Text Immersion in Midrash Tehillim 22

Danielle Weisbrot

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Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
School of Rabbinic Studies
New York

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Advisor: Dr. AJ Berkovitz

Table of Contents

Abstract

Midrash – particularly *aggadic* midrash – is a critical Jewish method of meaning-making. It allows the author, and by extension the readers, to put themselves inside a text and to let that text resonate within them. As such, it can be a powerful tool to help us navigate the trials and tribulations of life in and hopefully draw us closer to the Divine. I chose to focus on Midrash Tehillim because it connects to another such powerful text: the Psalms. Midrash Tehillim 22 offers a good example of this intersection. The base text, Psalm 22, deals with a protagonist in deep distress looking for salvation, and the midrashim address this hope from multiple angles. In the following paper I will discuss: 1. how Midrash Tehillim can be used by caregivers in a pastoral context to help congregants or patients access the healing powers of the Psalms; 2. the ways in which Midrash Tehillim 22 draws from and adapts previous midrashim; and 3. Midrash Tehillim's creativity in using biblical proof texts to further its theological agendas.

Chapter 1: Using Midrash Tehillim as a Pastoral Tool

We rely on Jewish texts to reflect our human experiences. The growth of the canon of Jewish literature over time and the existence of the genre of midrash both attest to this. We want to be able to trace our own lived realities in the text and find some meaning, direction, or comfort there. In particular, Jewish tradition has prescribed the Psalms as literary medicine – a tool to help those in distress as they deal with sickness, sadness, fear, and misfortune. The powerful poetry of the Psalms helps us put words to our emotions, while also reinforcing our connection to G-d, the Jewish people, and Jewish history.

Uses of the Psalms in Jewish Communal Life

There is frequent debate in Jewish classical Jewish literature as to the authorship of the Psalms. The subject is broached in the Talmud (e.g. Bavli Pesachim 117a, and Bava Batra 14b), *Midrash Tehillim*, and other sources but without the rabbis agreeing on how many of the psalms may be attributed to King David. Much of the content of the Psalms is chronologically inconsistent with David's timeline. From a logical perspective, it would have been impossible for him to have written them. Yet, there is a persistent interest in associating the Psalms with the beloved king. To reconcile this challenge, the rabbis argue that David had the gift of prophesy. "[T]he idea that David was the prophetic author of the psalms had become an established interpretive tradition by the first century C.E." (Menn 70). While Bavli Bava Batra 14b divides the authorship of the Psalms among several groups, Midrash Tehillim [72.6; 104.2] "extends [David's] authorship not only to the 'orphan psalms' that bear no superscription but even to those psalms introduced by superscriptions that include the names of other biblical figures" (Menn 62). The elevation of the Psalms to the

level of prophesy and the repeated attempts to assign their authorship to one of the most prominent biblical heroes attests to the high value Jewish tradition places on the Psalms.

There remains debate among scholars as well as to the precise dating and context of the individual psalms: whether they were pre- or post-exilic, whether they reflect the life of the priestly cult or common folk, whether they were written in so-called "real time" or represent an attempt to hearken back to earlier works, who authored them, etc. "Sigmund Mowinckel… understood the prominent setting of psalmody to be the royal cult, with its great ritual drama… at the time of the New Year" (Gillingham 217). This would place the majority of the Psalms in use during the days of the Temple service, though Herman Gunkel suggests that most of the biblical psalms were written later, in imitation of older psalms, and explicitly intended for use in exile (ibid). It seems that "any theory that tries to superimpose too monolithic a view onto the use of the psalms falls short of the evidence: the Psalter defies dating and classification in this way" (ibid 218). The dating itself, though, may not be as important to modern readers – or even readers in antiquity – as the *perception* of the history of the Psalms and its centrality in Jewish life.

Mishnah Tamid 7:4 establishes the *shir shel yom*, the specific psalm for each day of the week, which the priests were said to have chanted in the Temple. Whether this was an actual practice that the rabbis felt it worthy to maintain or a more recent development that was given earlier attribution, it hints that the tradition of regular psalm recitation was popular. Centuries later, the minor Talmudic tractate Sofrim 18:1-2 doubles down on this concept, claiming that the general population has begun reciting the Psalms in the absence of the priests, and that they have also accustomed themselves to reciting the Great *Hallel* at

the end of Passover, despite the rabbinic view that the practice is unnecessary or inappropriate. Leviticus Rabbah 16:2 portrays another example of the popularity of the Psalms among both the rabbinic elite and the common folk. In the midrash, a merchant travels from town to town, offering to sell a "potion" that promotes long life. However, when Rabbi Yannai asks to purchase it, the merchant produces a scroll of psalmody that includes Psalm 34:13-15. This indicates that there was a market among the populace for printed works of Scripture, including psalms. "Not only did wealthy patrons hire scribes to copy a borrowed work, but peddlers trafficked in prefabricated scrolls and codices" (Berkovitz, *Life* 83). As a component of this printing practice, the Psalter was clearly accessible to, and likely enjoyed by, a wider swath of the general Jewish public.

The Babylonian Talmud, in debating the authorship of the Psalms, highlights how ingrained was the use of psalms in celebrating holidays and enabling the people to express their joy aloud. Like the old joke which wonders how – if Jewish civilization is older than Chinese civilization – Jews could have survived for any amount of time without Chinese food, the Gemara questions how the Jews in the time before King David's reign could possibly have celebrated holidays without the psalms of *Hallel*. "Is it possible that the Jewish people slaughtered their paschal lambs [for Passover] and waved their *lulavim* [for Sukkot] without reciting a song?" (Bavli Pesachim 117a).[1] There is such a vested interest in establishing the Psalms as a foundational Jewish text that Rabbi Yosei, in the name of his son, Elazar, challenges his colleagues regarding the authorship of the Psalms: whereas Rabbi

[1] English translation by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz on Sefaria.org https://www.sefaria.org/Pesachim.117a.9-11?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en

Meir teaches the that the entire collection of psalms in the Psalter was composed by King David – a position that is reflected in Midrash Tehillim, as mentioned above – Rabbi Yosei asserts that they date back to the Exodus, recited by Moses and the Israelites upon the parting of the Sea of Reeds (ibid). Although King David is certainly a well-known and beloved biblical figure in his own right, there is a special significance to dating texts – even in the absence of or counter to historical or anthropological evidence – back to the time of Moses. Since rabbinic tradition consistently reinforces the idea that older is better, and the generations closer to the time of *matan Torah* have a better understanding of Scripture, there is a vested interest in making favored traditions seem as old as possible; it gives them more weight, authority, and authenticity. Even today, this concept manifests itself frequently in describing certain tunes for prayers as "traditional" or "*miSinai*" even though they may have been composed in our own lifetimes. "The elevation of David as a prophet at least partially assimilates the psalms to the genre of prophesy that becomes the dominant model for understanding the canonical writings as authoritative and revelatory" (Menn 71). By the same token, associating the Psalms with Moses as well adds a layer of holiness and honor.

