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I, Kate Speizer, hereby submit two (2) copies of my completed
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The Project of Midrash
The Creation Story as Told in
Genesis Rabbah

Kate Speizer 2/26/08
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"The author has my permission to submit this text immersion in partial fulfillment for requirement for ordination."

Name of Advisor: Joel Gereboff

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TEXT IMMERSION

Essay One: The Project of Midrash

Essay Two: The Creation Story as Told in Genesis Rabbah

Kate Speizer

February, 2008

Advisor: Joel Gereboff

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Ordination Requirements

Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion, Los Angeles

Essay One

THE PROJECT OF MIDRASH

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WHAT IS MIDRASH?

Defining midrash is not a simple task. In fact Daniel Boyarin begins his book, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, with the claim that "defining midrash is an impossible task" (viii). Scholars agree with his statement and say that "midrash cannot be precisely defined, only described (Strack 256)." Such a description might be that "the Midrash, with its cornucopia of parable and proverb, simile and saw, analogy and anecdote, [represents] a vast playground of rabbinic fancy" (Lehrman II).

Despite the difficulty in defining the term, there are a number of attempts made to do just that. Dating back to the 12th century, Maimonides comments that [midrash] is poetry" (Boyarin 2). Jacob Neusner says that midrash is "biblical exegesis, [an attempt to draw meaning from a given text - usually scripture,] by ancient Judaic authorities" (Neusner, *What is Midrash* xi). During the rabbinic period, midrash was broadly understood as any activity, field of study, book, or collection that expounds, elaborates, and/or interprets the Biblical text (Wright 45). Midrash fills in gaps or holes the Bible seems to leave unexplained. Today's Biblical scholars consider midrash to be a type of literary genre. The Encyclopaedia Judaica definition makes a combination of these two understandings and says that midrash is "a particular genre of rabbinic literature constituting an anthology and compilation of homilies...and sermons delivered in public... [that form] a running...commentary on specific books of the Bible" (Herr). The aspect of public recitation no longer applies, but the rest of the definition can serve us well today.

To better understand what midrash is, let us look at a specific case. There are fifteen midrashim that open Genesis Rabbah which address the first three words that

begin the Torah,בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים, "in the beginning God created". The midrashim about these three words are poetic. They are a running commentary on the opening of Genesis, sharing various interpretations of the meaning they wish to convey. The Rabbis' analysis begins with the first word of the Torah and systematically progresses through the entirety of the first book of the Torah.

These midrashim involve word play, expanding how one understands what the Biblical verse might mean. Sometimes offering an alternate meaning for a word is a necessary part of this technique. We see an example of this in midrash four:

> Genesis Rabbah - Parsha 1: Midrash 4
> This midrash is concerned with the opening word of the Torah, בְּרֵאשִׁית. It does not translate it as "in the beginning" as is commonly accepted. Rather, it separates the word into two, שִׁית and ברא, giving it the meaning of "created six." It claims that there were six things that preceded the creation of the world; the Torah, the Throne of Glory, the Patriarchs, Israel, the Temple, and the name of the Messiah. The first two existed fully before creation while the last four were only considerations.

Midrashim interweave further Biblical content into our understanding of the base verse. We can see this in midrash six:

> Genesis Rabbah - Parsha 1: Midrash 6
> R. Judah bar Simon begins this midrash with Daniel 2:22 which says that God revealed both deep and hidden things. Different interpretations describe what these things might be. The discussion leads the reader to believe that while the creation story is described in the beginning of Genesis, it is necessary to read the whole Bible in order to understand the whole story of creation.

Midrashim tend to provide an analysis on word order. There is an example of this in midrash twelve:

> Genesis Rabbah - Parsha 1: Midrash 12
> The question asked by this midrash is, "Why does the Torah not begin with the name of God?" God, even before earning any honor, should be named as the Master and Creator of the world. This is the way it is done in the human world; a king is first named and then his works are listed. This is not the case with God. We first hear of what God did and then the Divine name is credited.

Explanations for word choice are also given. For example, the seventh midrash identifies that the name of God, Elohim, in the opening of the Torah is offered in the plural. The midrash goes on to explain why the use of this particular name is necessary:

> Genesis Rabbah - Parsha 1: Midrash 7
> R. Isaac opens this midrash with Psalm 119:160 which states that God's word is truth and God's rules are just and eternal. He uses this as a prooftext to establish that it was with truth that God created the world. One can even find the Hebrew word for truth, אמת, embedded in the first three words of the Torah, בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים, by taking the last letter of each of these words. This explains why the name אֱלֹהִים was the necessary choice as God's name, eliminating any potential confusion with a plural designate for the Divine.

The Hebrew root of midrash is .ד.ר.ש, daled, resh, shin. The main definitions for this root, found in the Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, are "resort to" and "seek" (205). The general understanding of this root, d'rash, in the context of midrash is to examine, inquire, search, or search for understanding. D'rash is found over one hundred fifty times throughout the Bible from Deuteronomy to Ezra (Neusner *Study of Ancient Judaism* 56). The meaning of the term originated under secular circumstances

but very quickly became related to one's search for theological meaning in the Biblical text.

