ וְאֵין אַתָּה יָכוֹל לִבְרֹחַ מִפְּנֵיהֶם?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. He left him and went to Eshkol: "The Holy One said, 'Do such and such.'" <Eshkol> responded: "You are old, and if you are circumcised, considerable blood will flow from you, and you will not be able to tolerate [the pain], and you will perish.</td>
<td dir="rtl">הִנִּיחוֹ וְהָלַךְ אֵצֶל אֶשְׁכּל. אָמַר לוֹ: כָּךְ וְכָךְ אָמַר לִי הקב"ה. אָמַר לוֹ אֶשְׁכּוֹל: אַתָּה זָקֵן, אִם אַתָּה תָמוֹל יֵצֵא מִמְּךָ דָּם הַרְבֵּה וְלֹא תוּכַל לִסְבֹּל וְתָמוּת.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. He left him and went to Mamre and said: "The Holy One said, 'Do such and such.' How will you advise me?" Mamre said to him: "Need you seek advice in this matter?</td>
<td dir="rtl">הִנִּיחוֹ וְהָלַךְ אֵצֶל מַמְרֵא, אָמַר לוֹ: כָּךְ וְכָךְ אָמַר לִי הקב"ה. מַה תִּיעֲצֵנִי. אָמַר לוֹ מַמְרֵא: בַּדָּבָר הַזֶּה אַתָּה מְבַקֵּשׁ עֵצָה?</td>
</tr>
</table>

304One objection to this comparison is that drama includes sets, costumes, lighting, and other methods for introducing information to the audience. Compare the costumes in various productions of William Shakespeare's play, *Romeo and Juliet*. Each costume designer must attempt to intuit from the text the appropriate outfits for the cast. For a particular stretch, compare the play versions to the 1996 movie, *Romeo + Juliet* (20th Century Fox). While the sets, costumes, etc. convey information to the audience, they are not necessarily part of the literature. Perhaps this is what the playwright intended by: "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet."

a. "Did He not release you from the fiery furnace, perform miracles in your behalf, and rescue you from the kings? b. "Were it not for His strength and His might, they would have killed you. c. "He saved your 248 body-parts and yet you ask advice concerning only a piece of one of them? d. "Do his commandment."	הֲלֹא הוּא שֶׁהִצִּילְךָ מִכִּבְשַׁן הָאֵשׁ וְעָשָׂה לְךָ כָּל הַנִּסִּים, וְהִצִּילְךָ מִן הַמְּלָכִים? וְאִלּוּלֵי כֹחוֹ וּגְבוּרָתוֹ הָיוּ הוֹרְגִין אוֹתְךָ. וְהִצִּיל רמ"ח אֵבָרִים שֶׁבְּךָ, וּמִקְצָת אֵבָר אֶחָד אַתָּה מְבַקֵּשׁ עֵצָה? עֲשֵׂה כְּמִצְוָתוֹ.
4. The Holy One said: "Blessed shall you be for having advised him to be circumcised; I shall reveal Myself to him only in your territory."	אָמַר הקב"ה, יִתְבָּרֵךְ אַתָּה שֶׁנָּתַתָּ עֵצָה שֶׁיִּמּוֹל. אֵינִי נִגְלֶה אֵלָיו אֶלָּא בִּתְחוּמָךְ.

The middle part of the *midrash* builds a climactic storytelling arc—prologue, acts I – III, and epilogue. The prologue occurs occurs before Part B is subdivided; the characters are introduced. In each of the three acts, Abraham visit one of the three characters. While Aner is concerned that circumcision will leave Abraham defenseless and Eshkol is concerned that circumcision will be the death of Abraham, Mamre offers the answer that seems to resound with the rabbinic author.

Mamre's primary concern is whether Abraham should be taking advice from another person or from God in light of the miracles that Abraham has witnessed and his own salvation by God's hand. Like the three acts of the dramatic event (visiting the three men), Mamre's answer includes three reasons: surviving the fiery furnace, witnessing miracles, and surviving the war with the kings. The observant student might notice that within the *midrash*, only two of Mamre's three reasons relate to biblical narratives.[305] The *midrash* of Abram surviving the fiery furnace is preserved in Genesis Rabbah 38:13.[306] Regarding the three reasons given, this is a good opportunity for the teacher to point out

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305Abram witnessed miracles such as closing and opening the wombs of the Egyptian women (Gen. 12:10ff.) and the covenant ceremony including a mobile smoking oven and flaming torch (Gen. 15). Abraham also succeeded in battle with kings in Genesis 14.

306For an abbreviated version of this *midrash*, see Appendix 4.

how rabbinic writing tends to favor numerical patterns (see, for instance, the way that the *Mishnah* presents ideas in groups of three or five). The epilogue for the dramatic event is God's revelation that God will bless Mamre.

This *midrash* provides an opportunity to teach students the difference between *midrash* as close reading of the Bible and *midrash* as exegesis of the Bible. In contrast with the last lesson, this *midrash* does not demonstrate the Rabbis deconstructing the biblical text. Rather, they focus on three questions: who or what is Mamre, why is Abraham at the Terebinths of Mamre, and why did God appear there? At the end of Genesis 13, Abram moves to this place called "the Terebinths of Mamre." Genesis 14:13 explains that Mamre is an Amorite and that he has two kinsmen, Aner and Eshkol, and that the three of them are Abraham's military allies. For Abraham, Mamre, Aner, and Eshkol are peers, maybe even friends. They are people with whom Abraham strategizes and, perhaps, reflects. Yet the question remains, why did God appear in Mamre's territory? This *midrash* provides an exegetical answer, imagining a conversation that Abraham has with his three allies regarding God's commandment that he circumcise himself.

As the students read the *midrash*, help them identify the aspects that are essential to the drama and those essential to answering the *midrashic* question. Have students identify how each of Abraham's allies are depicted in the *midrash*, and particularly how the Rabbis depict Mamre in contrast to Abraham's other allies. The Rabbis seem to be making a case that an interaction with God is the direct reward of meritorious behavior. That is to say, God appears to Abraham for his obedience and in Mamre's territory for his role in Abraham's circumcision.

D'rash

The Parasha Says

בראשית יח

(1) וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו ה' בְּאֵלֹנֵי מַמְרֵא וְהוּא יֹשֵׁב פֶּתַח־הָאֹהֶל כְּחֹם הַיּוֹם: וַיִּשָּׂא עֵינָיו וַיַּרְא
וְהִנֵּה שְׁלֹשָׁה אֲנָשִׁים נִצָּבִים עָלָיו וַיַּרְא לִקְרָאתָם מִפֶּתַח הָאֹהֶל וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ אָרְצָה:

Genesis 18 (1) Adonai appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre; he was sitting at
the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot. (2) Looking up, he saw three men
standing near him. As soon as he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to
greet them and, bowed to the ground. (NJPS)

The Bible Also Says

בראשית יד

(13) וַיָּבֹא הַפָּלִיט וַיַּגֵּד לְאַבְרָם הָעִבְרִי וְהוּא שֹׁכֵן בְּאֵלֹנֵי מַמְרֵא הָאֱמֹרִי אֲחִי אֶשְׁכֹּל
וַאֲחִי עָנֵר וְהֵם בַּעֲלֵי בְרִית־אַבְרָם:

Genesis 14 (13) A fugitive brought the news [of Lot's capture] to Abram the Hebrew,
who was dwelling at the terebinths of Mamre the Amorite, kinsman of Eshkol and
Aner, these being Abram's allies. (NJPS)

The Midrash Explains

Midrash Tanhuma Vayeira 3	מדרש תנחומא (ורשא) פרשה וירא סימן ג
1. A. By the terebinths of Mamre. Why did the Holy One, appear by the terebinths of Mamre? Because He does not withhold a reward for any of His creations.	בְּאֵלֹנֵי מַמְרֵא. וְלָמָּה בְּאֵלֹנֵי מַמְרֵא יִתְבָּרַךְ שְׁמוֹ שֶׁל הקב"ה? שֶׁאֵינוֹ מְקַפֵּחַ שָׂכָר שֶׁל כָּל בְּרִיָּה.
B. Abraham had three friends: Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre. And when the Holy One told him to circumcise himself, he consulted each of them.	שְׁלֹשָׁה אוֹהֲבִים הָיוּ לְאַבְרָהָם: עָנֵר אֶשְׁכּוֹל וּמַמְרֵא. וְכֵיוָן שֶׁאָמַר לוֹ הקב"ה שֶׁיִּמּוֹל, הָלַךְ לָקַחַת מֵהֶם עֵצָה.