That same passage in Pesachim ponders as well whether, even if we attribute authorship of the Psalms to King David, as tradition generally holds, the psalms within it are focused on his personal experience or intended to reflect that of the community as a whole. A common opinion in rabbinic circles is that there are some of each: the psalms written in the singular are person to King David, and those written in the plural refer to the community at large (ibid). Although the Rabbis may simply have been working through the

textual irritant of explaining the existence of both singular and plural addresses in the Psalms, the fact that the explanation involves drawing a communal connection to the text itself – imagining the Psalms describing the hardships and joys of the people as well – seems to be no accident.

Some scholars posit that at the same time that the redactors of the Talmud were enshrining these indications of communal ownership of the Psalms, the larger, earlier, and more prominent section of *Midrash Tehillim* was also taking shape. "The primary editing of the main section (*Entstehungszeit*) was begun sometime in the Talmudic period (ca. the 3rd to 5th centuries) and continued developing gradually for several centuries (*Wirkungszeit*). The editing process probably ended at some point in the 11th century" (Kalimi 72). Although the Talmud makes it clear that the book of Psalms was already canonized, put to liturgical use, and communally relevant, the hallmark of a substantial Jewish text is how deeply you engage with it and mine it for additional meanings. Midrash Tehillim did just that – not only exploring the text and attempting to resolve grammatical or syntactical dilemmas, but also providing additional lenses through which the Psalms could be read. The process of creating midrash on the Psalms added an array of new avenues for emotional connection. If we make the most of these opportunities, we can potentially use Midrash Tehillim as a pastoral tool in and of itself.

Use of the Psalms remains popular in times of crisis. "Historically, it has been the custom for Jews to have copies of the Book of Psalms – often very small volumes – with

them at all times to turn to in moments of trouble. These little volumes of *Tillim* ,[2] along with copies of the *Tanach* and the Prayer Book, were often a Jew's most precious possessions" (Polish ch. 2).[3] Psalms often accompany us in liminal spaces: recited while in the presence of a dead body waiting for burial and at the funeral; read on behalf of one's children as they grow – increasing the number of the psalm to correspond to the child's year of life;[4] chanted on holidays as we mark out sacred time. Another such liminal space is that of illness, when we are anxious to know that we or our loved ones will recover, or perhaps struggling to reconcile ourselves with the prospect of *not* recovering.

Using Psalms as a Pastoral Tool

Although, in theory, most people who are sick could pull out a copy of the Psalms and start reading, many may lack the knowledge, inspiration, emotional capacity, or faith to turn to psalms for support. If the Psalms is an appropriate resource for a particular patient or family member, it may require a chaplain, rabbi, or other spiritual advisor to introduce the idea. In "Spiritual Tools for Enhancing the Pastoral Visit to Hospitalized Patients," Meyerstein and Ruskin describe the process and challenges of a typical pastoral encounter. They note that patients may experience a range of difficult emotions, from depression to anxiety to isolation. Additionally, these patients "are often preoccupied with spiritual questions, whether voiced or not (i.e. Why me? Did I cause this? Is G-d punishing me? Do I

[2] Rabbinic literature occasionally refers to the Psalms as *tillim* (תילים) instead of the more common term, *tehillim* (תהילים).
[3] The Kindle edition of this book does not seem to have page numbers.
[4] Look up and cite: *Maamarei Admur Hazaken Haketzarim*, p. 341; *Kovetz Michtavim*, *Tehilim Ohel Yosef Yitzchak,* p. 214: *Igrot Kodesh*, Rayatz, vol. 10, p. 53; *Sefer Haminhagim—Chabad*, p. 17. Mentioned in the Chabad article: https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4779124/jewish/Why-Do-You-Recite-the-Rebbes-Psalm-Every-Day.htm#footnote2a4779124

need to repent? etc.)" (Meyerstein 110). Many of these same theological questions are addressed in the Psalms and may be helpful if introduced in the right way. The authors discuss the elements of a typical hospital visit: singing songs to/with the patient, discussion, and sharing a personalized prayer which blends the patient's individual needs with "traditional liturgical phrases and quotations from the psalms" (ibid 113). Meyerstein and Ruskin recognize that the "evocative language [of the Psalms] resonates with intense emotions people experience when ill or facing life challenges" and typically hand a written verse from Psalms to the patient before leaving, so the patient can hold onto it for later – both physically and metaphorically (ibid 114).

When I imagine using Midrash Tehillim as a pastoral tool, whether in a hospital room or an office counseling session, I envision adding another dimension to the session in question: text study. The psalms themselves both contain and can evoke strong emotion, but some people may benefit from an additional layer of textual resources – beyond the aid of simply discussing the psalm with a pastoral caregiver – to bridge the gap between a psalm and their own experience. Although I have not had a chance to explore this specific process in a practical setting, I believe the following process may help the person providing pastoral care to assist patients, congregants, or others in times of crisis to draw connections between their own challenges and those articulated in the Psalms.

Step 1: Listen. The most critical element in pastoral care and counseling is being present for the other person – making yourself a vessel in which to hold their pain, their

fears, and even their hopes. However, it is often difficult for the care receiver[5] to express or even identify their own emotional struggles. “Often in communication, the speaker sends to the listener emotionally loaded information, but does not identify that emotion” (Savage 39). Therefore, the pastoral caregiver must pay careful attention to both verbal and nonverbal cues as aids in identifying what the other person may be feeling. These cues can then help facilitate a discussion about what might be at the root of those emotions.

Step 2: Identify a psalm. Based on what the patient or congregant has shared, the pastoral caregiver can potentially identify one or more psalms that speak to the emotions, challenges, or theological struggles that the care receiver has shared or hinted at. If so, the caregiver can introduce the idea with the words, “What you shared reminds me of a verse from Psalms…” or a similar statement. If the caregiver is familiar with a midrash associated with this psalm, or a midrash that might accompany it, even if the two are not officially paired, they may put forward a short description or snippet of that as well. If the receiver looks engaged or curious, this may be a sign that they are interested in pursuing that avenue. It is important to note that not every situation will call for a psalm. It may be that a psalm would not have significant meaning for that person; that a psalm is not age or cognitively appropriate for them; or because the care receiver is not ready for or interested in that type of textual engagement. However, if the person is in fact interested in studying the psalm or midrash, offer to sit together – either during that visit or at a subsequent visit – to study the text(s) in its/their entirety.

[5] In the context of care provided by a clergyperson, the receiver will most likely be a congregant or hospital patient, though clergy also provide pastoral care in a variety of other settings (e.g. prisons, military chaplaincy).

Step 3: Read the psalm. Hand the person a copy of the psalm which includes an English translation (or a translation in that person's primary language) so the text is accessible. Read the psalm aloud and then point out what verses or concepts jumped out at you, as the caregiver, in relation to what the other person shared. Although the midrash may serve as an entry point to the text, much of Midrash Tehillim is exegetical in nature and very closely tied to the specific language of the verses. While some of the content may be presented or canvassed up front, it will likely make the most sense when the person has some background knowledge of the psalm itself first.