Midrash is not history. Despite earlier research that used rabbinic stories to reconstruct the Jewish past, modern scholarship demonstrates the flaws to this approach. The stories we read in the Midrash are "exaggerated, legendary, and contradictory" (Rubenstein 3). We can not assume that they are a true representation of past events. However, they do provide some insight into the thinking and values we can associate with the compilers of the midrashic collections.

ORIGINS OF MIRASH:

In Jewish literature of the Second Temple period the word Midrash was first employed in the sense of education and learning in the most general sense as the quote, "Turn unto me, ye unlearned, and lodge in my house of Midrash," from Ecclus. 51:23 conveys (EJ). We still use the term house of, or Beit Midrash today to designate places of Jewish learning. The Beit Midrash is where one can find students pouring over text, immersed in the study of the Jewish tradition.

The Bible contains the oldest form of midrash beginning with the fifth book of the Torah, Deuteronomy. This is the first place we see an example of commentary and interpretation on what had taken place in earlier books of the Torah. For example, in Deut 4:8-14 Moses retells the account of receiving the Ten Commandments. It was first described in Ex 31:12-18. In Deuteronomy we are told the story from a different perspective. It gives us what purports to be Moses' interpretation of the events. Further midrashim in the Bible are found in Chronicles. Chronicles has "been understood as a kind of midrash on the books of Samuel and Kings" (Strack 257).

These "original" midrashim found within the Bible are not what one is usually referring to when they talk about the Midrash. Typically, when we are talking about the Midrash we are referring to a collection of writings gathered "over the course of many hundreds of years" (Holtz 178). The collection began as an oral tradition during the Tannaitic period, beginning in the 2nd century, continuing through the post-Talmudic era of the 6th century (Wikipedia). These were then recorded and transmitted from 400 – 1200 CE (Holtz 178). There are some unanswered questions as to how closely these written collections match the orally transmitted midrashim.

PURPOSE OF MIDRASH:

"The purpose of the midrashic literature was to make the Bible relevant and meaningful, to interpret it and draw out from it all of the lessons contained therein" (Wright 59). Midrash deepens our understanding of the Bible by providing us with insights and by suggesting intricacies that exist in our sacred text. It is said in Numbers Rabbah that there are seventy faces of the Torah (Freedman 534). Midrash is a direct application of this theory because it illuminates a number of ways in which a single verse might be understood or applied. Midrash is a venue in which one has the opportunity to "rewrite" the Biblical text or at a minimum comment upon it. It is an opportunity to fulfill the human drive to know it all. It is in our nature to want to hear the full story, making sure we know every last detail. Midrash can do this for us.

Midrash is much more than an investigative process that attempts to get at the original intent of the Biblical verses. While midrashim involve poetry, word play, explanations on word choice, analysis on word order, and a running commentary that share various interpretations of the Bible text; it is also a method by which we can provide religious instruction on morals and values. For example, in the midrashim about the Judah and Tamar from Gen 38 the Rabbis give instructions on the importance of fulfilling ones vows. Judah made a promise that his youngest son would fulfill the obligation of Levirate marriage, but failed to deliver on his promise. The Rabbis point out that this failure led him through a chain of negative events that could have been avoided all together had he kept his original vow to Tamar.

Midrash, as a process, is the place for Biblical interpretation. Our need to interpret and our desire to add comments and ideas to, the tradition dates back to antiquity. James Kugel captures this nicely when he states:

> For, even before the Bible had attained its final form, its stories, songs, and prophecies had begun to be interpreted. From very early times, sages and scholars in ancient Israel had made a practice of looking deeply into the meaning of these sacred writings, and, with each new generation, their insights and interpretations were passed on alongside the texts themselves (xiiv).

HOW IS MIDRASH ORGANIZED IN GENERAL?

We can look at an individual midrash and find that it was usually written for one of two reasons. Either someone was searching for the meaning of a particular text, which is called an exegesis, or someone wanted to read their own meaning into the text, which is called eisegesis ("Midrash" Class Notes). For example, in the midrashim on Gen 34, Shechem's rape of Dinah, we see mostly an exegesis. The rabbis were searching for the meaning behind this story. They wanted to discern why the Bible tells this story? What is it that is has to teach us?

Through my study of the midrashim on the rape of Dinah, I have arrived at the conclusion that the Rabbis wanted to provide an explanation for the violence that took place around this event. They are seemingly less concerned about the rape itself and devote more of their commentary to Simeon and Levi's and the rest of Dinah's brothers' violent response to the violation of their sister. The Rabbis use the story to teach the expression, "Like mother, like daughter." They want to impress upon parents that the quality of the next generation is a reflection on the generation that reared them. They show that Jacob failed to insure that his daughter was instructed in the proper way and therefore was unable to prevent the "improper" from happening to her.