	Hebrew
1. He went to Aner and said: "The Holy One said, 'Do such and such.'" \<Aner\> responded: "Do you want to cripple yourself so severely that, when the relatives of the kings whom you killed attack you, you will be unable to flee from them?"	הָלַךְ אֵצֶל עָנֵר, אָמַר: כָּךְ וְכָךְ אָמַר לִי הקב"ה. אָמַר לוֹ עָנֵר: בַּעַל מוּם רוֹצֶה אַתָּה לַעֲשׂוֹתְךָ שֶׁיִּהְיוּ קְרוֹבֵיהֶן שֶׁל הַמְּלָכִים שֶׁהָרַגְתָּ בָּאִין וְהוֹרְגִין אוֹתְךָ וְאֵין אַתָּה יָכוֹל לִבְרחַ מִפְּנֵיהֶם?
2. He left him and went to Eshkol: "The Holy One said, 'Do such and such.'" \<Eshkol\> responded: "You are old, and if you are circumcised, considerable blood will flow from you, and you will not be able to tolerate [the pain], and you will perish.	הִנִּיחוֹ וְהָלַךְ אֵצֶל אֶשְׁכֹּל. אָמַר לוֹ: כָּךְ וְכָךְ אָמַר לִי הקב"ה. אָמַר לוֹ אֶשְׁכּוֹל: אַתָּה זָקֵן, אִם אַתָּה תָמוֹל יֵצֵא מִמְּךָ דָם הַרְבֵּה וְלֹא תוּכַל לִסְבֹּל וְתָמוּת.
3. He left him and went to Mamre and said: "The Holy One said, 'Do such and such.' How will you advise me?" Mamre said to him: "Need you seek advice in this matter?	הִנִּיחוֹ וְהָלַךְ אֵצֶל מַמְרֵא, אָמַר לוֹ: כָּךְ וְכָךְ אָמַר לִי הקב"ה. מַה תְיַעֲצֵנִי. אָמַר לוֹ מַמְרֵא: בַּדָּבָר הַזֶּה אַתָּה מְבַקֵּשׁ עֵצָה?
a. "Did He not release you from the fiery furnace, perform miracles in your behalf, and rescue you from the kings?	הֲלֹא הוּא שֶׁהִצִּילְךָ מִכִּבְשַׁן הָאֵשׁ וְעָשָׂה לְךָ כָּל הַנִּסִּים, וְהִצִּילְךָ מִן הַמְּלָכִים?
b. "Were it not for His strength and His might, they would have killed you.	וְאִלּוּלֵי כֹחוֹ וּגְבוּרָתוֹ הָיוּ הוֹרְגִין אוֹתְךָ.
c. "He saved your 248 body-parts and yet you ask advice concerning only a piece of one of them?	וְהִצִּיל רמ"ח אֵבָרִים שֶׁבָּךְ, וּמִקְצָת אֵבָר אֶחָד אַתָּה מְבַקֵּשׁ עֵצָה?
d. "Do his commandment."	עֲשֵׂה כְמִצְוָתוֹ.
4. The Holy One said: "Blessed shall you be for having advised him to be circumcised; I shall reveal Myself to him only in your territory."	אָמַר הקב"ה, יִתְבָּרֵךְ אַתָּה שֶׁנָּתַתָּ עֵצָה שֶׁיִּמּוֹל. אֵינִי נִגְלֶה אֵלָיו אֶלָּא בִּתְחוּמָךְ.
C. Hence it is written: Adonai appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre.	הֲדָא הוּא דִכְתִיב: וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו ה' בְּאֵלֹנֵי מַמְרֵא.

Lesson for Parashat Chayei Sarah

Objectives

During the course of this lesson, students will...

* Generate appropriate questions based on the close reading of biblical text,
* Investigate the textual trigger for the questions that the Rabbis asked,
* Consider the motives of the Rabbis, and
* Identify *midrashic* hermeneutics: *gezera shava*, 'repetition is used for interpretation,' and *paronomasia* (i.e. puns).

P'shat

Many of the women of the Hebrew Bible are unnamed, have no independent actions, and do not significantly influence the narrative. In contrast, the first matriarch not only has a name, but God specifically honors her by changing that name from Sarai to Sarah.[307] She is also the namesake of the only *parasha* named after a woman, *Parashat Chayei Sarah*, which begins with her death. The Reform Judaism "Learn Torah" website provides the following summary for Genesis 23:1 – 25:18.

* Abraham purchases the cave of Machpelah in order to bury his wife Sarah. (23:1-20)
* Abraham sends his servant to find a bride for Isaac. (24:1-9)
* Rebekah shows her kindness by offering to draw water for the servant's camels at the well. (24:15-20)
* The servant meets Rebekah's family and then takes Rebekah to Isaac, who marries her. (24:23-67)

307While a modern reader might not see a name change in this way, it is clear that for the biblical author, there is immense honor to having the deity (or leader) grant a new name. See, for instance, Abram -> Abraham (by God), Jacob -> Israel (by God), Ben-Oni -> Benjamin (by Jacob), Joseph -> Zaphenath-paneah (by Pharaoh), and Hosea -> Joshua (by Moses).

> * Abraham takes another wife, named Keturah. At the age of
> one hundred and seventy-five years, Abraham dies, and
> Isaac and Ishmael bury him in the cave of Machpelah.
> (25:1-11)[308]

The *parasha* opens with the death of the first matriarch, and the Bible uses this verse to describe her death: "Sarah lived a hundred years and twenty years and seven years. These were the years of the life of Sarah."[309] Compare this with Abraham's death: "These were the days of the years of the life of Abraham: one hundred years and seventy years and five years. And Abraham breathed his last, dying at a good ripe age, old and contented; and he was gathered to his kin."[310] This method of parsing out the years by hundreds, tens, and single years is consistent with other deaths in the Bible. However, Rashi still finds it important to comment on this turn of phrase, and he cites a *midrash* to answer the question. Before looking to the *midrash*, the class should closely examine the biblical verse and students should be encouraged to ask questions that the Bible leaves unanswered. Most important for the following discussion are two words in the biblical verse: *chayim* and *shanim*.

In Hebrew, the word for life (*chayim*) is usually written as a plural noun. Students who might think that this is odd should consider how certain English nouns are only written in their plural form: scissors, pants, and clothes. In Hebrew, *chayim* can refer to a single life or multiple lives: "breath of life" (Gen 1:30) and "the lives of my father and mother" (Josh 2:13). Often the context of the noun determines the meaning, but the Rabbis often chose to read these differently.

308"Chayei Sarah," last accessed March 10, 2014, http://www.reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-
　　study/chayei-sarah .
309Genesis 23:1.
310Genesis 25:7ff.

The second word is *shana*, 'year.' In modern Hebrew, it is an irregular feminine

noun in that its plural looks like a masculine plural noun: *shanim*. However, like many of

these nouns, its plural construct appears feminine: *sh'not*.[311] Biblical Hebrew sometimes

uses this "feminine-looking" construct form, but all of the examples in Genesis use a

construct form *sh'nei*, which looks like a masculine construct.[312] For a student who has

more familiarity with modern Hebrew, this may seem like a mistake in the biblical text,

and attention should be drawn to this issue because the Rabbis may have also thought that

the word was incorrect (or if not incorrect, that it was chosen for another reason). Genesis

23:1 begins by describing Sarah's lifetime, and then repeats itself in the final words,

"*sh'nei chayei sarah*," or, "These were the years of the life of Sarah." The teacher may

wish to ask students about the possible rationale for this additional clause. Since the

biblical verse repeats the word so frequently, the teacher should ask what other possible

meanings the word could have. For instance, do any of the words for year—*shana*,

shanim, or *sh'nei*—look like other Hebrew words? For example, the masculine number

two in construct form is *sh'nei*, spelled and vocalized the same as "years of" in this verse.

Stepping back from the individual verse, students should talk about the character

of the first matriarch. How does the Bible depict Sarah? It could be important to note that,

although passive through most of the narrative, she offers Hagar to her husband and then

mistreats her (Gen 16); she follows Abraham's command and prepares food for visitors

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311"Construct form" refers to the special declension for a noun when it is the first of two nouns in sequence to denote ownership or expression, often, but not universally correlating to the English word 'of' (*beit avicha* = house of your father / your father's house ; *mishp'chot haadama* = families of the earth ; *elonei mamre* = terebinths of Mamre)

An example of 'years' in construct would be *sh'not hash'monim* = 1980s. An example of another feminine noun that has an irregular plural that appears masculine but appears feminine in construct form is woman: *isha* (*nashim, nashot*) such as *nashot hakotel* = Women of the Wall.

312Examples of *sh'not* include Deuteronomy 32:7, Isaiah 38:10, Psalms 31:11, 77:6, 78:33, 90:15, Proverbs 3:2, 4:10, 10:27, and Job 10:5, 16:22.

(Gen 18); she laughs at the prediction that she will have a child (Gen 18); she becomes a

mother in her nineties (Gen 21); and, she makes Abraham cast out Hagar and Ishmael

(Gen 21). A modern reader might consider some of these traits to be dubious. For

instance, should Sarah have harassed Hagar and expelled her from her home? In the

milieu described in the biblical narrative, Sarah is in the right. She protects the Hebrew

clan by ensuring that the child who was born to two members of the clan remains in the

household as the heir.[313] The Rabbis also consider Sarah a biblical heroine as this *midrash*

makes explicit.

Remez

The first important matter to consider regarding this lesson is that this *midrash*,

and the *midrashim* in the lessons to follow are not selected from *Midrash Tanhuma*. They

are found in *Genesis Rabbah*, another collection of *aggadic midrashim* that interprets the

book of Genesis from the rabbinic perspective. Unlike *Midrash Tanhuma*, *Genesis*

Rabbah uses a numbering system that appears the same as the biblical "chapter:verse"

system, but does not correspond with the biblical chapters in any way. This lesson

presents *Genesis Rabbah* 58:1, which comments on the words of Genesis 23:1. This text

is not a single *midrash*; the lesson below discusses three discrete *midrashim*. However,

they all use a verse from Psalms to expound upon Genesis 23:1.

313The book of Genesis is fixated on intra-clan relationships as evidenced by the patriarchs each marrying
    close relatives: Abraham marries his half-sister per Gen 20:12; Isaac marries his first cousin once
    removed per Gen 24:15; and, Jacob marries his first cousins per 29:13ff).

1.		
A.	Sarah lived one hundred years and twenty years and seven years. These were the years of the life of Sarah.	וַיִּהְיוּ חַיֵּי שָׂרָה מֵאָה שָׁנָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וְשֶׁבַע שָׁנִים שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה:
B.	Adonai is concerned for the needs of the faultless; their portion lasts forever.	יוֹדֵעַ ה' יְמֵי תְמִימִם וְנַחֲלָתָם לְעוֹלָם תִּהְיֶה.
C.	Just as they are faultless, so too their years are faultless.	כְּשֵׁם שֶׁהֵן תְּמִימִם כָּךְ שְׁנוֹתָם תְּמִימִים.
D.	When she was 20 years old, she was like a 7 year old as to beauty; when she was a 100 years old, she was like a 20 year old as to sin.	בַּת כ' כְּבַת ז' לַגּוֹי בַּת ק' כְּבַת כ' שָׁנָה לְחֵטְא.