Step 4: Study the midrash. Unlike with the psalm itself, reading the full text aloud might *not* be the most helpful way to use Midrash Tehillim. As a general principle, midrash aims to be accessible. "One of the principles that guide the Rabbis in their interpretation of the biblical text is that 'The Torah speaks in the language of the people,'[6] that is, appropriate to their capacity to understand and comprehend" (Kalimi 78). Yet, based on the sections I have studied, Midrash Tehillim appears to be a dense text. While it may have been relatively accessible to the audience of its time – particularly if that audience was the highly educated rabbinic elites among whom these midrashim often circulated – the average reader today likely will not have the breadth of biblical knowledge to understand all of the textual references, or the elevated Hebrew literacy necessary to identify some of the textual irritants that the midrash often explores. I expect that it would be most helpful for the pastoral caregiver to prepare the text in advance, pulling out relevant sections and being ready to give an overview of the salient points. However, the explanation should not

[6] Kalimi cites Talmud Bavli, Kiddushin 17b – דברה תורה כלשון בני אדם

be so explicit as to rob the text of its flexibility and limit the opportunity for the person to make their own meaning from it. Even for (literally) well-versed readers, midrash and *aggadah* in general have a certain amount of ambiguity baked into the text that allows for multiple interpretations. The caregiver should offer just enough information to allow the receiver to engage with the text – for example, the context in which it was written or brief biographical information on any rabbinic or biblical figures mentioned – but stop short of directing the receiver toward a specific conclusion about the meaning of the text. Although the caregiver should be prepared to respond to questions about the midrash, they should focus on cultivating the receiver's unique reflections on the passage and continue to listen for cues relating to the receiver's emotional state.

Step 5: Encourage creativity. Ultimately, even if it spends its time dissecting word choices, every midrash tells a story. During the text study session, if the care receiver seems engaged by the text and process, try to get the person to tell their *own* story using the words of the midrash as a jumping off point. Is there anything in the midrash that strikes a chord with them or with which they disagree? How might they have written it differently? When they read metaphors in the midrash, who or what comes to their mind? What other metaphors might they use for their own troubles? The care receiver may want to try writing their own midrash or even exploring other media to *drash* the *drash*. "We see the words in a new light when we view the psalms visually through artistic representation in illuminated manuscripts and in modern art, and we hear the words differently when they are interpreted through music, both sacred and secular" (Gillingham 228). Introducing a musical

or artistic setting of the psalm – or asking the person to consider creating their own – may be another avenue to building meaning.

Sample Points of Connection in Psalm 22

The discussion of Psalm 22 begins with a focus on the textual irritant of אַיֶלֶת הַשַּׁחַר, a word combination found only once in the Tanach. The midrashists quickly determine that the phrase denotes Esther. Berkovitz notes that this is a polemic against Christianity, which had adopted Psalm 22 as a prophesy of Jesus' crucifixion (225). In choosing Esther to be the protagonist of Psalm 22 – the Jewish alternative to Jesus – Midrash Tehillim reclaims the psalm; "Esther stands in place Jesus as the Jewish Christ" (ibid 232). Yet, in giving that kind of symbolic power to a female biblical figure, the rabbis open a window for women to see themselves in the text more explicitly. It is not just David, the warrior king, who is surrounded by enemies and valiantly chooses to both challenge and have faith in G-d, but also the brave queen who risks her life to challenge the ruling authority and change her people's fate. Through this midrash, women have a chance to see themselves reflected in the story, even though heroic female characters are generally underrepresented (or repressed) in the Tanach and later Jewish tradition. Thus, Psalm 22 may be particularly helpful as a point of connection for people who identify as female or for those who have trouble seeing themselves in the text if they do not imagine themselves in the role of a male warrior.

Another potential point of connection may be Midrash Tehillim 22:24. Esther is in the middle of her journey to plead with Achashverosh, and cries out, "Be not far from me; for trouble is near; for there is none to help" (Buber trans., Ps 22:12). With dangers behind

and ahead of her, the midrash imagines Esther crying out to G-d. "This liminal moment represents the climax of the Esther narrative. After fasting and anticipating almost certain death, how could Esther not ask for divine assistance?" (Berkovitz, "Jewish" 233). This portion of the midrash might resonate with someone who has a frightening path in front of them or who feels alone in their struggles.

Midrash Tehillim on Psalm 22 also addresses a number of other emotional points. It has a prevailing message of comfort, encouraging faith and hope for the future. Midrash 22:20, for example, deals with issues of self-image. It responds to Psalm 22:7 – an expression of feeling as lowly as a worm – and brings assurance that even the most humble creature has the power to speak up, to overcome mighty obstacles, to be a symbol of honor, and to evoke G-d's compassion.[7] Midrash Tehillim 20:30 also invites discussion of self-worth. The midrash parses Psalm 22:25: "For [G-d] did not scorn, did not spurn the plea of the lowly; and did not hide [G-d's] face from him; when he cried out to [G-d], [G-d] listened."[8] As the midrash addresses each segment of the verse, it highlights the difference between human tendencies, such as a bias in favor of the wealthy, and Divine judgement, which does not draw such distinctions. The parable of R. Haggai at the end of the midrash asserts that G-d does not look down upon the offerings of the poor but rather heeds their prayers. In a pastoral setting, the image of the "poor" person could be extrapolated to apply to those who feel they have nothing left inside them to "give" – lacking the physical or

[7] See Chapter 3 for further discussion.
[8] JPS (1985) English translation from Sefaria.org, adapted https://www.sefaria.org/Psalms.22.25?lang=bi

spiritual strength to offer prayer or affirm faith – but who are seeking assurance that they will still be heard.

From a theological perspective, Midrash Tehillim 22 also provides readers with alternative ways to imagine G-d acting in their lives. While representations of the Divine are largely anthropomorphic in biblical and rabbinic texts, this chapter of Midrash Tehillim associates G-d with animal forms in several cases.[9] Midrash Tehillim 22:4 and 5 both describe G-d acting like *ayelet hashachar*, "leap[ing] up like a hind in a time of darkness to give light to the world" (Braude 300).[10] While I do not expect many care receivers to take these depictions literally – the midrash itself uses a simile rather than a metaphor here, including the article כ ("like") in באיל ("like a hind") – the midrash may serve as a spark for individual creativity. The departure from more familiar depictions of G-d as a male anthropomorphic entity may broaden the receiver's perspective and encourage them to discover their own personal metaphors for the Divine Presence, inviting them to build their own relationship with the One who brings light in the darkness.

Moving Forward

Although I have not yet had an opportunity to implement this approach to using Midrash Tehillim as a pastoral tool, I expect that it can be a meaningful practice. My own experience of midrash in general, along with the overwhelming evidence of the popularity and power of the Psalms to aid those in periods of crisis, leads me to believe that the

[9] See Chapter 3 for further discussion.
[10] This quotation is from midrash 4. The following midrash contains largely similar phrasing, but in that pericope, G-d is bringing light specifically to the Jewish people rather than to the whole earth.

combination of the two can only augment their efficacy if approached with the proper sensitivity.