In addition to a differentiation based on exegesis or eisegesis, there are other classifications that can be made based upon content. There are midrashim that are stories, narratives, folk sayings, and those that express theological beliefs. These types of midrashim are labeled Midrash Aggadah. In contrast, there are midrashim categorized as Midrash Halakah which derive laws from the text (Class Notes). The legal, or halakic midrashim, usually open with a scriptural verse, present an interpretation, and reject that

interpretation with the author's ruling opinion. The aggadic, or more theologically based midrashim, are structured in a similar way. The slight variation is that they tend to include a lot of parables, meaning that the reader receives more examples of a particular interpretation in aggadic midrashim. This tends to make them quite lengthy.

The line that divides a midrash into a halakic or aggadic classification is not always clear. In describing how one might recognize the distinction, Joseph Heinemann says that an aggadic text "is one that relates...not to the contents of the Aggadah but rather to its method of transmission" (42). These types of midrashim were related by word of mouth. Halakic midrashim were typically transmitted in writing (Class Notes). It is important to keep in mind that differentiating between these two types of classifications is not crucial for understanding the meaning of either the Biblical or the midrashic text.

There are additional rubrics under which midrashim can be organized. They are exegetical, homiletic, and narrative categories. In my introductory course on midrash our professor, Dr. Lewis Barth, taught us that an exegetical midrash is the "line by line, phrase by phrase, word by word, letter by letter interpretation of the biblical text" (Class Notes). These exegetical midrashim look at a complete body of Biblical text and systematically work through it. Homiletic midrashim deal with select verses and tend to involve more extended discussions and sermons about the text (Wright 57). Narrative midrashim are "completely rewritten biblical narratives embellished with legends and non-biblical traditions" (Wright 58-9).

Neusner adds to this discussion and says that the midrashim can be divided into three methods of interpretation: prophecy, paraphrase, and parable (*What is Midrash* xi).

He calls these three methods by other names as well which help in outlining their function. He says that prophecy is "midrash as process", paraphrase is "midrash as exegesis", and parable is "midrash as compilation" (*What is Midrash* xi). These different methods are all attempts to address an issue that stems from the Biblical text itself, not as a result of assumptions that the reader brings to the text. No matter the method, what the Rabbis of the Midrash are attempting to do is respond to a problem of word order, language, theology, or some kind of world situation inherent to the text. This explains why the Midrash still serves us so importantly today.

Another aspect of the Midrash's organization is that it will sometimes intentionally put two contradictory instructions or opinions side by side. The Rabbis did this in order to demonstrate the value of seeing that there are multiple voices within the tradition. Offering one viewpoint does not necessarily negate another point of view. For an example let us look at the Joseph story. In Gen 39:1 it states, "And Joseph was brought down to Egypt." This is when Joseph is brought to Egypt and sold into slavery. The Midrash explains the meaning of this verse in multiple ways. First is tells us that our translation of "brought down" could be incorrect and that we should actually translate the verse to say, "Joseph ruled over the Egyptians" (GR 36:2). Another interpretation of the verse is to keep the more common translation that Joseph was brought down to Egypt, but that we must understand that Joseph was brought down reluctantly like a cow to the slaughterhouse. Yet another interpretation of the same verse says that Joseph brought down the Shechinah with him.

When doing Biblical exegesis, some will take the PaRDeS approach in understanding a particular section of text. That is, they will assign four levels to their

reading of it. These levels come from the acronym PaRDeS; they are the Pshat, Remez, Drash, and Sod. A pshat reading is when one looks at the plain, direct, contextual meaning of the words. To read the verse with an eye to remez, one is looking for hints within the text. They are searching for deep meaning. A drash reading of the text is one that involves interpretation. The reader is inquiring of and searching through the text. The meaning of drash is the same as the root found in midrash. A sod reading is an attempt to get at the secretive, mystical, or hidden meaning behind the text.

Might we consider reading the Midrash through the PaRDeS lens? The Rabbis certainly devoted a lot of time to pshat and drash readings. At first glance it may seem like they were less concerned with remez and sod. Addison Wright says that the process went something like this:

> The interpreter would begin with the plain sense...If the plain sense contained a difficulty and thus an obstacle between the text and the audience, the difficulty would be solved and, if possible, some religious value also derived. If the plain sense was obvious or if it was not useful religiously, then a hidden meaning would be sought. Throughout the whole process the belief in hidden meanings was not the primary motivating principle (64-65).

While it may not have been a "primary motivating principle" we can easily recognize that rabbinic interpretation goes far beyond the pshat, plain meaning, of the text. Can we also see that they attempt to bring forth the mysterious sod level of interpretation? Yes! The midrashim about the creation story is just one place where we can see this level of reading the text. The Rabbis establish that a pshat understanding of how the world was created will simply not suffice. While we might discern from the pshat that the people inhabiting the earth are the owners of the land and Creation, this is

not the case. God is the mysterious Owner and Creator of all. This is linked to the secret instructions God finds in Torah, the blueprint for the ultimate Divine masterpiece. The Rabbis provide this interpretation in Genesis Rabbah, Parsha 1: Midrash 2:

> R. Yehoshua opens with Psalm 91:6 which shows God's power through the acts of creation and those that have inherited it. This midrash establishes that God, rather than humanity, is the owner of the world. However, the midrash does emphasize that the world was created for Israel. This is all recorded in God's map of creation, the Torah, and will be of use to future generations.