The first *midrash*, numbered 1A-1D, begins by identifying the biblical verse that is being explained. The second part draws in material from Psalms 37:18. At first the two verses seem unconnected, but the *midrash* says, in 1C, that they are related. The *midrash* is using the rabbinic hermeneutic called *gezera shava* loosely to connect "the years of the life of Sarah" with "the days of the faultless." Now, instead of reading "Just as they are faultless, so too their years are faultless," the verse should be understood as , "Just as [their days] are faultless, so too their years are faultless." The parallel is more clear and the rest of the *midrash* follows: Sarah was faultless when she reached old age in terms of both sin and beauty.

While 1B and 1C might seem ambiguous, 1D explains that the *midrash* is speaking of Sarah because it refers to the 127 years in the parsed out form: 100 + 20 + 7. The *midrashic* author wants to elaborate on the phrase, "one hundred years and twenty years and seven years," and asks why the word years is repeated. In other words, why does the biblical text say: "Sarah lived" one hundred twenty-seven "years. These were the years of the life of Sarah?" In this *midrash*, the author uses a rabbinic hermeneutic tool, which states that repetition in the Bible is a trigger for interpretation. Since rabbinic

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Judaism tends to consider the consonantal text of the Hebrew Bible to be the word of God, there can be no extraneous information. This hermeneutic approach essentially nullifies this argument and instead provides a rationale for extra information that sees the duplicate information as deliberate. This is in contrast to how some modern readers might approach the Bible, in that they might attribute errors to human authorship or human transmission of the text or they might recognize that the Bible sometimes uses expressions in a different way than the contemporary Hebrew language.

2.		
	A. Another *drash*: Adonai is concerned for the needs of the faultless. This refers to Sarah who was faultless in all her actions.	דָּבָר אַחֵר – פֵּירוּשׁ נוֹסָף יוֹדֵעַ ה' יְמֵי תְמִימִים זוֹ שָׂרָה שֶׁהָיְתָה תְּמִימָה בְּמַעֲשֶׂיהָ.
	B. This is like the faultless <ritually pure> calf.	אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן כְּהָדָא עֶגְלָתָא תְּמִימָה.

The second *midrash* also comments on Psalms 37:18 by explicitly connecting this verse to Sarah in 2A. The next part, 2B, seems very disconnected from the rest of the *midrash*. The Soncino translation points out that the Jerusalem Talmud usually omits this section when it uses the *midrash*. The teacher can use this opportunity to remind students that collections of *midrash* are not always without errors due to copying or transmission. In this case, the teacher can cite Soncino's explanation and consider that this might have been an insertion to the *midrash*.

3.		וְנַחֲלָתָם לְעוֹלָם תִּהְיֶה
	A. ...Their portion lasts forever means These were the years of the life of Sarah.	שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר וַיִּהְיוּ חַיֵּי שָׂרָה.

B. Why is it necessary to say: These were the years of the life of Sarah at the end <of the verse>?	מַה צּוֹרֶךְ לוֹמַר שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה בָּאַחֲרוֹנָה.
C. It tells you that for those who are righteous before God, their lives are pleasant in this world and the world to come.	לוֹמַר לְךָ שֶׁחָבִיב חַיֵּיהֶם שֶׁל צַדִּיקִים לִפְנֵי הַמָּקוֹם בָּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה וּלְעוֹלָם הַבָּא.

The third *midrash* might be the hardest to understand without accessing the original text. In English, it begins: "Their portion lasts forever means These were the years of the life of Sarah," and the two verses seem to have nothing in common. In Hebrew, one might consider the parallel use of the verb *lihyot* (to be) as the bridge between the two verses. This would be another example of *gezera shava*. In this case, the two verses can be read together: "The years of the life of Sarah [=] an eternal portion."

The *midrash* also uses an alternate reading of the Psalms verse to make their case. Specifically, the second half of the verse is translated as, "their portion lasts forever." The words, *vnachalatam l'olam tiye*, have that exact meaning. Leaving the first word alone, the latter two words either mean "will be forever" or "the world that will be." While this is not identical to *'olam haba* (the world to come), the meaning is synonymous, and the Rabbis use this alternate definition to explain that "The years of the life of Sarah [really means] the world to come."

The latter two sections, 3B-C, uses the hermeneutic principle of repetition is cause for interpretation. Genesis 23:1 repeats information when it details the years of Sarah's life and ends with, "These were the years of the life of Sarah." In order to interpret this seemingly extra phrase, the *midrash* relies on another rabbinic hermeneutic tool—*paronomasia*—"a play on cognate roots."[314] In this case, the *midrash* imagines that the word *sh'nei*, which we have translated as "years of," might be read as *sh'nei*, which

314Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 29.

means "two (of)."[315] Following from this reason, the *midrash* asserts that Sarah merited

two lives to be lived in the two worlds—*haolam hazeh* and *haolam haba*. The teacher

may ask students to imagine rabbinic motivations for Sarah's depiction in *midrash*.

Students may need to wrestle with the difference between modern attitudes to Sarah

expelling Hagar and the Rabbis' extolling Sarah. Also, the teacher may wish to remind

the students that this collection of *midrash* was written during a time when Christianity

was also in its formative years. The Rabbis, who are competing with Christianity, may

want to have a 'more perfect' mother character than Mary.

D'rash

The Parasha Says

בראשית כג

‎(1) וַיִּהְיוּ חַיֵּי שָׂרָה מֵאָה שָׁנָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וְשֶׁבַע שָׁנִים שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה:

Genesis 23 (1) Sarah lived one hundred years and twenty years and seven years. These were the years of the life of Sarah.

The Bible Also Says

תהלים לז

‎(18) יוֹדֵעַ ה' יְמֵי תְמִימִם וְנַחֲלָתָם לְעוֹלָם תִּהְיֶה:

Psalms 37 (18) Adonai is concerned for the needs of the faultless; their portion lasts forever. (NJPS)

315This is particularly appropriate since the two words not only share the same consonants but also the same vocalization. c.f. Genesis 1:16 (God made the two great lights...).

Midrash Genesis Rabbah 58:1	מדרש בראשית רבה נח א
1.	
A. Sarah lived one hundred years and twenty years and seven years. These were the years of the life of Sarah.	וַיִּהְיוּ חַיֵּי שָׂרָה מֵאָה שָׁנָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וְשֶׁבַע שָׁנִים שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה:
B. Adonai is concerned for the needs of the faultless; their portion lasts forever.	יֹדֵעַ ה' יְמֵי תְמִימִם וְנַחֲלָתָם לְעוֹלָם תִּהְיֶה.
C. Just as they are faultless, so too their years are faultless.	כְּשֵׁם שֶׁהֵן תְּמִימִים כָּךְ שְׁנוֹתַם תְּמִימִים.
D. When she was 20 years old, she was like a 7 year old as to beauty; when she was a 100 years old, she was like a 20 year old as to sin.	בַּת כ' כְּבַת ז' לַנּוֹי בַּת ק' כְּבַת כ' שָׁנָה לַחֵטְא.
2.	
A. Another *drash*: Adonai is concerned for the needs of the faultless. This refers to Sarah who was faultless in all her actions.	דָּבָר אַחֵר – פֵּירוּשׁ נוֹסָף יֹדֵעַ ה' יְמֵי תְמִימִם זוֹ שָׂרָה שֶׁהָיְתָה תְּמִימָה בְּמַעֲשֶׂיהָ.
B. This is like the faultless <ritually pure> calf.	אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן כְּהָדָא עֶגְלָתָא תְּמִימָה.
3.	וְנַחֲלָתָם לְעוֹלָם תִּהְיֶה
A. ...Their portion lasts forever means These were the years of the life of Sarah.	שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר וַיִּהְיוּ חַיֵּי שָׂרָה.
B. Why is it necessary to say: These were the years of the life of Sarah at the end <of the verse>?	מַה צוֹרֶךְ לוֹמַר שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה בָּאַחֲרוֹנָה.
C. It tells you that for those who are righteous before God, their lives are pleasant in this world and the world to come.	לוֹמַר לָךְ שֶׁחָבִיב חַיֵּיהֶם שֶׁל צַדִּיקִים לִפְנֵי הַמָּקוֹם בָּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה וּלְעוֹלָם הַבָּא.

Lesson for Parashat Tol'dot

Objectives

During the course of this lesson, students will...

* Generate appropriate questions based on the close reading of biblical text,
* Investigate the textual reason for the questions that the Rabbis asked,
* Articulate the character of Esau according to the *midrashim*, and
* Identify *midrashic* hermeneutics: *notarikon*, *gezera shava* and *gematria*.

P'shat

Parashat Tol'dot is named for the generations of Isaac that are outlined at the beginning of this *parasha*. The Reform Judaism "Learn Torah" website provides the following summary for Genesis 25:19 – 28:9.

* Rebekah has twins, Esau and Jacob. (25:19-26)
* Esau gives Jacob his birthright in exchange for some stew. (25:27-34)
* King Abimelech is led to think that Rebekah is Isaac's sister and later finds out that she is really his wife. (26:1-16)
* Isaac plans to bless Esau, his firstborn. Rebekah and Jacob deceive Isaac so that Jacob receives the blessing. (27:1-29)
* Esau threatens to kill Jacob, who then flees to Haran. (27:30-45)[316]

Reading the entire *parasha* is important for providing context to the lesson because it illustrates the character of Esau. The Bible paints Esau as unassuming and quick to emotion. In the *midrash*, the Rabbis treat Esau in a less kind manner because the Rabbis think of themselves and the Jewish community as descendants of Jacob and often

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[316] "Tol'dot," last accessed March 10, 2014, http://www.reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/toldot .

try to show his virtue and because the Rabbis use Esau as a stand-in for those who oppressed the Jews (Rome, and later, Christianity). **Secondary source for teacher.** With this context at hand, we move to the specific verses in question.