Chapter 2: Midrash Tehillim 22's Use of Other Midrashim

All good stories change with the teller. Every oral or even written repetition of a tale takes on its own nuances of tone and context; the narrator chooses which details to include, adapt, embellish, or ignore. Midrash Tehillim takes a very deliberate approach to adapting the texts from which it borrows. The examples below highlight a few of the ways in which Midrash Tehillim 22 liberally alters previous midrashim to forward its various polemical and theological agendas.

MT's M.O.

Midrash Tehillim 22 has several apparent goals in its treatment of Psalm 22. It is persistently invested in establishing Esther as *ayelet hashachar*, the "dawn hind" mentioned in verse 1 of the psalm. Since this exact phrase appears nowhere else in the Tanach, it provides fertile ground for midrashic interpretation. Midrash Tehillim 22 avails itself of this opening to pursue an anti-Christological campaign, promoting Esther as the messianic figure of the psalm as a polemic against those who would assert that it refers to Jesus.[11] Another goal of the work is to emphasize Israel's chosenness and ability to defeat its enemies; the majority of Psalm 22 laments the absence of G-d's saving grace in a time of distress, and Midrash Tehillim 22 attempts to reassure Jewish readers that they have not – as verse 2 of the psalm would suggest – been abandoned by their Creator.[12]

Midrash Tehillim 22 pulls from a number of different sources. These include the Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi, Bereshit Rabbah, Esther Rabbah, among others. For the

[11] See Chapter 1 for further discussion.
[12] See Chapter 3 for further discussion.

purposes of this paper, I will focus on earlier strata of midrashim and examine a few cases in which Midrash Tehillim put its own theological spin on the source material.

Light and Dark

"Like a myrtle-tree, whose odor is good and whose taste is bitter, so Mordechai and Esther were a light to Israel and a darkness to the peoples of the earth" (Braude 299).

Buber notes[13] that this midrash is at least partially sourced from Esther Rabbah 6:5. The citation in Esther Rabbah does parallel the first part of this quote from Midrash Tehillim 22:3: they both seek to explain Esther's name, *Hadassah* (הדסה), which translates to "myrtle." "Why is she named Hadassah? Her smell was sweet and her taste was bitter" (Esther Rabbah 6:5).[14] Yet, the Esther Rabbah midrash applies the analogy differently than does Midrash Tehillim when relating it back to the Purim narrative: "Thus Esther was sweet to Mordechai and bitter to Haman" (ibid). Esther Rabbah is working narrowly within the context of the Scroll of Esther itself, while Midrash Tehillim broadens the scope of the message; it discusses entire nations rather than individuals. It seems to be making a case for Jewish particularism, highlighting the triumph of the Jewish people over the other nations, in this case represented by Haman and Persia. Given the anti-Christological agenda of the midrashim on Psalm 22, the midrash may be taking an opportunity to assert the superiority of the Jewish tradition over other religions like Christianity.

Esther and Jesus: A Tale of Two Saviors

[13] See pp. 181, note 15 (טו)
[14] English translation from Sefaria.org
https://www.sefaria.org/Esther_Rabbah.6.5?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en

In Esther chapter 4, Mordechai attempts to convince Esther to risk her life by approaching King Achashverosh unbidden in order to save the Jewish people. In making his case, Mordechai alternately threatens Esther and offers her hope of success: "if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father's house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis" (Esther 4:14).[15] Midrash Tehillim 22:5 restates the essence of Mordechai's speech in two parts: (1) "a man ought not to push his fellow away with both hands;" and (2) "while he may be pushing him away with his left hand, he ought to be pulling him near with his right" (Braude 301). This is, itself, an embellishment on a statement found in the Babylonian Talmud:[16] "**It is taught** in a *baraita* that **Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar says:** With regard to the evil **inclination,** to **a child, and** to **a woman, have the left** hand **drive** them **away and the right draw** them **near**" (Sanhedrin 107b).[17] Part one of the statement in Midrash Tehillim stresses the importance of this principle and suggests an element of impropriety or even danger if one fails to heed the advice. At the same time, it excludes the portion of the *baraita* from Sanhedrin that groups women with children or evil impulses. There is too little information to assume the intentions of the authors/redactors on this point, but it is possible that gender was a factor in paring down the passage from Sanhedrin: language that demeans women could have undercut Midrash Tehillim's portrayal of Esther as the ultimate righteous savior.

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[15] JPS (1985) English translation from Sefaria.org https://www.sefaria.org/Esther.4.14?lang=bi
[16] See Buber pp 182, note 22 (כב)
[17] English translation by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz on Sefaria.org https://www.sefaria.org/Sanhedrin.107b.14-15?lang=bi. The bold text represents a more-or-less direct translation of the sparse Talmudic language; the standard non-bolded font is added by Steinsaltz for clarity.

For an educated reader with knowledge of the Talmud, there is an additional layer of meaning in Midrash Tehillim 22:5's citation of Sanhedrin. The Talmudic passage continues with an example of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perahya, a teacher whose student commits certain transgressions. Despite the fact that the student repeatedly attempts to make amends, ben Perahya refuses to accept the apology, and even when ben Perahya is ready to relent, the student has given up hope and turned irrevocably from Jewish tradition. That wayward disciple, according to the Talmud, is Jesus. Thus, for those reading Midrash Tehillim through the lens of the cited *gemara*, while Mordechai cautions his ward about the immediate dangers of keeping silent and presents the rewards of speaking up, he may also be delivering a message to future generations of Jews: it is dangerous to be too exclusive. If you are too harsh in rejecting those who may deviate from the path you have set, you may create an enemy – your own "Jesus" – and become responsible for the suffering or destruction of the Jewish people. Again, the text subtly compares Esther to Jesus and marks her as the superior of the two. Jesus, due to the unforgiving approach of his teacher, Yehoshua ben Perahya, turns from Torah and towards idolatry; he becomes the arch nemesis of the Jewish people. Esther, having received from *her* mentor a warning mixed with the promise of reward – having been coaxed as well as threatened – fulfills her mission to rescue the people from certain death. She becomes the redemptive messianic figure in this story, while Jesus is summarily dismissed as a heretic.

Midrash Tehillim 22:5 also removes the ambiguity of the original text from Esther by clarifying the meaning of help coming *mimakom acher*, "from another quarter" (Esther 4:14). The midrash attributes the rescue to none other than G-d – also known as *HaMakom*,

though that name is not directly used here – citing, "Israel is saved by the Eternal – an everlasting deliverance" (Isaiah 45:17). The midrash simultaneously makes two theological points. The first is that the Eternal *will* always protect the Jewish people, even in the face of imminent destruction or flawed leadership. The second is that such deliverance can come *only* from the Eternal or someone designated to fulfill G-d's will. In this case, that Divine appointee is Esther; there is no room for someone like Jesus.

A Fast Miracle

In anticipation of her dangerous approach to the king's chamber, Esther asks Mordechai to institute a three-day fast on her behalf (Esther 4:16). The Babylonian Talmud[18] cites this as an example of the extent of human tolerance. In Masechet Yevamot, the rabbis debate what physical circumstances are unendurable; at what point is it safe to assume that a man has died, such that his wife may be allowed to remarry even in the absence of definitive proof of his death (e.g. a corpse) (Bavli Yevamot 121b)? The natural extension of this argument leads to what types of survival could be considered miraculous and the sages discuss the likelihood of surviving a three-day fast such as the one Esther invoked. The *gemara* brings the fast decreed by Esther as proof that three days of starvation is generally survivable; it is therefore not miraculous to endure it and live.