GENESIS RABBAH AS AN EXAMPLE:

The formal Midrash on Genesis, called Bereshit or Genesis Rabbah, was written by the Rabbis of the third and fourth centuries, known as the Amoraim (Neusner *Genesis and Judaism* ix). It was written in the land of Israel as exciting world events, such as the birth of the West and the legalization of Christianity, were influencing the globe (Neusner, *Confronting Creation* 3).

The first name of this work was Bereshit de-Rabbi Oshaya Rabbah because the opening words are attributed to Rabbi Oshaya Rabbah (Herr). Rabbah means great in Hebrew and other scholars believe that the collection was called Genesis Rabbah because it was an expansion and provided a greater amount of material than Genesis alone (Herr).

Genesis Rabbah is the area of Midrash to which my text immersion has been devoted. My chevruta and I started at the very beginning of Genesis Rabbah, exploring what the Midrash had to say about creation. From there we moved ahead to the commentary on the rape of Dinah in Gen 34. Then we studied the story of Tamar and Judah in Gen 38. We concluded with Potiphar's purchase of Joseph in Gen 39.

While there may have been isolated comments on Genesis in the Palestinian Talmud, Genesis Rabbah was the first collection of statements to be written down about the understanding of the Book of Genesis (Neusner *Confronting Creation* 9). The midrashim contained within it involve narrative, sometimes using it as a tool to embellish the Biblical text. It blends both halakic and aggadic material together in an exegetical format, analyzing the text of Genesis in a systematic order. It has an anthological quality to it. "Genesis Rabbah is an exegetical Midrash which gives a consecutive exposition of

the Book of Genesis, chapter by chapter, verse by verse, and often even word for word" (Herr).

The oldest manuscript, housed in the Vatican library, contains 101 sections of Genesis Rabbah (Herr). These divisions were made based on the Masoretic organization of the Bible as well as the triennial cycle of weekly readings (Herr).

The language of Genesis Rabbah is mostly mishnaic Hebrew, of the same style found in the Palestinian Talmud, with some Aramaic and a few Greek terms interspersed throughout (Herr). In commenting on the language of Genesis Rabbah, Moshe David Herr warns against assuming that the Midrash and Palestinian Talmud were sources for one another:

> Although there are many parallel passages in Genesis Rabbah and the Jerusalem Talmud, a careful examination reveals that the latter was not the source of the former. The aggadot which occur in both Genesis Rabbah and the Jerusalem Talmud were sometimes derived from earlier common sources (probably from oral traditions). The halakhot in Genesis Rabbah were either incorporated in the aggadot in the earlier sources or originated close to the period of the Mishnah, in which case they were derived from an edition of the Jerusalem Talmud different from the extant one, but which was also redacted and arranged not later than 425 C.E. Genesis Rabbah, too, was apparently edited at about the same time.

This is a complex issue with new evidence coming out of recent scholarship. Alyssa Gray identifies ways in which rabbinic compilations relied upon one another. She has a four step method which proves that some of the Rabbinic compilers knew of, relied on, and reworked extant source material (Gray 64).

Genesis Rabbah is not only the "largest and most important" midrash it is also the "earliest amoraic aggadic Midrash" that still exists today (Herr). It was first published in 1512 and an English translation was only made available in 1939 (Herr).

ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE BIBLICAL TEXT:

We operate on the assumption that the Bible is a holy text; it is kadosh – separate, distinct, and unique. The Rabbis operated by this same assumption. Some of them were able to take this assumption a step further and give the Bible substantial power. For the Rabbis of the Midrash, the Torah was so powerful that is was known as "the blueprint of creation or the instrument with which God constructed the universe" (Rubenstein 268). We see this in very first midrash of Genesis Rabbah:

> Parsha 1: Midrash 1
> R. Hoshaya opens with Prov 8:30 which discusses what it means to be an *amon*. An *amon* can be translated as nursling, tutor, covered, hidden, great, or craftsperson. The key word, *amon*, is being used in the midrash as a metaphor for Torah. It asserts that just as a craftsperson needs their diagram to produce a piece of work, and an architect needs their blue print before building, so too does God need a map for creation. Therefore, one should read Gen 1:1 as "With רֵאשִׁית God created the heaven and the earth." רֵאשִׁית is God's map and that map must be Torah.

Many of the Rabbis believed that "the Bible's precise wording [was] both utterly intentional - that is, nothing in the Bible [was] said by chance or said in vain and [it is all] infinitely significant" (Kugel 56). Therefore, repetitions and seemingly unclear meanings found within the text demand our attention and consideration. These "gaps" are present for a reason. It was understood then as it is now that "scripture [requires] deep investigation in order for its full sense to be revealed, the groundwork was laid for interpretations that sometimes departed drastically from what the text seemed to be saying" (Kugel 57).

For the creators of Genesis Rabbah, "the book of Genesis tells the story of Israel, the Jewish people, in the here and now" (Neusner, *Confronting Creation* 2). It is the guide for ethical and moral behavior. Without a Temple there is no direct line of communication with God. The closest we have, and the closest the Rabbis had, was the Biblical text. Therefore, we can understand why the "study of Torah was the highest value in the rabbinic worldview" (Rubenstein 268).