Three verses from within the first pericope are particularly important to this lesson: "Isaac pleaded with Adonai on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and Adonai responded to his plea, and his wife Rebekah conceived. But the children struggled in her womb, and she said, 'If so, why do I exist?' She went to inquire of Adonai, and Adonai answered her, 'Two nations are in your womb, Two separate peoples shall issue from your body; One people shall be mightier than the other, And the older shall serve the younger.'"[317] Unlike much of the Bible, these verses include a very sympathetic description of a woman's feelings and the woman has an explicit conversation with God.

The first phrase from Genesis 25:22 that needs explanation is, "The children struggled in her womb." Students should read carefully the Hebrew words and translate them: *vayit'rotzatzu habanim b'kirbah.* The most clear word is *habanim*, the sons or the children. In this case, it is clear that the children means the fetuses. The final word in the phrase, means, "in her insides," in this case, meaning womb.[318] The only word that is particularly difficult is the first word of the phrase: *vayit'rotzatazu.*

The teacher has the opportunity, when confronted with this word, to ask students how they might approach translating the word. Modern commentators use the word "struggle," a contextual reading of the word. One of the first comprehensive lexicons of Biblical Hebrew, written by Wilhelm Gesenius and translated by Edward Robinson in the

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317Genesis 25:21ff.
318Sometimes *kerev* means 'midst,' 'bowels,' etc.

nineteenth century, describes this word as, "to dash one another, to struggle."[319] The

twentieth century derivative work, colloquially called Brown-Driver-Briggs for its three

authors, defines the root as "crush" and translates this verse: "the children crushed

(thrust, struck) one another within her."[320] But, for the purposes of this discussion, how

would one translate the word without modern resources. In the whole of the Hebrew

Bible, this word is never repeated, and the root occurs only five additional times, and

each time with the meaning of crush or shatter.[321] In other words, there is no way to

translate this word without either relying on the context of the verse (i.e. The two sons

did X in her womb and she complained) or by relying on extrabiblical sources. The three

extant *targumim* translate this word with the root *dachak* (דחק), which means "press each

other."[322] Since this is a particularly difficult word for to parse, the lack of clear

understanding left an opening for *midrashic* creativity.

The other aspect of the biblical verse that should be pointed out is the last phrase:

"She went to inquire of Adonai." Students should be asked about the contextual meaning

of the verse as well as how the individual word *lid'rosh* might be interpreted by the

Rabbis. This is the same root that is used for *midrash* (the literature) and *beit midrash*

(study house), and this alternate use might factor into the Rabbis' interpretation. Students

might answer about finding God in nature or going to a special place (temple, altar, etc.).

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319 Wilhelm Gesenius, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament: Including the Biblical Chaldee*, trans. Edward Robinson, 20th edition (Crocker and Brewster, 1871).

320 Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic : Coded With the Numbering System from Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, Index edition (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996).

321 The root רצץ also occurs in Deut 28:33, Judg 9:53, Judg 10:8, Eccl 12:6, and 2 Chr 16:10. Unlike our verse, which is in the *hitpaʿel* (T-stem), the other cases include *kal, piel, hifil*, and irregular forms such as *poʿel* and *pual*.

322 Compared to *Targum Onkelos, Targum Neofiti*, and *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*.

Remez

Genesis Rabbah 63:6 is much longer than presented in the selection below.

Between the sections labeled 3 and 4, the original text includes two more *midrashim* that

together are longer than the four sections provided. However, those two expanded

sections connect Rebekah to the twelve tribes of Israel and are unrelated to the the

discussion presented in this lesson. The first three *midrashim* each explain the meaning of

the phrase in Genesis 25:22, "The children struggled in her womb," and the fourth

midrash asks the meaning of the last phrase in the verse. Additionally, the first three

midrashim share a goal of casting Esau as evil from conception, and by contrast, God's

choice of Jacob as the preferred heir of Abraham and Isaac.

1.	
A. But the children struggled in her womb.	וַיִּתְרֹצֲצוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקִרְבָּה.
B. R. Yochanan and Reish Lakish:	רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן וְרִישׁ לָקִישׁ.
1. R. Yochanan said, "This one was running to kill that one and that one was running to kill this one."	רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן אָמַר זֶה רָץ לַהֲרוֹג אֶת זֶה וְזֶה רָץ לַהֲרוֹג אֶת זֶה.
2. Reish Lakish said, "This one releases the laws given by that one and that one releases the laws given by this one."	רִישׁ לָקִישׁ אָמַר זֶה מַתִּיר צִיוּוּיוֹ שֶׁל זֶה וְזֶה מַתִּיר צִיוּוּיוֹ שֶׁל זֶה.

The first *midrash* is concerned with the definition of the biblical verb *l'hit'rotzetz* (

להתרצץ), which is a difficult word because the root is ambiguous. Of the possible roots (

רוצ/ריצ, רצצ, רצי/רצה, ירצ, נרצ), modern philologists relate it to *rotzetz* while Rabbi

Yochanan relates it to *ratz*. This first rabbinic interpretation, reads the word as "run." The

second commentary on this verse uses the rabbinic hermeneutic *notarikon*, which allows

Reish Lakish to split up a word into two or more words, to divide *yit'rotzetzu* into *yatir*

tzav (יתרצצו > יתיר צוו). Looking at the words in print form may make it difficult to see

the connection because the letters do not match exactly, but since *midrash* may have been

an oral literature, the word play would work. The new meaning would be that "he

releases (from obligation) his commandment," explaining Reish Lakish's subsequent

statement.

2.

A. R. Berekhiya in the name of R. Levi:	רַבִּי בְּרֶכְיָה בְּשֵׁם רַבִּי לֵוִי
1. "It is so you should not say that it was only after he left his mother's womb that [Esau] contended against [Jacob].	שֶׁלֹּא תֹאמַר מִשֶּׁיָּצָא מִמְּעֵי אִמּוֹ נִזְדַּוֵּג לוֹ.
2. "But even while he was yet in his mother's womb his finger was stretched forth against him" As it says: The wicked are defiant from the womb.	אֶלָּא עַד שֶׁהוּא בִּמְעֵי אִמּוֹ זִירָתֵיהּ מְתוּחָה לְקַבְּלֵיהּ הה"ד זֹרוּ רְשָׁעִים מֵרָחֶם.

The second *midrash*, taught in the name of Rabbi Berekhiya, cites another biblical

verse. Assuming that *b'kirbah* means in her womb, the author connects this verse to

Psalms 58:4. Berekhiya reads "The wicked are defiant from the womb," as, "The wicked

[push out their] finger from the womb."[323] Both this understanding of the word and R.

Yochanan's "to run" meanings are also used in the third *midrash*. As if the soul of the

fetus can be attracted like a magnet, the third *midrash* has Jacob and Esau, in utero,

running toward institutions of Judaism and locations of idolatry, respectively.

3.

A. But the children struggled in her womb.	וַיִּתְרֹצֲצוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקִרְבָּהּ
B. When she went by synagogues and houses of study, Jacob would twitch trying to get out, as it is written: Before I created you in the womb, I selected you.	בְּשָׁעָה שֶׁהָיְתָה עוֹמֶדֶת עַל בָּתֵּי כְּנֵסִיּוֹת וּבָתֵּי מִדְרָשׁוֹת יַעֲקֹב מְפַרְכֵּס לָצֵאת הה"ד בְּטֶרֶם אֶצָּרְךָ בַבֶּטֶן יְדַעְתִּיךָ.
C. When she went by houses of idolatry, Esau would run and twitch trying to get out, as it is written: The wicked are defiant from the womb.	וּבְשָׁעָה שֶׁהָיְתָה עוֹמֶדֶת עַל בָּתֵּי עֲבוֹדַת כּוֹכָבִים עֵשָׂו רָץ וּמְפַרְכֵּס לָצֵאת הה"ד זֹרוּ רְשָׁעִים מֵרָחֶם.

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323 To do this, he reads the Psalms verse as *zrato rsha`im merechem*. *Zéret* is the little (or pinky) finger.

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4. ...

A. She went to inquire of Adonai.	וַתֵּלֶךְ לִדְרֹשׁ אֶת ה'. וְכִי בָּתֵּי
B. Now were there synagogues and houses of study in those days?	כְּנֵסִיּוֹת וּבָתֵּי מִדְרָשׁוֹת הָיוּ בְּאוֹתָן הַיָּמִים? וַהֲלֹא לֹא
C. But is it not the fact that she went only to the study of Shem and Eber?	הָלְכָה אֶלָּא לַמִּדְרָשׁ שֶׁל שֵׁם וָעֵבֶר. אֶלָּא לְלַמֶּדְךָ שֶׁכָּל מִי
D. This serves to teach you that whoever receives an elder is as if he receives the *Shechinah*.	שֶׁהוּא מְקַבֵּל פְּנֵי זָקֵן כְּמַקְבִּיל פְּנֵי שְׁכִינָה.

The third *midrash* suggests that Rebekah would pass by synagogues and study-houses and the fourth *midrash* asks where Rebekah would "inquire of Adonai." A modern reader might sense the anachronism of synagogues and study-houses during the patriarchal time period, but the Rabbis have a tradition that Noah's son Shem and his great-grandson Eber established a study-house. **Genesis Rabbah 63?.**

It is also important to note that the author uses the word study-house in relation to the Genesis verse because the root of the word "to inquire" is used in the word study-house: *lid'rosh* and *b'tei-midr'shot*, respectively.