Midrash Tehillim 22:5 takes a different tack. It ignores the Talmud's conclusion that fasting for three days is relatively safe. "It might be thought that they had to fast continuously night and day: but can men fast continuously three days and three nights, and

[18] See Buber pp 183, note 28 (כח)

not die?" (Braude 301).[19] Rather, it asserts that the Jewish people of Shushan survived their ordeal by breaking their fast each day. Additionally, Midrash Tehillim considers this a short fast of "only" three days, "because the Holy One, blessed be He, does not leave the children of Israel in distress for more than three days" (ibid). Although the midrash does not elaborate on three days being short, it might be another reference to the strength of the Jewish people. Instead of a three-day fast being potentially fatal, it is characterized as almost too easy. The midrash brings forward several cases of Biblical characters suffering for a period of three days, after which they are granted a measure of relief: Abraham finally spotting Mount Moriah on the third day (Gen. 22:4); Joseph releasing his falsely-accused brothers from prison (Gen. 42:17); Jonah being expelled from the mouth of the fish after a three-day journey (Jonah 2:2), etc. By drawing these comparisons, the midrash brings an element of the miraculous – which had been stripped or at least downplayed in the Talmudic assessment – back into the Esther narrative. Esther's implementation of a three-day fast elevates her status to something comparable to Abraham, and the status of the Jewish people to that of the Israelites of old.

The theme of the three-day fast is also addressed in Esther Rabbah 9:2.[20] Esther Rabbah provides the structure and some of the content for Midrash Tehillim 22:5's assertion that the Eternal does not allow the suffering of the Jewish people to continue for more than three days. However, while the passage in Esther Rabbah has many parallels to

[19] Even Braude, in his own footnotes, has doubts about the biological accuracy of Midrash Tehillim's assertion that a three-day fast is fatal. Yet, he notes that the economic situation of an impoverished citizen of the Near East, who eats sparingly on a regular basis, might make three days of total privation a true risk. See footnote #8 on Psalm 22.

[20] See Buber pp 183, note 29 (כט)

what eventually is included in Midrash Tehillim, the two are not identical. Midrash Tehillim 22:5 includes several additional examples which are not present in Esther Rabbah, such as: "[when Israel went out into the wilderness of Shur], it is said *And they went three days in the wilderness, and found no water* (Ex. 15:22);" "the word of the Lord came to Isaiah, saying: *Return, and say to Hezekiah: Behold, I will heal thee; unto the house of the Lord thou shalt go on the third day* (II Kings 20:5);" and "Rahab the harlot said to the spies sent out by Joshua: You need suffer but three days, as it is said *Get you to the mountain… and hide yourselves there three days… and afterward may ye go your way* (Josh. 2:16)." The extra insertions may be intended for thoroughness or to bolster the argument of the midrash.

Despite the variations in the two midrashim, however, both cite Hosea 6:2: "After two days will He revive us, on the third day He will raise us up, that we may live in His presence."[21] This inclusion reinforces the comparison of Esther to Jesus as a messianic figure. Although most scholars agree that the verse in Hosea was written with regards to healing (the preceding verse uses וירפאנו – *and will heal us*), and that the verb יחינו (*will revive/restore us*) refers only to metaphorical "resurrection," the Christian New Testament re-contextualized and reinterpreted the meaning. I Corinthians 15:4, speaking of Jesus, notes, "and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures."[22] In trying to identify the "scriptures" that Paul mentions in I Corinthians, several of the Church fathers, as early as Tertullian, followed by Origen and Cyprian, identified Hosea 6:2 as the probable source of the reference and the interpretive tradition

[21] JPS (1917) English translation from Mechon-Mamre.org https://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt1306.htm
[22] Text from *The Jewish Annotated New Testament: New Revised Standard Version Bible Translation*. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

became more mainstream over time (Cook 1). “In its original context, there is little reason to doubt that Hos 6:2 is a reference to the restoration and healing of Israel, and not the resurrection of the dead. In later interpretation, however, probably beginning with the [Septuagint] and culminating in the targumic translation, the text was taken to describe the resurrection” (ibid). Eventually this understanding found its way from Christian circles into Jewish readings of Hosea as well (Cook 2).

Both midrashim – Esther Rabbah 9:2 and Midrash Tehillim 22:5 – employ the Hosea verse as the final example in the list. The verses are not ordered chronologically per the canon (e.g. II Kings 20:5 appears before Joshua 2:16, breaking what had to that point been a logical progression), nor does any single verse seem to be dependent on the one before it for thematic flow; the citations are generally interchangeable. This listing style often appears in composite *p’tichtaot* (proems), where the narrative units of the midrash are arranged such that the final example transitions to the biblical verse or Torah portion in question. Similarly, in many Mishnaic and Talmudic passages, especially where no rabbinic opinion has been clearly designated as decisive, the last opinion listed is often inferred to be the prevailing one. Since Midrash Tehillim is not following a lectionary cycle or generally producing halachic rulings, the assumption that the final statement is binding is weaker here. Yet, in this pericope from Midrash Tehillim, the use of the Hosea verse immediately before the conclusion and the use of the word לפיכך (“accordingly”) could make a case for the juxtaposition being another intentional polemic against Christianity. If so, the verse itself would be restored to its original context as the revival of the Jewish people, or – if Hosea 6:2 can indeed be read as a reference to messianic resurrection – the biblical figure

most closely associated with that miracle would then be Esther, bringing her people back from the brink of death, rather than Jesus.

However, the concluding statement of Midrash Tehillim 22:5 is a bit jarring. After a lengthy passage about salvation, the midrash somewhat awkwardly sums up by returning to the first verse of Psalm 22, asserting that Esther is *ayelet hashachar*, the dawn hind. Here, the midrash seems to be looking forward more so than backward, starting its transition to address the second verse of the psalm: "My G-d, my G-d, why have You abandoned me; why so far from delivering me and from my anguished roaring?" The midrash comforts readers with the idea that, while suffering surely exists, the Eternal will not allow the Jewish people to suffer endlessly or beyond their capacity to endure. And Esther, as the heroine of the midrashic understanding of the Psalm, has the capacity to bring that healing about.