HOW CAN MIDRASH CONTRIBUTE TO OUR LIVES TODAY?

Jews are known as people of the Book. Our text is a guide and the interpretation of this guide is the key to unlocking its meaning. The authors of the Midrash model this process for us. The rabbis were detectives, trying to understand the intentions behind the meaning of the biblical text. They play with the text, turning it over and over providing us with multiple interpretations and meanings of it. They follow Ben Bag-Bag's advice from Pirke Avot 5:23 to "turn the Torah over and over again for everything is contained within it".

The midrashic enterprise is a legacy we have inherited and a tradition that we are invited to continue. Today when we make an interpretation of the Biblical text, we are making our own midrash. It is a privilege to be able to follow in the footsteps of our ancient Rabbis and to join them in creating stories about the text. This process can take us into a different reality by filling in missing voices and motivations that the original texts do not give us. The tradition calls to us saying, "darsheni!" expound upon me - add your voice!

Wilfred Shuchat was a congregational rabbi who spent a lot of time responding to this call. He was particularly drawn to translating Midrash and in the introduction to a book of his translations he shares:

> "The most important aspect of Midrash...is its relevance. The Rabbis tried to show that Judaism spoke to their generation. That is how I understand Midrash. We should try to do the same thing for ourselves" (vii-viii).

Perhaps this is explains why I was drawn to immerse myself in Midrash and within Genesis Rabbah in particular. For "...the importance of Genesis, as the sages of Genesis Rabbah read the book, derives not from its lessons about the past but from its

message for Israel's present - and, especially, future" (Neusner *Confronting Creation* 2). I could not agree more. As humans we have been given the unique gift to look forward and prepare for the future. The tradition has provided us with a number of wonderful tools to help us succeed in this important endeavor.

The Rabbis came to the text with a desire to understand their lives. It was this motivation that brought us the Midrash. It is a connection to our past that allows us to engage with our ancestors. It is an inspiration for us to continue the legacy of creative interpretation. Midrash is an avenue, an entry point, by which we can live Torah and make it come alive.

We know that the midrashic enterprise has been successful because it has made "yesterday's text meaningful and nourishing for today" (Wright 68). It is important that we "find out how things got going [so that] we can find meaning in today and method in where we are heading" (Neusner, *Confronting Creation* 2).

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Essay Two

THE CREATION STORY AS TOLD IN GENESIS RABBAH

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This paper explores issues surrounding the creation story as described in the opening of the Midrash, Genesis Rabbah. Detailed summaries of the midrashim provide the foundation for a reflection on the extant themes that emerge from this selection of Genesis, or Bereshit, Rabbah. Relevant modern scholarship pertaining to these themes and the field of Midrash itself will then be addressed. Following will be an exploration of the motivations, concerns, and goals of the Rabbis who created this body of literature. It will examine their biases and social realities as evidenced in the text.

SUMMARIES OF THE MIDRASHIM:

Midrash Rabbah, Parsha Aleph

Gen 1:1 – In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ

Parsha 1: Midrash 1

R. Hoshaya opens with Prov 8:30 which discusses what it means to be an *amon*. An *amon* can be translated as nursling, tutor, covered, hidden, great, or craftsperson. The key word, *amon*, is being used in the midrash as a metaphor for Torah. It asserts that just as a craftsperson needs their diagram to produce a piece of work, and an architect needs their blue print before building, so too does God need a map for creation. Therefore, one should read Gen 1:1 as "With רֵאשִׁית God created the heaven and the earth." רֵאשִׁית is God's map and that map must be Torah.

Parsha 1: Midrash 2

R. Yehoshua opens with Psalm 91:6 which shows God's power through the acts of creation and those that have inherited it. This midrash establishes that God, rather than humanity, is the owner of the world. However, the midrash does emphasize that the world was created for Israel. This is all recorded in God's map of creation, the Torah, and will be of use to future generations.

Parsha 1: Midrash 3

R. Tanhuma opens with Psalm 86:10 which lauds God for God's unique greatness and wonders. God is called אֱלֹהִים which appears to be in the plural form, but the midrash points out that there is no plurality to God. God works alone. In case someone were to think that the angels were co-creators with God, the midrash points out that they were not created until after the first day of creation. God, alone, is responsible for the creation of the world.

Parsha 1: Midrash 4

This midrash is concerned with the opening word of the Torah, בְּרֵאשִׁית. It does not translate it as "in the beginning" as is commonly accepted. Rather, it separates the word into two, שִׁית and ברא, giving it the meaning of "created six." It claims that there were six things that preceded the creation of the world; the Torah, the Throne of Glory, the Patriarchs, Israel, the Temple, and the name of the Messiah. The first two existed fully before creation while the last four were only considerations.