Going to a study-house with an elder is equivalent to inquiring of God.

D'rash

The Parasha Says

בראשית כה

(21) וַיֶּעְתַּר יִצְחָק לַה׳ לְנֹכַח אִשְׁתּוֹ כִּי עֲקָרָה הִוא וַיֵּעָתֶר לוֹ ה׳ וַתַּהַר רִבְקָה אִשְׁתּוֹ: (22) וַיִּתְרֹצֲצוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקִרְבָּהּ וַתֹּאמֶר אִם־כֵּן לָמָּה זֶּה אָנֹכִי וַתֵּלֶךְ לִדְרֹשׁ אֶת־ה׳: (23) וַיֹּאמֶר ה׳ לָהּ שְׁנֵי גוֹיִם בְּבִטְנֵךְ וּשְׁנֵי לְאֻמִּים מִמֵּעַיִךְ יִפָּרֵדוּ וּלְאֹם מִלְאֹם יֶאֱמָץ וְרַב יַעֲבֹד צָעִיר:

Genesis 25 (21) Isaac pleaded with Adonai on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and Adonai responded to his plea, and his wife Rebekah conceived. (22) But the children struggled in her womb, and she said, "If so, why do I exist?" She went to inquire of Adonai, (23) and Adonai answered her, "Two nations are in your womb, Two separate peoples shall issue from your body; One people shall be mightier than the other, And the older shall serve the younger."

The Bible Also Says

תהלים נח

(4) זֹרוּ רְשָׁעִים מֵרָחֶם תָּעוּ מִבֶּטֶן דֹּבְרֵי כָזָב:

[Psalms 58] (4) The wicked are defiant from the womb; the liars go astray in utero. (NJPS)

ירמיה א

(5) בְּטֶרֶם אֶצָּרְךָ בַבֶּטֶן יְדַעְתִּיךָ וּבְטֶרֶם תֵּצֵא מֵרֶחֶם הִקְדַּשְׁתִּיךָ נָבִיא לַגּוֹיִם נְתַתִּיךָ:

[Jeremiah 1] (5) Before I created you in the womb, I selected you; Before you were born, I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet concerning the nations. (NJPS)

Midrash Genesis Rabbah 63:6	מדרש בראשית רבה סג ו
1.	
A. But the children struggled in her womb.	וַיִּתְרֹצֲצוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקִרְבָּהּ.
B. R. Yochanan and Reish Lakish:	רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן וְרִישׁ לָקִישׁ.
1. R. Yochanan said, "This one was running to kill that one and that one was running to kill this one."	רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן אָמַר זֶה רָץ לַהֲרוֹג אֶת זֶה וְזֶה רָץ לַהֲרוֹג אֶת זֶה.
2. Reish Lakish said, "This one releases the laws given by that one and that one releases the laws given by this one."	רִישׁ לָקִישׁ אָמַר זֶה מַתִּיר צִיוּוָיו שֶׁל זֶה וְזֶה מַתִּיר צִיוּוָיו שֶׁל זֶה.
2.	
A. R. Berekhiya in the name of R. Levi:	רַבִּי בְּרֶכְיָה בְּשֵׁם רַבִּי לֵוִי
1. "It is so you should not say that it was only after he left his mother's womb that [Esau] contended against [Jacob].	שֶׁלֹּא תֹאמַר מִשֶּׁיָּצָא מִמְּעֵי אִמּוֹ נִזְדַוֵּג לוֹ.
2. "But even while he was yet in his mother's womb his finger was stretched forth against him" As it says: The wicked are defiant from the womb.	אֶלָּא עַד שֶׁהוּא בִּמְעֵי אִמּוֹ זִירָתֵיהּ מָתוּחָה לְקַבְלֵיהּ הה"ד זֹרוּ רְשָׁעִים מֵרָחֶם.
3.	
A. But the children struggled in her womb.	וַיִּתְרֹצֲצוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקִרְבָּהּ
B. When she went by synagogues and houses of study, Jacob would twitch trying to get out, as it is written: Before I created you in the womb, I selected you.	בְּשָׁעָה שֶׁהָיְתָה עוֹמֶדֶת עַל בָּתֵי כְנֵסִיּוֹת וּבָתֵי מִדְרָשׁוֹת יַעֲקֹב מְפַרְכֵּס לָצֵאת הה"ד בְּטֶרֶם אֶצָּרְךָ בַבֶּטֶן יְדַעְתִּיךָ.
C. When she went by houses of idolatry, Esau would run and twitch trying to get out, as it is written: The wicked are defiant from the womb.	וּבְשָׁעָה שֶׁהָיְתָה עוֹמֶדֶת עַל בָּתֵי עֲבוֹדַת כּוֹכָבִים עֵשָׂו רָץ וּמְפַרְכֵּס לָצֵאת הה"ד זֹרוּ רְשָׁעִים מֵרָחֶם.
4. ...	...
A. She went to inquire of Adonai.	וַתֵּלֶךְ לִדְרֹשׁ אֶת ה'. וְכִי בָתֵּי
B. Now were there synagogues and houses of study in those days?	כְנֵסִיּוֹת וּבָתֵּי מִדְרָשׁוֹת הָיוּ בְּאוֹתָן הַיָּמִים? וַהֲלֹא לֹא
C. But is it not the fact that she went only to the study of Shem and Eber?	הָלְכָה אֶלָּא לַמִּדְרָשׁ שֶׁל שֵׁם וָעֵבֶר. אֶלָּא לְלַמֶּדְךָ שֶׁכָּל מִי
D. This serves to teach you that whoever receives an elder is as if he receives the *Shechinah*.	שֶׁהוּא מְקַבֵּיל פְּנֵי זָקֵן כִּמְקַבֵּיל פְּנֵי שְׁכִינָה.

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Lesson for Parashat Vayeitzei

Objectives

During the course of this lesson, students will...

*   Generate appropriate questions based on the close reading of biblical text,
*   Investigate the textual trigger for the questions that the Rabbis asked,
*   Probe into ambiguities in the biblical text that stem from prepositions and pronouns, and
*   Identify *midrashic* hermeneutics: *gezera shava* and *mashal.*

P'shat

This *parasha* continues when Jacob is grown. *Parashat Vayeitzi* is summarized in the Reform Judaism "Learn Torah" website for Genesis 28:19 – 32:3.

*   Jacob dreams of angels going up and down a ladder. God blesses him. Jacob names the place Bethel. (28:10-22)
*   Jacob works seven years in order to marry Rachel, but Laban tricks Jacob into marrying Leah, Rachel's older sister. (29:16-25)
*   Jacob marries Rachel but only after having to commit himself to seven more years of working for Laban. (29:26-30)
*   Leah, Rachel, and their maidservants, Bilhah and Zilpah, give birth to eleven sons and one daughter. (29:31-30:24)
*   Jacob and his family leave Laban's household with great wealth. (31:1-32:3)[324]

The three verses from this *parasha*, Genesis 28:10-12, which are the focus of this lesson, share a certain level of ambiguity. Most of this ambiguity comes from the use of nonspecific prepositions and pronouns. This would be a good opportunity to ask students

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324"Vayeitzei," last accessed March 10, 2014, http://www.reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/vayeitzei .

to identify all of the prepositions and pronouns in the three verses, to write their common

meaning, and to identify the meaning in context.

Prepositional Phrase	Preposition	Usual Meaning	Contextual Meaning
מבאר שבע	*mem* prefix	From	**From** Beer Sheva
חרנה	*hei* directional suffix	To(wards)	**Toward** Haran
במקום	*bet* prefix	In, with, on	[reached] Ø the place. (none)
מאבני המקום	*mem* prefix	From	**From among** the rocks of the place
מראשתיו	*mem* prefix	From	**By** (or) **under** his head
וישכב במקום	*bet* prefix	In, with, on	Laid down **at** that place
ארצה	*hei* directional	To(wards)	**On** the ground
השמימה	*hei* directional	To(wards)	Up **to** the sky
בו	*bet* prefix	In, with, on	[going up and down] **on it**

Figure: Example of chart to help students recognize the prepositions in Gen 28:10-12.

Pronomial Phrase	Pronoun	Usual Meaning	Contextual Meaning
מראשתיו	3m pl object	his / its	by **his** head
במקום ההוא	3m s subject	he, it, that	in that place
וראשו	3m pl object	his / its	and **its** top
בו	3m s object	him / it	**on it**

Figure: Example of chart to help students recognize the pronouns in Gen 28:10-12.

Now that students have an idea of the number of prepositions and pronouns used

in these verses, they should be asked to identify any ambiguity in those words. Some

examples that the teacher could point out, using the figures, include: the 'head' or 'top' of what or whom was in the sky?

The second issue that might be raised as a tangent is the modern use of the words *olim* and *yordim*. Students should discuss the concept of *aliyah* and *y'ridah* (in terms of immigration) and ask how this may factor into the reading of this verse. If the Rabbis meant this, then perhaps Jacob was sleeping at the border of Canaan / Israel. Angels passing him would be *olim* if they entering the Land and *yordim* if they were leaving.

Remez

This lesson focuses on two *midrashim* about angels from *Genesis Rabbah* 68:12. The first *midrash* addresses a potential question that arises from the ambiguous pronoun in the word *bo* ('on him' or 'on it').