The Clothes Make the Man – or Woman

A Biblical verse that Midrash Tehillim 22 cites repeatedly in discussing Psalm 22 is Micha 7:8: "Do not rejoice over me, O my enemy! Though I have fallen, I rise again; though I sit in darkness, the Eternal is my light."[23] Midrash Tehillim 22:13 juxtaposes the verse with Song of Songs 6:10: "Who is she that shines through like the dawn, beautiful as the moon, radiant as the sun, awesome as bannered hosts?"[24] Each of these verses offers a parallel to the first verse of Psalm 22 in their dual references to military victory and to sunrise. למנצח ("for the leader") in Psalm 22:1 contains the root נ.צ.ח which relates to strength and victory. Micha 7:8 suggests a battle scenario in its discussion of an enemy (איבתי), falling (נפלתי), and

[23] JPS (1985) English translation from Sefaria.org, slightly adapted https://www.sefaria.org/Micah.7?lang=bi
[24] JPS (1985) English translation from Sefaria.org https://www.sefaria.org/Song_of_Songs.6?lang=bi

rising (קמתי). Songs 6:10 incorporates an image of troops bearing flags (בנדגלות). Esther's role as אילת השחר ("the dawn hind") is linked to the light (אור) of the Eternal in Micha, and to dawn (שחר) in Songs. We are meant to read Esther as the heroine ("Who is she" from Songs) who is involved in delivering the Jewish people from its enemies and bringing them from darkness to light.

Having provided this context, the primary midrash draws from a midrash found in Talmud Yerushalmi 4b[25] to make the case for the Purim story being the narrative to which these verses collectively refer; yet, Midrash Tehillim 22:13 makes alterations to the source midrash.[26] The core of both midrashim begins with R. Hiyya bar Abbah and R. Simeon ben Halafta walking in Arbel at dawn and comparing Israel to the sunrise: "At the beginning, light comes little by little; then spreads wider and wider; grows and increases; and at last bursts into shining glory" (Braude 308). To support the argument, each midrash cites verses from Esther, beginning with 2:21[27] where Mordechai sits at the palace gate and overhears the plot to kill Achasverosh, and ending with 8:16: "The Jews enjoyed light and gladness, happiness and honor."[28] The Talmudic midrash builds the middle section of its case by following Mordechai – sitting at the gate as a lowly guard; returning to guard duty after having been honored publicly; leaving the king's presence dressed in elaborate robes and a crown, with the power to issue edicts in the king's name; and as a member of the Jewish

[25] See Buber pp 187, note 67 (סז)
[26] Berkovitz notes that this passage in the Talmud Yerushalmi is the earliest known rabbinic link between Psalm 22 and the story of Purim ("Jewish" 228). This midrash is also included in Esther Rabbah 10:14 and other sources.
[27] Although Buber and Braude both cite Esther 2:21 here, it is worth noting that the same words (ומרדכי ישב בשער־המלך) appear two verses earlier, at the end of 2:19.
[28] JPS (1985) English translation from Sefaria.org https://www.sefaria.org/Esther.8.16?lang=bi

people who are rejoicing in their salvation. The midrash presumably highlights the quickening pace of the improvement in situation (Berkovitz, "Jewish" 229). Whereas there is a gap of approximately four chapters between the first and second citations from Esther, the following gap is only two chapters, and there is no gap at all between the last two verses, which are consecutive. Like the light of dawn, redemption will start slowly and then pick up its pace until "the Jews have light and joy" (Esther 8:16).

Midrash Tehillim 22:13 borrows the initial setup, structure, and first and last verses of the Talmud Yerushalmi midrash, but takes a different approach in its intermediate citations. It abandons the neatly curated approach of the Talmud Yerushalmi and broadens the scope of its chosen verses. Beginning, as does the Talmudic midrash, with Esther 2:21, Midrash Tehillim follows the fate of the Jewish people more generally, rather than using Mordechai as their sole representative, and it loosely incorporates a theme of royal clothing as a symbol of success. The second citation, Esther 5:2, gives Esther a significant, though perhaps not quite central, role in the Midrash Tehillim adaptation. She wins the king's favor and is wearing royal garb at the time (see Esther 5:1), though this is still a modest victory; Esther has dressed *herself* in the regal attire and merely survives her interview with the king without testing the full extent of his offer of half his kingdom (see Esther 5:3-4). The following citation, Esther 6:11, depicts Haman dressing Mordechai in royal robes and parading him publicly as an honor. The next verse, Esther 7:10, departs from the progression of the Jewish people ascending in honor but recaptures the image of military victory as Haman – the quintessential enemy – is impaled on the stake intended for Mordechai. The proximity of the citations increases here as it does in the Talmud

Yerushalmi. The next three citations are all from chapter 8 – verses, 8, 15, and 16 – and return to featuring Mordechai as the central figure. He rapidly gains stature as he is granted authority to save the Jews; is outfitted in richly elaborate royal robes complete with a crown (surpassing his wardrobe in 6:11); and, as a member of the Jewish people, revels in the joy of the ultimate triumph. In departing from the tight format of the midrash in Talmud Yerushalmi 4b, Midrash Tehillim creates space for Esther. By highlighting her along with Mordechai, Midrash Tehillim steers closer to its goal of depicting Esther as *ayelet hashachar* and the subject of Songs 6:10. Similarly, introducing a verse about the downfall of Haman is consistent with the general pattern of Midrash Tehillim's approach to Psalm 22 – emphasizing victory over various enemies, even when hope is thin.

Conclusions

In both subtle and explicit ways, Midrash Tehillim adapts previous midrashic content to accomplish its own goals. It seems clear that in this pericope – the midrashim on Psalm 22 – Midrash Tehillim 22 prioritizes content over form; even if the narrative trajectory of a particular midrash becomes more diffuse than the one from which it borrows (e.g. Talmud Yerushalmi 4b), Midrash Tehillim is willing to make sacrifices to get its points across. The authors were invested in providing both reassurance in times of distress or persecution, as well as ammunition against Christian teachings. By reframing or in some cases rewriting existing midrashim, Midrash Tehillim 22 was able to achieve its aims of casting Esther as a messianic heroine and emphasizing Israel's past and future victories over its enemies. While I have not yet studied a large enough sample of the entire collection of Midrash Tehillim to

be able to make these claims about the work as a whole, these examples show a fairly clear pattern of midrashic alteration regarding Psalm 22.

Chapter 3: Midrash Tehillim 22's Midrashic Style

If midrash were a laboratory experiment, it would be considered bad science. Every midrash begins with an irritant, whether one that is inherent in the text or that originates in the mind of its author(s). Midrash Tehillim 22 addresses both types of these cues in its approach to interpreting Psalm 22. But no matter how the questions arise, midrashic authors almost always have one or more agendas driving their responses to the text, leading them to curate their "experiments" to fit their preexisting "hypotheses." In Midrash Tehillim 22, the rabbinic authors shape the text by seeking proof texts that help accomplish their goals of preaching faith in G-d even in dark times and assuring readers that, no matter how bleak things appear, G-d will not only redeem them but grant them power over their enemies.