Parsha 1: Midrash 5

This midrash opens with Psalm 31:19 which says to "let lying lips be dumb (תֵּאָלַמְנָה)." The key word from the verse is dumb. The midrash cites a proof text, Ex 4:11, that illustrates that the word can also mean bound or silenced. It then extends from this that if one questions the nature of creation, in any sense, then they must not fear of God. To investigate the acts of creation is to question the glory of God. This is seen as a major insult. The concluding piece of the midrash states that one should not ask what creation was made of because, as it states in the Torah, there was only void and chaos prior to the beginning.

Parsha 1: Midrash 6

R. Judah bar Simon begins this midrash with Daniel 2:22 which says that God revealed both deep and hidden things. Different interpretations describe what these things might be. The discussion leads the reader to believe that while the creation story is described in

the beginning of Genesis, it is necessary to read the whole Bible in order to understand the whole story of creation.

Parsha 1: Midrash 7

R. Isaac opens this midrash with Psalm 119:160 which states that God's word is truth and God's rules are just and eternal. He uses this as a proof text to establish that it was with truth that God created the world. One can even find the Hebrew word for truth, אמת, embedded in the first three words of the Torah, בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים, by taking the last letter of each of these words. This explains why the name אֱלֹהִים was the necessary choice as God's name, eliminating any potential confusion with a plural designate for the Divine.

Parsha 1: Midrash 8

This is the second midrash to define the opening word of the Torah, בְּרֵאשִׁית, as שִׁית and ברא giving it the meaning of "created six." It claims that there were a different six things that preceded the creation of the world and that perhaps these were the building materials; water, earth, timber, stones, canes, and iron.

Parsha 1: Midrash 9

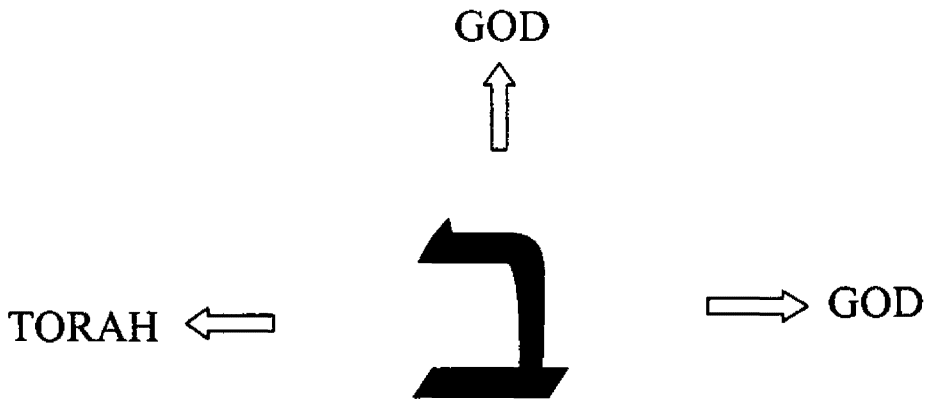
This midrash addresses a potential challenge of תֹּהוּ וָבֹהוּ from the second verse of Genesis. Some might think that this void and chaos were actually primordial matter that existed before creation. Some say that these are the materials God used to create. This midrash denies all of these claims and says that they are truly empty and formless not having any value or contribution to the creation of the world.

Parsha 1: Midrash 10

The question asked by this midrash is, "Why does the Torah start with the second letter of the alphabet, ב, rather than the first letter, א?" Two possible answers come from what the shape of the letter represents. First, the *bet* is closed on all sides except to the left where the words of Torah emanate. This is a sign not to question what comes before, above, or below Torah, just that which comes after it. The second answer that comes

from the shape of the letter is that it contains two projecting points, one that points upwards and the other pointing backwards. This is to designate that God comes above and before everything. Another suggested answer is that the *bet* symbolizes the two worlds; this one and the one to come. Or yet another possible answer is that the *bet* stands for ברכה, blessing. If it had begun with an *aleph* it could have been construed to mean ארירה, curse.

Diagram demonstrating that only God comes before and above the letter bet, while the opening on the left side of the letter allows Torah to come forth:



Parsha 1: Midrash 11

This midrash is also concerned with the role of the letters of the alphabet. It wants to know why there are two forms, regular and final, for כ,מ,נ,פ and צ. The list is rearranged from alphabetical order to מנצפ"ץ, from your prophets, to signify that these are the ones who transmit the tradition.

Parsha 1: Midrash 12

The question asked by this midrash is, "Why does the Torah not begin with the name of God?" God, even before earning any honor, should be named as the Master and Creator of the world. This is the way it is done in the human world; a king is first named and

then his works are listed. This is not the case with God. We first hear of what God did and then the Divine name is credited.

Parsha 1: Midrash 13

R. Shimon ben Yochai opens this midrash with Leviticus 1:2 which addresses the process for making vows and sacrifices to God. The verse instructs that when one is proclaiming a sacrifice for God, the Divine name is uttered after announcing that which is to be sacrificed. The underlying question is similar to midrash 12. It wants to know, "Why does the Torah not begin with the name of God?" The answer given is because we follow the model from making a sacrifice. One is to name that which is to be sacrificed and then offer it to God.