1.	
A. R. Hiyya the Elder and R. Yannai:	רַבִּי חִיָּיא רַבָּא וְרַבִּי יַנַּיי.
1. One said, "They were ascending and descending the ladder."	חַד אָמַר עוֹלִים וְיוֹרְדִים בַּסּוּלָם.
2. The other said, "They were ascending and descending Jacob."	וְחַרְנָה אָמַר עוֹלִים וְיוֹרְדִים בְּיַעֲקֹב.
3. The one who says, "They were ascending and descending the ladder," has no problems.	מָאן דְּאָמַר עוֹלִים וְיוֹרְדִים בַּסּוּלָם נִיחָה.
4. The one who says, "They were ascending and descending Jacob," the meaning is that they were raising him up and dragging him down, dancing on him, leaping on him, and annoying him.	מָן דְּאָמַר עוֹלִים וְיוֹרְדִים בַּסּוּלָם מַעֲלִים בּוֹ מוֹרִידִים בּוֹ אוֹפְזִים בּוֹ קוֹפְזִים בּוֹ סוֹנְטִים בּוֹ.
a. For it says, Israel in whom I glory.	שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר־בְּךָ אֶתְפָּאָר.
b. [So said the angels] "Are you the one whose visage is incised above?" They would then go up and look at his features and go down and examine him sleeping.	אַתְּ הוּא שֶׁאִיקוֹנִין שֶׁלָּךְ חֲקוּקָה לְמַעֲלָן עוֹלִים וְרוֹאִין אִיקוֹנִין שֶׁלּוֹ יוֹרְדִין וְרוֹאִים אֹתוֹ יָשֵׁן.

The first section of the *midrash*, 1A, essentially says that the meaning, "on the ladder," is a safe definition, but that it could also mean "on Jacob." For this second definition, the *midrash* relies on another biblical verse that also refers to Jacob (really Israel) and contains the same preposition with a less ambiguous pronoun: "Israel in whom I glory." This can be related to the rabbinic hermeneutic tool of *gezera shava* because the *midrash* finds in two sources a similar word or phrase and uses one to explain the other. **Check with RS**. In the last phrase of 1A, the author gives the angels a voice to demonstrate that they have a reason to ascend and descend onto Jacob. Apparently, God keeps an image of Jacob in the heavens, and the angels need to check that this person below is the same as the one in the picture above. **Theological implications?**

1.
   A. ...
   B. Parable of a king who sits and judges in the court. לְמֶלֶךְ שֶׁהָיָה יוֹשֵׁב וְדָן בַּפְּרֶוֶר.
      1. People would go up to the basilica and find עוֹלִים לַבָּסִילְקִי וּמוֹצְאִין
         him asleep. אוֹתוֹ יָשֵׁן.
      2. They would go down to the court and find יוֹרְדִים בַּפְּרֶוֶר וּמוֹצְאִים אוֹתוֹ
         him sitting and judging. יוֹשֵׁב וְדָן.

The next part of the first *midrash*, 1B, uses the rabbinic hermeneutic principle called *mashal*, which indicates that the *midrash* will use a parable to (potentially) explain the biblical material. With any *mashal*, it is important to help students understand the parable by tracking the analogous information.

What does the *mashal* say?	What should it relate to?	What is broken?
King	Jacob	Jacob
Sits and judges	* Jacob doing some action *	Asleep
Court	Earth	Heaven
People	Angels	Angels
Go up	Going up on the ladder	Going down on the ladder
Basilica	Heaven	Earth
Asleep	* Jacob asleep *	Visage is incised
Go down	Going down on the ladder	Going up on the ladder
Sitting and judging	* Jacob doing some action *	Asleep

Figure: Example of chart to help students resolve a *mashal*

The *mashal* has certain parallels that seem swapped with the end of 1A. It is important to point out, for students, that usually, the earthly king represents the divine King. The people who ascend and descend in the courthouse mirror the angels who ascend and descend the staircase in Jacob's dream. And, the actions by the king are opposite those in the *midrash*. That is to say, in the *midrash*, the angels descend to see Jacob asleep; in the parable, the people ascend to see the king asleep; in the *midrash*, the angels ascend to (presumably) see Jacob sitting in judgement; in the parable, the people descend to see the king sitting in judgement. **To check with RS.**

1.
A. ...
B. ...
C. Above, whoever speaks in favor of Israel rises up, and whoever condemns Israel goes down. Below, whoever speaks in his favor goes down, and whoever condemns him goes up.

לְמַעְלָן כָּל מִי שֶׁהוּא אוֹמֵר זְכוּתוֹ עוֹלָה חוֹבָתוֹ יוֹרֵד. לְמָטָה כָּל מִי שֶׁאוֹמֵר זְכוּתוֹ יוֹרֵד חוֹבָתוֹ עוֹלָה.

The *midrash* resolves this inconsistency in the next part, 1C, by relating to Israel's experience as a people in the author's time. The *midrash* says that the heavens are raised up with Israel when they exalt Israel while nations of the earth seem to grow more powerful when they disparage Israel. This seems like an air of hopelessness in a literature that tends to promise future reward. It could be a great conversation topic in the classroom, although the plan is to cover both *midrashim*.

2.
A. The angels who escort a person in the Land do not escort him outside of the Land.
B. "Ascending" are the ones who escorted him in the Land, and "descending" are the ones who will escort him outside of the Land.

מַלְאָכִים הַמְלַוִּין אֶת הָאָדָם בָּאָרֶץ אֵין מְלַוִּין אוֹתוֹ בְּחוּצָה לָאָרֶץ. עוֹלִים אֵילוּ שֶׁלִּיווּהוּ בָּאָרֶץ וְיוֹרְדִים אֵילוּ שֶׁלִּיווּהוּ חוּץ לָאָרֶץ.

The second *midrash* is much shorter than the first and expounds on which angels are accompanying Jacob on his journey. It states that different angels are assigned within "the Land" and outside of "the Land." This correlates with modern usage of *aliyah* and *y'ridah* as immigrate to and emigrate from Israel, respectively. The second *midrash* is the one that Rashi cites in his commentary on Genesis 28:12. The idea of different celestial beings in different locations seems to fit with the Ancient Near East idea of local deities; however, it begs the question as to God escorting Israel to Egypt.

D'rash

The Parasha Says

בראשית כח

(10) וַיֵּצֵא יַעֲקֹב, מִבְּאֵר שָׁבַע; וַיֵּלֶךְ, חָרָנָה: (11) וַיִּפְגַּע בַּמָּקוֹם וַיָּלֶן שָׁם, כִּי-בָא הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ, וַיִּקַּח מֵאַבְנֵי הַמָּקוֹם, וַיָּשֶׂם מְרַאֲשֹׁתָיו; וַיִּשְׁכַּב, בַּמָּקוֹם הַהוּא: (12) וַיַּחֲלֹם, וְהִנֵּה סֻלָּם מֻצָּב אַרְצָה, וְרֹאשׁוֹ, מַגִּיעַ הַשָּׁמָיְמָה; וְהִנֵּה מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים, עֹלִים וְיֹרְדִים בּוֹ.

Genesis 28 (10) Jacob left Beer-sheba, and set out for Haran. (11) He came upon a certain place and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of that place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. (12) He had a dream; a stairway was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky, and angels of God were going up and down on it.

The Bible Also Says

ישעיה מט

(3) וַיֹּאמֶר לִי עַבְדִּי-אָתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר-בְּךָ אֶתְפָּאָר:

Isaiah 49 (3) And He said to me, "You are My servant, Israel in whom I glory." (NJPS)

Midrash Genesis Rabbah 68:12	מדרש בראשית רבה סח יב
1.	
A. R. Hiyya the Elder and R. Yannai: 1. One said, "They were ascending and descending the ladder." 2. The other said, "They were ascending and descending Jacob."	רַבִּי חִיָּיא רַבָּא וְרַבִּי יַנָּיי. חַד אָמַר עוֹלִים וְיוֹרְדִים בַּסּוּלָם. וְחָרָנָה אָמַר עוֹלִים וְיוֹרְדִים בְּיַעֲקֹב.

3. The one who says, "They were ascending and descending the ladder," has no problems.
4. The one who says, "They were ascending and descending Jacob," the meaning is that they were raising him up and dragging him down, dancing on him, leaping on him, and annoying him.
  a. For it says, Israel in whom I glory.
  b. [So said the angels] "Are you the one whose visage is incised above?" They would then go up and look at his features and go down and examine him sleeping.
	מָאן דְּאָמַר עוֹלִים וְיוֹרְדִים בַּסּוּלָם נִיחָה.
	מָן דְּאָמַר עוֹלִים וְיוֹרְדִים בַּסּוּלָם מַעֲלִים בּוֹ מוֹרִידִים בּוֹ אוֹפְזִים בּוֹ קוֹפְזִים בּוֹ סוֹנְטִים בּוֹ.
	שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר־בְּךָ אֶתְפָּאָר.
	אַתְּ הוּא שֶׁאִיקוֹנִין שֶׁלְּךָ חֲקוּקָה לְמַעֲלָן עוֹלִים וְרוֹאִין אִיקוֹנִין שֶׁלּוֹ יוֹרְדִין וְרוֹאִים אַתוֹ יָשֵׁן.

B. Parable of a king who sits and judges in the court. 1. People would go up to the basilica and find him asleep. 2. They would go down to the court and find him sitting and judging.	לְמֶלֶךְ שֶׁהָיָה יוֹשֵׁב וְדָן בַּפְּרְוָר. עוֹלִים לְבָסִילְקִי וּמוֹצְאָין אוֹתוֹ יָשֵׁן. יוֹרְדִים בַּפְּרְוָר וּמוֹצְאִים אוֹתוֹ יוֹשֵׁב וְדָן.
C. Above, whoever speaks in favor of Israel rises up, and whoever condemns Israel goes down. Below, whoever speaks in his favor goes down, and whoever condemns him goes up.	לְמַעֲלָן כָּל מִי שֶׁהוּא אוֹמֵר זְכוּתוֹ עוֹלֶה חוֹבָתוֹ יוֹרֵד. לְמַטָּה כָּל מִי שֶׁאוֹמֵר זְכוּתוֹ יוֹרֵד חוֹבָתוֹ עוֹלֶה.
2.	
A. The angels who escort a person in the Land do not escort him outside of the Land. B. "Ascending" are the ones who escorted him in the Land, and "descending" are the ones who will escort him outside of the Land.	מַלְאָכִים הַמְלַוִּין אֶת הָאָדָם בָּאָרֶץ אֵין מְלַוִּין אוֹתוֹ בְּחוּצָה לָאָרֶץ. עוֹלִים אֵילוּ שֶׁלִּיוּוּהוּ בָּאָרֶץ וְיוֹרְדִים אֵילוּ שֶׁלִּיוּוּהוּ חוּץ לָאָרֶץ.