Psalm 22 is written in first person narration, presumably in the voice of David per the inscription in the first verse.[29] For example, verse 2 asks, אֵלִי אֵלִי לָמָה עֲזַבְתָּנִי – "My G-d, my G-d, why have You abandoned me?"[30] At first, the protagonist seems alone, surrounded by animals and enemies. The only people he mentions are those who scorn, despise, and mock him (Ps. 22:7-8). Similarly, although the speaker mentions having a mother and, at one point, feeling a sense of security at her breast, that sense of security is credited to G-d (Ps. 22:10-11). The psalmist's isolation comes to a head in verse 12: "Do not be far from me, for trouble is near, and there is none to help."[31] However, there is a shift in worldview as the psalm progresses. Susan Gillingham discusses the fact that many psalms in the Psalter

[29] See Chapter 1 for further discussion.
[30] JPS (1985) English translation from Sefaria.org https://www.sefaria.org/Psalms.22.2?lang=bi
[31] JPS (1985) English translation from Sefaria.org https://www.sefaria.org/Psalms.22.12?lang=bi

are actually composites of earlier works, noting that "some personal psalms have been given a more communal conclusion" (221). This seems to be the case in Psalm 22, or at least aligns to its style. Although the narrative voice remains consistent throughout the psalm, the protagonist's isolation falls away as he addresses an entire community of people that he expects to heed him: "Then will I proclaim Your fame to my brethren, praise You in the congregation" (Ps. 22:23).[32] The tone of the remainder of the psalm is one of relief and joyful praise, though it is possible that the verses only describe an anticipation of these feelings; no verse in the psalm confirms or describes G-d's definitive intervention.

Midrash Tehillim 22 picks up on this tentative experience of salvation and attempts to cast it as a firm reality. The midrashim in this chapter convert images of despair to hopefulness and those of danger to victory. This is most starkly evident in the way that the midrashim treat the various animal representations in Psalm 22.

Animal Portrayals in Psalm 22

Psalm 22 is rife with depictions of animals and their actions. They generally fill three roles: violent predators, a symbol of humility, and a symbol of grace. The predatory animals make up the majority of the references in the psalm. This first occurs in verse 2, where the protagonist's outcries are described as roaring (דִּבְרֵי שַׁאֲגָתִי), like that of a lion. Here, the protagonist identifies himself with a strong beast but does not acknowledge any personal power; the strength manifests in his cry of pain, not in an ability to confront what challenges him. Later in the psalm, as his tone becomes more desperate, the animal depictions are figured as external enemies: being surrounded by mighty bulls (vs. 13);

[32] JPS (1985) English translation from Sefaria.org https://www.sefaria.org/Psalms.22.23?lang=bi

"tearing, roaring lions"[33] (vs. 14); a pack of hungry dogs (vs. 17); a dog who grabs or restrains (vs. 21); a lion's mouth (vs. 22); and the horns of oxen (vs. 22).[34] These are the elements from which the protagonist needs to be saved.

After the instance of the protagonist roaring in pain, he self-identifies with only one other animal – a worm (תּוֹלַעַת): "But I am a worm, less than human; scorned by men, despised by people"[35] (Ps. 22:7). The vignette from verses 7-9 portrays the protagonist as a lowly person, humbled by his peers. The implication, particularly in verse 9, is that he is unworthy of being regarded or rescued by any other person. G-d alone might be tempted to rescue him, though the scorners doubt this possibility, and perhaps the protagonist does as well.

The animal that gets the least direct attention in the psalm[36] oddly has the most prominent position in Midrash Psalms 22. Even before the specific attribution to David, the first verse of the psalm notes that it is for, or regarding, *ayelet hashachar*, "the dawn hind." This mention is unique not just in its language – that word combination existing only here in the entire Tanach – but also in its role in the psalm. Every other animal in the psalm is associated with a negative situation: it is either a danger to the protagonist or a symbol of his despair. The hind's close association with dawn (the phrase is a *smichut* construct with no intervening preposition) suggests that the animal, and perhaps the entire psalm, is a symbol of Divine grace and brighter times ahead. Midrash Tehillim 22 latches onto the

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[33] JPS (1985) English translation from Sefaria.org https://www.sefaria.org/Psalms.22.14?lang=bi
[34] The Aramaic Targum offers its own spin on these verses by converting the animal metaphors to similes, even adding the word עממיא ("people") in verse 13 to clarify that the enemies are humans who act *like* bulls.
[35] JPS (1985) English translation from Sefaria.org https://www.sefaria.org/Psalms.22.7?lang=bi
[36] *Ayelet hashachar* is a compact phrase and there is no verb in the inscription verse.

dawn hind as a literal ray of hope, using the reference as the hook on which to hang its positive *drashot* of the psalm.

Midrashic Technique

Midrash Tehillim 22 reframes Psalm 22 from a poem of anguish and doubt to one of triumph and security. The primary way it attempts this is by inverting the animal depictions. Predatory animals shift from representing the enemy to representing the protagonist or the Jewish people as a whole. Enemies fall victim to animals that they had intended to use as weapons. The humble victim is recast as a powerful entity. And the brief glimmer of hope that the psalm offers is expanded into a shining beacon. As occurs in most midrash, the authors and redactors of Midrash Tehillim 22 pursued these agendas through employing previous midrashic content and through the creative incorporation of biblical verses as proof texts for their arguments.

While the midrashic perspectives are generally tied to linguistic or thematic trends in the biblical text, the authors and redactors of midrashim do not always feel bound to adhere to what appears to be authorial intent. Often, they reverse-engineer the text, looking for openings that will admit creative reinterpretation. In this way, they can give their own views an air of biblical authenticity.

> Many times the Rabbis have a very narrow basis in Scripture on which they form their theological viewpoints (קרא אסמכתא בעלמא; Babylonian Talmud, *Chullin* 64b, 77a). Frequently one get the impression that the Sages actually looked only for an excuse to hang their own exposition on the biblical verse(s). They read the Psalter and deliberately filled in its gaps, based either on other Scriptures which they related to the text by association, or based simply on their own imposed ideas. They insert what in their opinion is missing or should have been included in the text. (Kalimi 77)

In the case of Psalm 22, the authors of the midrashim in Midrash Tehillim appeared to have two agendas. The primary agenda was to portray Psalm 22 as a polemic against Christianity. Due to the many allusions to Psalm 22 in the Christian Gospels, some "Jewish and, later Gentile followers of the early Jesus movement saw Psalm 22 as a traditional prophesy of Jesus' execution" (Berkovitz 225). To combat this phenomenon, it was in the interest of the authors and redactors of Midrash Tehillim 22 to portray the events and protagonist(s) as a depiction of Jewish history, rather than a Christian future.