Parsha 1: Midrash 14

The question addressed here is, "Why does אֵת appear in our verse, Gen 1:1, both before the heavens and the earth are listed?" The midrash wants to point out that while the seemingly simply word, that may or may not even need to be included, is there for a reason and that reason is rich in meaning. The first answer provided by the midrash suggests that the אֵת is used to signify that the heavens and the earth are direct objects rather than proper nouns. If they were proper nouns the reader might assume that they had Divine powers. The second rabbi to provide an answer to the question warns against such a simplistic view. He says that the אֵת is there to demonstrate that heaven and earth represent more than just two singular creations. The אֵת is a clue that they encompass all that is included from the first letter of the alphabet to the last. Therefore, we are to understand that the heavens and the earth mean sun, moon, stars, planets, trees, foliage, and the Garden of Eden. The midrash then goes on to make a case for dedicating oneself to Torah study.

Parsha 1: Midrash 15

This midrash addresses a question to the order of the creation of heaven and earth. It answers whether the order in which objects are listed designates the order in which they were created. In our verse, Gen 1:1, the heavens are listed before the earth. A Shammai

versus Hillel debate is used to consider the various ways of answering the question. In the end their debate only establishes that we cannot look at the creation of the world in human terms. God is not dependent upon a particular order as an architect would be. Rav Yohanan says that it is not a question simply of what was created first, but also what was completed. He says that the heavens were first with regards to creation, but that the earth was the first to be completed. Rav Shimon ben Yohai says there is no need to ask the question at all because both the heavens and the earth were created at the same time. Yohai's son, Rav Eleazar reinforces this idea and adds that we also learn that the heavens and the earth are equal to one another. We see other places in the Tanakh when the order of things is reversed and this is the evidence used to prove that order does not designate importance or chronology.

REFLECTION ON THE THEMES IN THESE MIDRASHIM:

There are four major themes that emerge from these midrashim. They are: 1) Torah is the blueprint for creation, 2) God is the sole creator and owner of the world, 3) there are hidden meanings in language even within the Hebrew letters themselves, and 4) creation came from nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*).

The Torah contains the Jewish story. It is a living document that today's Jews engage with on a daily basis. The Rabbis who compiled Midrash Rabbah also engaged with the Torah daily and used it as their source text. In their opening midrashim, the Rabbis link the human use of Torah to God's use of the Torah. They establish that the Torah served God as the map or blueprint for creation. So too does the Torah serve as a map today. It is our guide for living a Jewish and an ethical life.

Another theme the Rabbis want to establish is that God is the sole creator and owner of the world. This is an important message for us to hear today. With so many technological advances, it is easy for us to forget that we are not the masters of creation. These midrashim tell us that God is the Source of creation and the Ruler of the universe which serves to elevate our interactions in this world. We enable this to happen when we use the midrashim to remind us that we have daily opportunities to connect with the Divine.

Midrashim are rich in word play. Not only do they pose questions about word usage in the Biblical text, but they highlight word order and the use of certain letters. Illuminating these issues directs us to the deeper meaning within the Biblical text. The Rabbis have brought our attention to hidden messages within the text. These come in the way of clever puns and can be quite entertaining for the reader.

The Rabbis want to prove that God created the universe out of nothing. They find it essential to show that God created all. Otherwise, God would be subject to matter and the material world just as humans are (Niehoff 8). It might seem convenient if there had been some sort of pre-existing matter around before God began creation. Then one could associate this pre-existing matter with the source of evil in the world. It would, however, be an insult and limitation on God. Rather than eliminating a challenge, it would actually undermine God's authority and power.

Of these four themes, of most interest to me, is the time and detail the Rabbis give to establishing that the world was created from nothing. It made me wonder why it is so crucial to debunk ideas that something was in existence before God created the world and why it would be such a travesty if God had to use something in order to create the universe and its inhabitants. The following discussion about current scholarship on creation will offer answers to these questions.

RELEVANT MODERN SCHOLARSHIP:

We now turn to modern scholarship on Midrash Rabbah and how it can help us to understand the Rabbis view of creation. Jacob Neusner will begin the conversation. He is a prolific author and currently serves as Professor of Judaic Studies at Bard College. He provides us with a solid foundation and background on our text under investigation.

Bereshit Rabbah was written in Israel sometime between the fourth and fifth centuries of the Common Era. Christianity was just beginning to take hold and had been established as the religion of Rome (Neusner 3). Neusner asserts that Bereshit Rabbah was written in conversation with this new environment and the challenges it presented to Judaism (8). The text provides us with insights as to the fears and insecurities the Rabbis were feeling about Israel's future. Bereshit Rabbah was their avenue for responding to their new reality. This is evident in many of the opening midrashim summarized earlier in this paper. The midrashim touch on topics that were being questioned in the Christian world. For example, midrash two is focused on asserting God's power. Midrash three points out that there is no plurality, specifically a possibility of dualism, to God. Midrash five likens questioning the nature of creation to questioning the very nature of God. Midrash six advocates for familiarizing oneself with the entire Torah. Midrash seven says that God embodies truth. Midrashim four, eight, and nine address the question of what may have existed before creation took place and establish that these items do not undermine God's power or God's role as Creator. These are all matters of belief that the Rabbis would likely have felt were threatened by the emerging Christian doctrine.