Lesson for Parashat Vayishlach

Objectives

During the course of this lesson, students will...

* Generate appropriate questions based on the close reading of biblical text,
* Investigate the textual reason for the questions that the Rabbis asked, and
* Articulate that this *midrash* does not use the rabbinic hermeneutics and how it still functions as *midrash*.
* (Maybe) discuss difficult perspectives on Jewish texts.

P'shat

Change to a different *midrash*.

~~*Parashat Vayishlach* finds our patriarch, Jacob, returning home with his two wives and two concubines. Perhaps the most famous account from this *parasha* involves Jacob wrestling a figure in the dark, winning, and receiving the name Israel. The Reform Judaism "Learn Torah" website summarizes Genesis 32:4 – 36:43, thusly:~~

> ~~* Jacob prepares to meet Esau. He wrestles with a "man," who changes Jacob's name to Israel. (32:4-33)~~
> ~~* Jacob and Esau meet and part peacefully, each going his separate way. (33:1-17)~~
> ~~* Dinah is raped by Shechem, the son of Hamor the Hivite, who was chief of the country. Jacob's sons Simeon and Levi take revenge by murdering all the males of Shechem, and Jacob's other sons join them in plundering the city. (34:1-31)~~
> ~~* Rachel dies giving birth to Benjamin and is buried in Ephrah, which is present-day Bethlehem. (35:16-21)~~

*   Isaac dies and is buried in Hebron. Jacob's and Esau's
———   progeny are listed. (35:22-36:43)[325]

———   In preparation for this *midrash*, we read several verses of the biblical text for content and context. Clearly, Jacob is concerned about meeting with his brother. This is a good opportunity for students to remind one another of the reason that Jacob might be worried. They should be able to find Esau's vow in Genesis 27. Students might ask about whether they think that a grudge would last the intervening years (at least 14), but this would be off topic from considering the actual text of the Bible and *midrash*. Instead, consider Jacob's motives in dividing his camp and separating his family from the rest of the camp. See Genesis 32:9 for the Bible's stated rationale. Finally, we come to the verse that is the most pertinent to our study: "That same night he arose, and taking his two wives, his two maidservants, and his eleven children, he crossed the ford of the Jabbok."[326]

———   Students might wonder about the special treatment of the maidservants compared to his family and they might ask about the river (wadi) Jabbok. Both of these questions are also outside of the scope of the biblical narrative. Instead, focus the students on the numbers of people. How many wives does Jacob have; who are they? How many maidservants does Jacob have; who are they? How many children does Jacob have; who are they? Students should be able to identify the missing child, and in the case of this narrative, the most minor characters must be accounted for. Remind students that Benjamin has yet to be born, but that Jacob has eleven sons and one daughter.

325"Vayishlach," last accessed March 10, 2014, http://www.reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/vayishlach .
326Genesis 32:23.

Remez

~~I included a *midrash* from *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* and abbreviated it due to content. The *midrash* begins by expounding on the number of children according to Genesis 32:23 and ends by attributing Dinah's rape to Jacob's actions in this scene. I believe that this *midrash* can be taught, in whole, to certain audiences. However, in most Reform Jewish day schools (where the eldest students are 10 or 14), it might not have a place.~~

~~The *midrash* begins, as indicated below, with a question that comes from the use of a certain number in the biblical text and a confusion as to whether the masculine plural noun includes feminine objects. That is to say, the verse indicates Jacob, his two wives, his two maidservants, and eleven *banim* (sons or children). Either way, a child is ignored in the biblical narrative—if it is Dinah, this is not uncommon for female characters.~~

~~After pointing out the omission, the *midrash* explains that Jacob had stowed her away in order that his brother would not desire to marry her. Students should be asked about the rabbinic hermeneutics that are used in this *midrash*. Through I abbreviated the *midrash*, I included the rest of the translation, below. Neither the abbreviated *midrash* nor its continuation use any of the hermeneutics of which we have spoken discussed. To this end, I would ask the students whether they consider this "story" to be a *midrash*. It fits most of the criteria: date, location, genre, and methodology.[327] Because the text was compiled in *Midrash Genesis Rabbah*, date, location, and genre can be assured, but without the rabbinic hermeneutics, we have to check if this "story" addresses exegetical and theological issues and responds to the world of its composers. The "story" does respond to an exegetical issue in the biblical text, and as the last *midrash* of *Midrash*~~

327See above, 1:The Project.

~~Genesis Rabbah 76, it also bridges this chapter to the next chapter (which begins with the rape of Dinah).~~

~~Now that students have had the opportunity to wrestle with the character of midrash, this shorter text might afford additional class time to recap the learning over the past six weeks. The teacher can use questions to determine if students understand the defining characteristics of midrash, if the recognize the various rabbinic hermeneutics, and how they might approach biblical texts by looking for textual issues.~~

~~A note on the abridgment of this midrash. I was very troubled by whether to abbreviate the midrash at this point, and ultimately chose to do so. The midrash continues—beyond the lesson—by attributing Dinah's rape as Jacob's punishment for not offering her as Esau's bride. That is to say, the moral lesson seems to be: if you punish your neighbor, God will punish you by having somebody rape your daughter. Discussing this theology would be, at best, a touchy topic among an older audience. Since this curriculum is targeted to Reform Jewish day school students—most of whom are elementary students—I have chosen not to include this material. It also brings up the major question of what we should do with difficult texts in the Reform Movement, an important topic outside the scope of this project.~~

D'rash

The Parasha Says

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בראשית לב

(4) וַיִּשְׁלַח יַעֲקֹב מַלְאָכִים לְפָנָיו אֶל־עֵשָׂו אָחִיו אַרְצָה שֵׂעִיר שְׂדֵה אֱדוֹם: (7) וַיָּשֻׁבוּ הַמַּלְאָכִים אֶל־יַעֲקֹב לֵאמֹר בָּאנוּ אֶל־אָחִיךָ אֶל־עֵשָׂו וְגַם הֹלֵךְ לִקְרָאתְךָ וְאַרְבַּע־מֵאוֹת אִישׁ עִמּוֹ: (8) וַיִּירָא יַעֲקֹב מְאֹד וַיֵּצֶר לוֹ וַיַּחַץ אֶת־הָעָם אֲשֶׁר־אִתּוֹ וְאֶת־הַצֹּאן וְאֶת־הַבָּקָר וְהַגְּמַלִּים לִשְׁנֵי מַחֲנוֹת: (23) וַיָּקָם ׀ בַּלַּיְלָה הוּא וַיִּקַּח אֶת־שְׁתֵּי נָשָׁיו וְאֶת־שְׁתֵּי שִׁפְחֹתָיו וְאֶת־אַחַד עָשָׂר יְלָדָיו וַיַּעֲבֹר אֵת מַעֲבַר יַבֹּק:

Genesis 32 (4) Jacob sent messengers ahead to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. (7) The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau; he himself is coming to meet you, and there are four hundred men with him." (8) Jacob was greatly frightened; in his anxiety, he divided the people with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two camps. (23) That same night he arose, and taking his two wives, his two maidservants, and his eleven children, he crossed the ford of the Jabbok.

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The Midrash Explains

Midrash Genesis Rabbah 76:9	מדרש בראשית רבה עו ט
1.	
A. That same night he arose, and taking his two wives, his two maidservants....	וַיָּקָם ׀ בַּלַּיְלָה הוּא וַיִּקַּח אֶת־שְׁתֵּי נָשָׁיו וְאֶת־שְׁתֵּי שִׁפְחֹתָיו וְגוֹמֵר.
B. Where was Dinah?	וְדִינָה הֵיכָן הִיא.
1. He put her in a chest and locked the cover.	נְתָנָהּ בְּתֵיבָה וְנָעַל בְּפָנֶיהָ.
2. He thought, "That wicked man has wandering eyes. This is so that he will not try to take her from me."	אָמַר הָרָשָׁע הַזֶּה עֵינוֹ רָמָה. הִיא שֶׁלֹּא יִתְלֶה עֵינָיו וְיִרְאֶה אוֹתָהּ וְיִקַּח אוֹתָהּ מִמֶּנִּי.

Midrash Genesis Rabbah 76:9

C. R. Huna said in the name of R. Abba the Kohen of Bardelayya:

1. The Holy One said to him: "A friend owes loyalty to his brethren, though he forsakes the fear of the Almighty (Job 6:14)."

2. You have withheld loyalty from your brethren. When you gave her to Job in marriage, you did not convert him.

3. And you did not seek to have her married off in the acceptable way, so she will be taken in marriage in a forbidden way.

4. That is in line with this verse: And Dinah ... went out to visit the daughters of the land (Gen 34:1).

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Appendix 1 – Survey

I used SurveyMonkey (www.surveymonkey.com) to create and distribute this survey.

Page 1

Background Information

These first three questions help me understand the context of instruction. I am particularly interested in your upper elementary (and middle schools for those schools with middle schools).