The second goal of the midrashists seems to be a more general theological principle; they repeatedly make a point of offering comfort in the face of suffering and assuring readers that the Eternal will always come to their rescue. Yet, in the course of that project, the rabbis offer a variety of images of G-d – alleviating Jewish suffering, punishing the enemies of the Jewish people, and even occasionally punishing the Jews themselves, using their enemies as tools. "The plurality of opinions in Midrash Psalms shows that its final editor(s) probably had several views of [G-d], and desired to include all or at least most of them in this midrashic collection. They did not – or could not – take the authority to decide which opinion contained absolute truth (if there is such a thing)" (Kalimi 3). For example, while most of the midrashim in Midrash Tehillim 22 that address the "worm" of Psalm 22:7 are positive – turning the worm into a heroic figure – these approaches are contrasted by a decidedly negative interpretation at the conclusion of Midrash Tehillim 22:20:

> R. Berechiah had four sayings, three concerning men, and one concerning women: Woe[37] unto the living who needs help from the dead. Woe unto the strong who

[37] Braude renders the Aramaic חישך as "woe unto." While this is an appropriate translation in terms of overall meaning, it's worth noting that a more literal translation would be "darkness" rather than "woe." This adds

> needs help from the weak. Woe unto the seeing who needs help from the blind. Woe unto the generation whose leader is a woman, as when *Devorah, a prophetess… [judged Israel]* (Judges 4:4). (Braude 316-7)

This statement appears directly after an affirmation that the Jews are universally hated: "Like a worm despised among creatures of the earth, so the children of Israel are despised among the nations of the earth" (Braude 316). Assuming that the redactors of Midrash Tehillim intended these statements as a thematic unit, the pericope implies that female leadership is a recipe for communal disaster. The excerpt from R. Berechiah narrowly dodges an explicit assault on the Esther narrative by turning its attention on Devorah, the rejected alternative identity of the dawn hind (see Midrash Tehillm 22:1). Yet, his philosophy does not sit well with the majority of Midrash Tehillim 22, which praises a female heroine of the Jewish people.

Small but Mighty

Although the statement by Rabbi Berechiyah stands as a visible outlier, the majority of Midrash Tehillim 22:20 spends significant energy recharacterizing the image of the worm in Psalm 22:7.[38] Since the psalm had been canonized as part of biblical Scripture at the time Midrash Tehillim was redacted, the rabbis, following the traditional rules of engagement for all midrash, were unable to deviate from the *peshat* of the text (Kalimi 77). The protagonist of the psalm *must* be a lowly worm. But ample space is left to cast the worm in a new light, making assets of its supposed liabilities. The midrash juxtaposes Psalm 22:7 with two

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another layer of meaning as the darkness that R. Berechiah prescribes contrasts with the image of the dawn hind, a harbinger of light.

[38] Buber and Braude both footnote that several manuscripts include additional material not included in the officially redacted text of Midrash Tehillim 22:20. These other editions praise the humility of the worm as a virtue, in the style of Abraham (Gen. 18:27), Moses and Aaron (Ex. 16:7), etc. They also emphasize the strength of the worm's mouth to fell enemies like trees.

consecutive verses from Isaiah. Isaiah 41:14 offers a fairly straightforward, logical connection: Jacob, a euphemism for the entire Jewish people, is called a worm (תּוֹלַעַת) and yet is promised Divine help in its troubles. The midrash also plays, though, with Isaiah 41:15, specifically the word פִּיפִיּוֹת (teeth). In the context of the Isaiah verse, פִּיפִיּוֹת refers to the teeth or spikes of a thresher. Midrash Tehillim 22:20 riffs on this, reading the root of פִּיפִיּוֹת – פי, mouth – and retaining its plural usage to represent the mouths of the Israelites, whose effective prayers will "root out the evil decrees which [hostile] nations of the earth devise against them" (Braude 316).

The following pericope in Midrash Tehillim 22:20 juxtaposes the verse from the psalm with Exodus 26:1, where תּוֹלַעַת refers not to the worm itself but to its product: crimson thread. In this section, Braude translates the beginning of Psalm 22:7 as "I am the empurpler," highlighting the complete transformation of the image in the midrash. The תּוֹלַעַת is no longer a lowly creature who crawls on the earth but a creature honored above all others for its ability to produce royal dyes for the Tabernacle. Thus, the protagonist of Psalm 22, who, as demonstrated in the previous section also represents the entire Jewish people, is elevated from the lowest depths to the highest heights.

<u>The Hunter Becomes the Hunted</u>

A clear case of the rabbis bending proof texts to their will is in the first midrash in Midrash Tehillim 22. The authors address the recurring image of dogs attacking the protagonist in verses 17 and 21 of Psalm 22. The authors describe a complete reversal of fortune: in the midrash, the Israelites control the dogs and send them out to devour the corpses of the Israelites' foes. One of the proof texts that the midrash brings to substantiate

this reversal is fairly straightforward; Psalm 68:24 projects exactly the scene the midrash describes: G-d will ensure "that your feet may wade through blood; that the tongue of your dogs may have its portion of your enemies."[39] However, the midrash is not content simply to rebut Psalm 22 directly. To bolster the scope of Israelite triumph, the midrashists choose to cast the Egyptians – Israel's most mighty oppressors – as the enemies that are overrun in this case. This type of narrative leap requires some contrivance to support, however. Explication of the word כְּלָבִים (dogs) might lead a reader directly to the refutation in Psalm 68, but the insertion of the Egyptian narrative seems to be a much bigger stretch by the authors as the Egyptians are not mentioned directly in either Psalm 22 or Psalm 68. So, to build its case, the midrash brings in a verse from Exodus (the end of verse 14:30). This addition assures readers that the Eternal will give Israel superlative power and the ability to punish even Pharaoh's army.

Divine (Natural) Intervention

Several of the midrashim in Midrash Tehillim 22, in an effort to bring the greatest possible comfort to combat the distress of Psalm 22, bring G-d directly into the picture. While the majority of Midrash Tehillim 22 argues that the dawn hind is Esther, there are several instances where the Holy One takes on that role. In Midrash Tehillim 22:5, G-d is assigned the role of *ayelet hashachar*. In order to make this argument effectively, the midrash takes a different approach than it does when dealing with Esther. It ignores the feminine gender of אַיֶּלֶת (hind) and focuses on associating G-d with שַׁחַר, the (masculine) dawn.

[39] JPS (1985) English translation from Sefaria.org https://www.sefaria.org/Psalms.68.24?lang=bi

In this pericope, the entire argument hangs on a fairly contrived connection to the proof text, Genesis 15:12: "As the sun was about to set, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a great dark dread descended upon him."[40] The connection here is thematic rather than linguistic. In the next several verses in Genesis, the Eternal reveals to Abram a prophesy of his descendants being enslaved in Egypt for 400 years. This is the quintessence of suffering in the Jewish mindset. In that same vision, though, G-d promises to deliver retribution to the oppressors, and redemption and prosperity to Abram's seed (Gen. 15:14). In the midrash, G-d is the source of light that can overcome the deepest darkness. The redactors never quite manage to stitch the proof text neatly back to the base verse in Psalms, however. The narrative unit explicates Genesis 15:14, connecting it word by word to multiple verses from the Prophets and Writings, and following the theme of bringing light, without returning to the word "dawn" specifically.

Conclusion

The animal portrayals in Psalm 22 are largely symbols of fear, despair, and oppression. The image of the dawn hind offered a glimpse of hope up front, and the authors of Midrash Tehillim 22 *did* avail themselves of the opportunity to add layers of meaning to that ambiguous phrase. But they did not restrict themselves to using that opening as an inroad for positivity. Instead, the authors took on the challenging task of converting even the most graphic images of defeat into victory. The midrashim that address the animal images in Psalm 22 – from mauling dogs to humble worms – serve as clear examples of how the rabbis curated proof texts to forward their own agendas.

[40] JPS (1985) English translation from Sefaria.org https://www.sefaria.org/Genesis.15.12?lang=bi&aliyot=0

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