Let us continue this discussion amongst scholars with Daniel Boyarin, a Professor of Talmudic Culture at the University of California, Berkeley. He introduces

us to the idea of Logos which may be defined as the "divine wisdom of the word of God." A secondary idea associated with this is that this divine wisdom serves as the means for human salvation (Encarta World English Dictionary). A common perception is that Logos refers specifically to Jesus as savior and physical embodiment of God's wisdom. Boyarin challenges this narrow interpretation, expanding Logos' definition to include divine wisdom as understood in other western religions. Logos is therefore, not the distinguishing mark between Christianity and Judaism, but is rather a way of interpreting and relating to divine wisdom, an enterprise of both traditions. As Boyarin explains it, "In their very efforts to define themselves and mark themselves off from each other, Christian writers of orthodoxy and the Rabbis were evolving in important and strikingly parallel ways" (5).

Both Christianity and Judaism respond to the Logos and each of them has a unique understanding of what the Logos is and how it functions. For Christianity, Logos is Jesus as the son of God as one who was active with God, the Father, in creation. For Judaism, Logos is Torah – both written and oral. How each religion interprets and uses Logos marks their differences. Logos is the vehicle through which God acts. For the Jews this is Torah and for the Christians this is Jesus.

Logos theology is how orthodoxy develops around divine wisdom, eventually creating a canonized set of interpretations that become the orthodoxies themselves. Alternative interpretations which are not universally accepted become heresies. One takes the Logos and establishes that there is only one correct interpretation. If one does not follow the Logos, then they fall outside the border of membership within the group (Boyarin 29).

For the Rabbis, following the Logos is to accept that there is only one God. So long as Judaism was a tribal religion, there was no orthodoxy. That would not last for long and boundaries would soon be established as to who was in and who was out. Studying mishnah, Talmud, and Midrash we witness this struggle to establish Logos (Boyarin 29).

Maren Niehoff, a professor of Jewish Thought at the Hebrew University, also looks at the influence of Christianity on the Rabbis. All three of our scholars convincingly demonstrate that Midrash Rabbah was written in some sort of conversation with, or at least in response to, the emerging Christian world.

Niehoff sees the text as both a statement of the Rabbis' own beliefs and as a response to a competing theology. Niehoff views Judaism and the beginnings of Christianity as undistinguishable from one another. She does not believe that Judaism can be looked at "as the mother figure giving birth to the daughter religion, while remaining unchanged herself, but rather as a sister developing and changing during the first centuries of the Christian era" (2). This does not mean that we are unable to trace particular Jewish positions as a reaction to Christian developments (Niehoff 3). For example, the midrashim address issues that were never before dealt with such as *creatio ex nihilo*.

MOTIVATIONS, CONCERNS, AND GOALS OF THE RABBIS:

The world around the Rabbis was full of change. Judaism could not remain the same. The midrashim that the Rabbis wrote allow us to witness their response to these changes. In their midrashim, we see their declaration of general theological standards that were meant to establish normative belief and practice. The Rabbis model a level of engagement with the Biblical text that we can emulate today (Neusner 11).

The Rabbis fill in gaps that are found in the Biblical text. For example, word and letter choice in the Torah are rarely explained. This leaves an opportunity for interpretation and explanation. In midrashim ten, eleven, and twelve we see examples of this. Each midrash identifies a gap in the text and uses it as an opportunity to elucidate meaning behind certain choices that were made. The Torah does not tell us why the Torah begins with the letter ב rather than the letter א, but midrash ten provides a possible explanation. The Torah does not tell us why certain letters have both a regular and final form, but midrash eleven gives a beautiful interpretation. One might have expected the Torah to open up with the name of God, but midrash twelve tells us one reason why that would not make sense.

The Rabbis illuminate non-literal meaning behind words that are used in the Torah. For example, in midrash one, a literal translation of Gen 1:1 is dismissed and an alternate meaning is given to one of the words in the verse. Rather than translating רֵאשִׁית as "beginning" the Rabbis outline how רֵאשִׁית can be understood to mean "Torah". They have brought forth an entirely new meaning of the verse.

Sometimes the Rabbis are drawn to textual difficulties inherent in the text itself while other times they are brought to the text with an issue of their concern. In the case

of the midrashim on the opening verse of the Torah, the Rabbis seem to be drawn to the text with the issue of responding to Christianity's views on the creation of the world. They were experienced as a threat by the Rabbis and used their midrashim to protect what they viewed as the only correct version of creation. They were unwilling to share the story and felt it should only belong to the Jews.

The Rabbis remain committed to the Biblical account of creation. Nothing they do in Midrash Rabbah detracts from this. Their process brings a better understanding and appreciation of the Bible as they perceived it. It adds layers of beauty and complexity to one's relationship with the Torah rather than taking anything away. When we seek to understand a piece of text we are following the example that the Rabbis have provided us. An attempt to discover the original intent of the Biblical text, looking to commentaries, and providing our own analysis of the Torah are all ways we continue the legacy. Insights and interpretations that are brought to the verses of the Torah make it a living document. It is a vehicle for sharing with the generations, past and present.

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