1) In a typical week, how much time is allotted for studying Judaics? (*Select one answer*)

- < 60 minutes (< 1 hour)

- 60 - 119 minutes (< 2 hours)

- 120 - 179 minutes (< 3 hours)

- 180 - 239 minutes (< 4 hours)

- 240 - 299 minutes (< 5 hours)

- 300 - 359 minutes (< 6 hours)

- > 360 minutes (6 hours or more)

Midrash is a single topic area in the larger curricular area of Judaics. The amount of time available for teaching Judaics is a limiting factor for the amount of time available for teaching *midrash*.

2) How do students in grades 5 - 8 access Jewish texts? (*Select one answer*)

- Most students do not read Jewish texts

- Most students can only access texts in translation

- Most students can access texts in Hebrew

- Most students can access texts in Hebrew and Aramaic

The level of language skills would help me understand how much access students would have to a newly designed curriculum.

3) What curriculum or curricula do you use to teach Judaics in grades 5 – 8? (*Select one or more answers*)

- We have created our own curriculum

- Tal Am

- NETA

- Other (please specify)

I had hoped that the answer to this question would inform areas of research. For "Other," I could expand my research. For school-created curriculum, I could request access to the material.

Page 2

<u>Content Area</u>

These three questions help me understand how you teach Midrash.

4) Does your school teach Midrash? (*Select one answer*)

- No

- Sometimes: i.e. "a good story"

- Yes, in conjunction with Bible

- Yes, as a separate subject area

- Yes, in conjunction with History

- Yes in another way (please specify)

I wanted to address the anecdotal evidence that Reform Jewish day schools do not teach *midrash* by asking the question directly.

5) In what language do you read and teach Midrash? (*Select one or more answers*)

- We do not learn Midrash

- Teacher reads / tells in English

- Teacher reads / tells in Hebrew

- Students read in English, discuss in English

- Students read in Hebrew, discuss in English

- Students read in Hebrew, discuss in Hebrew

- Other (please specify)

Some hermeneutics are easier to understand in the original language (i.e. changing vowels of a word to change the meaning of a biblical verse).

6) How do students approach Midrash? (*Select one or more answers*)

- Bible story

- Literature

- Pious exegesis

- Other (please specify)

Since *midrash* can be approached from a number of angles, I wanted to know how teachers currently teach this material. This would also inform how much teacher training would be necessary.

Page 3

Final Page

Thank you very much for contributing to this research. Your survey responses will be kept confidential and results will be analyzed and used in the aggregate.

7) Are you happy with the way that Midrash is taught at your school? (*text input*)

Sometimes, a school's Jewish religious perspective, inherited curricula, or teacher capability limit the current curriculum. I wanted to know if the Judaics heads surveyed had positive feelings about their curricula.

8) Your Name and School (optional)

9) May I contact you with further questions?

- No

- Yes (please specify email address or phone number)

Appendix 2 – Tal Am Books

The Tal Am Hebrew and Judaic Studies curriculum is designed to be taught in Hebrew using Hebrew language books. This project, however, is targeted for English readers who may or may not have strong Hebrew reading skills. In Chapter 2, I present modules from the Tal Am 2, Tal Am 3, and Tal Am 4 curricula using translations of the titles. The following table is provided to facilitate accurate source citation.

English Title	Module	Hebrew Title
Why does the Torah begin with a B?[328]	2T	למה מתחילה התורה באות ב?
Why is the moon smaller than the sun?[329]	2T	למה הירח קטן והשמש גדולה?
The wise man[330]	2T	האדם החכם
What did Cain say to Abel?	2T	מה אמר קין להבל?
Why did God command Noah to build an ark?	2T	למה ציוה ה [sic] את נח לעשות תיבה?
Noah in the ark	2T	נח בתיבה
A rainbow in the sky[331]	2T	קשת בענן
Where did they go in *parashat lech l'cha*?	2T	לאן הלכו ב-לך לך?
Why did Abram and Lot part ways?	2T	למה מפרדו אברם ולוט?
Do not fear, Abram	2T	אל תירא אברם
Why do we sing to angels?[332]	2Y (Sh)	למה שרים למלאכים?
What happened when God gave the Torah?	2H (Sv)	מה קרה כשה' נתן את התורה?
Lighting the Shabbat candles at home	3Y(Sh)	הדלקת מרות שבת בבית שלי
Homework on Shabbat?!	3Y(Sh)	שיעורי בית בשבת!?
War on the day of rest?!	3Y(Sh)	מלחמה ביום המנוחה!?
Lighting a fire on Shabbat?!	3Y(Sh)	להדליק אש בשבת!?
When was the tree of life planted?	3Y(Sh)	מתי נוטעים את עץ החיים?

328The Torah begins with the Hebrew letter *bet* which, like "B" is the second letter of the alphabet.

329Literally: "Why is the moon small and the sun large?"

330NB "Man," in this title is also the name, "Adam."

331Literally, "A rainbow in the clouds," which mirrors the biblical text: "I have set My bow in the clouds." NJPS Gen 9:13.

332To avoid the clunkiness that surrounds the third person plural, I chose to insert "we" into the title because it better fits English sentence syntax.

English Title	Module	Hebrew Title
What did Mordecai learn from the verses of Torah?[333]	3Y(Sh)	מת למד מרדכי מהסמנים שבפסוקים?
When do slaves rest?	3Y(Sh)	מתי נחים העבדים?
What did David ben Gurion learn from the Bible?	3Y(Sh)	מה למד דוד בן גוריון מהתנ"ך?
What did the Israelites learn about Shabbat at Mt. Sinai?	3Y(Sh)	מה למדו בני ישראל על התורה בהר סיני?
The tale of the ladybug	4Y (Pe)	האגדה של פרת משה רבנו
Through which gate would the soldiers enter Jerusalem?[334]	4Y (Il)	דרך איזה שער יכנסו החילים?
Do you choose Torah or waste?[335]	4T	כתר תורה או מדבר נורא

Key:

Module	Definition
Tal Am 2	Second Grade
Tal Am 3	Third Grade
Tal Am 4	Fourth Grade
2T	These are modules for learning Torah portions during Tal Am 2
2Y(Sh)	This is a module for the Jewish year, specifically focused on Shabbat during Tal Am 2
2H(Sv)	This is a module for holidays, specifically for Shavuot during Tal Am 2
3Y(Sh)	These are modules for learning about the Jewish year, specifically Shabbat in Tal Am 3
4Y (Pe)	This is a module for the Jewish year, specifically focused on Passover in Tal Am 4
4Y (Il)	This is a module for the Jewish year, specifically focused on Israel in Tal Am 4
4T	This is a module for learning Torah portions during Tal Am 4

333Literally: "What did Mordecai learn from the signs in the verses?"

334The title does not indicate the word: "Jerusalem," but the front cover illustration and story do.

335Literally, "The crown of Torah or an awful desert?," indicating the choice that the Israelites had between accepting Torah or being stranded in the desert.

Appendix 3 – Email to Rabbi Isaacs

Email for Rabbi Isaacs
Marc Kasten <XXXX>   Thu, Apr 3, 2014 at 11:24 AM
To: XXXX@temple-sholom.net

Dear Rabbi Isaacs,

I am finishing my rabbinical thesis on teaching *midrash* in the context of day schools, and I found your book, *Teaching Text*, as a helpful resource. I have two quick questions that I hope you might be able to answer:

1. As a JTS ordained rabbi serving a Conservative synagogue: What motivating factors contributed to publishing the book through UAHC / URJ Press?

2. You mentioned in the book an attempt to find vocalized sources whenever possible: What guided your decision to not add your own vowels to the sources?

My best,
[contact information]

==

Temple Sholom admin asst <XXXX>   Thu, Apr 3, 2014 at 11:47 AM
To: Marc Kasten <XXXX>

Hi Marc. The URJ materials were always published with good taste and aesthetics, so it was URJ that I first approached with the idea for the book. Since I never was an expert in vocalizing texts, I felt it best not to vocalize.

Hope this helps and good luck with your thesis!

Ron

Appendix 4 - Abraham Survives the Fiery Furnace

Now the king was exceedingly wroth at Abraham [for destroying the idols in his father's shop and] ... was not to be turned aside from his purpose, to make Abraham suffer death by fire. One of the princes was dispatched to fetch him forth. But scarcely did the messenger set about the task of throwing him into the fire, when the flame leapt forth from the furnace and consumed him. Many more attempts were made to cast Abraham into the furnace, but always with the same [results]....

Abraham was finally placed in [a] catapult, and he raised his eyes heavenward, and spoke, "O Lord my God, Thou seest what this sinner purposes to do unto me!" His confidence in God was unshakable. When the angels received the Divine permission to save him, and Gabriel approached him, and asked, "Abraham, shall I save thee from the fire?" he replied, "God in whom I trust, the God of heaven and earth, will rescue me," and God, seeing the submissive spirit of Abraham, commanded the fire, "Cool off and bring tranquillity to my servant Abraham...."

The king, the princes, and all the people, who had been witnesses of the wonders done for Abraham, came to him, and prostrated themselves before him. But Abraham said: "Do not bow down before me, but before God, the Master of the universe, who hath created you. Serve Him and walk in His ways, for He it was who delivered me from the flames, and He it is who hath created the soul and the spirit of every human being, who formeth man in the womb of his mother, and bringeth him into the world. He saveth from all sickness those who put their trust in Him."

The king then dismissed Abraham, after loading him down with an abundance of precious gifts, among them two slaves who had been raised in the royal palace. 'Ogi was the name of the one, Eliezer the name of the other. The princes followed the example of the king, and they gave him silver, and gold, and gems. But all these gifts did not rejoice the heart of Abraham so much as the three hundred followers that joined him and became adherents of his religion.[336]

336Louis Ginzberg and Boaz Cohen, *The Legends of the Jews: From the Creation to Jacob* (Jewish publication society of America, 1912), 198–203.