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Introduction The Enchanted World of Midrash and Its Unexpected Return in Recent Generations

Midrash's Enchanted World

When I am asked, "What is midrash?" I say that it must be understood first and foremost as an exercise in creativity, with an element of play and pleasure in which sweep and imagination are conjoined. No artistic work springs *ex nihilo*, but rather depends on many years of tradition and culture. Midrash leans on an ancient and uniquely significant literary creation, the Bible, which has come to be known as the "Book of Books." The Bible's importance and centrality in the lives of the Jews of antiquity cannot be exaggerated. It was seen as the very embodiment of God's own words and His revelations to His prophets, and from this, it drew its undisputed status as a holy text. The tales of the people's patriarchs, of the people's origin in Egypt, and of the wanderings in the desert and entry into the Land of Israel were much more than history. They were myths, foundational stories, tracing a way of life, moral principles, faith, and hope. The biblical laws and statutes became the central infrastructure of Jews' legal world and ways of life for generations to come.

The sealing of the biblical canon was an essential step in its becoming a book with sacred standing. Like powerful shafts of light, the Bible stood at the center of life, while the other works written in the following years were relegated to the margins. Those works became known as the Apocrypha (in Greek: hidden, concealed) and *Ha-Sefarim Ha-Hitzonim* (in Hebrew: the books on the outside), an undifferentiated category, fixing their being "outside" the sacred canon.

Unlike those books, the Bible became a source of inspiration and focus of ceaseless attention. At communal gatherings on Sabbaths and festivals, public reading of verses from the Torah stood at the center. Ceremonial

readings aside, biblical tales were told and retold, again and again, and passed from generation to generation. Central scenes were immortalized by wall paintings and floor mosaics in public buildings and synagogues. The tales and images of biblical heroes were incorporated into religious liturgy and popular song. The biblical laws were expanded on and interpreted in legal works. This widespread, multifaceted creativity didn't threaten the Bible's sacred status, but rather anchored its centrality and sacredness. There were even those who studied the Bible word for word and knew all its parts by heart. It is in light of all this that we can understand the flowering of the distinctive literary creation called midrash.

WHAT IS MIDRASH, AND WHAT IS IT TRYING TO DO?

The creators of midrash were several thousand sages who lived in the first centuries of the Common Era, in Babylonia and the Land of Israel. They are generally divided into two categories: the *Tannaim*, sages who lived from roughly 1 to 200 CE and were active in the Land of Israel, and the *Amoraim*, who lived from roughly 200 to 500 CE, and were active in the two geographic centers, the Land of Israel and Babylon. These sages studied the Bible deeply and intensely, and they dealt with biblical verses in creative ways. This is, in essence, the meaning of the word "midrash," literally, "searching out and exploring sacred scripture."¹

What is the central purpose of that search in biblical verses? What did the sages seek to find in the sacred texts? Many think, mistakenly, that the rabbis' central purpose was to explain difficult texts or explicate passages that were not understandable. This, though, can explain only a small part of the midrashic corpus. In the places where the rabbis reflect on what they were doing, their motives were matters of faith and flowed from an educational philosophy. They wanted to forge a strong, lively connection between the Torah and their lives and make it meaningful and relevant to their contemporaries.

Here lies a paradox and wonder: the centrality and holiness of the Bible didn't lead the sages to a frozen understanding of the texts or rigidity in understanding their contents. To the contrary. They brought forth rich and diverse innovation of a multiplicity of meanings by way of imagination and creativity. Rather than lock up the Scriptures and guard them like frail

crystals easily shattered, the sages took pains to use verses over and over every which way to give them a real place in their lives. They didn't want the Torah to become something empty and irrelevant, and they thought that the responsibility to make sure that didn't happen rested on their shoulders. In one of the lovely images, they command themselves to dig in the Torah like farmers plowing their fields, turning its clods and working its mounds of earth. They believed that all truths were to be found, and they would find them by searching and exploring well.² Midrash, the searching and exploration within the verses, yielded educational messages, concepts and ideas, and approaches to contemporary problems, and expressed intellectual and philosophical depth.

THE MIDRASHISTS' TOOL KIT

The preoccupation with and searching in biblical verses was done through midrashic tools that forge a connection between the verse and an abstract thought. The midrashic process exhibits three components: the biblical verse, the starting point of every reading; the theological idea or educational message that the midrashist seeks to convey to listeners; and the midrashic methods, which combine the other two components. The task of midrashic methods is to forge the connection between biblical verse and abstract thought.

The contents of the midrashic tool kit are many and varied. To the sages, the sanctity of Scripture renders it capable of interpretation in almost any way. Almost any path is fit and worthy to find meaning in the Torah, in which, the rabbis believed, all was contained and all could be found. We detail a few. Sometimes the sages detached the verses from their syntactical confines and so changed their meaning and contents. Sometimes they removed a verse from its context and so poured into it new meaning. Sometimes they broke words into pieces and constructed new ones without feeling constrained by Scripture's own word divisions. At times they even interpreted single letters as though they stood by themselves, then expounded on the letters' sounds, their order in the alphabet, or the meaning of their names. The sages thought the order of biblical passages doesn't necessarily reflect a historical continuum, and so they sought out connections between different passages that happened to appear near one

another and tried to explain their placement. At times they read proper names as telling something about the person's life story and character, and they also identified biblical place names with locations known to them.

These examples are but a small taste of the different, creative means through which the sages interpreted the Torah. The paths of midrash are so many and so varied that they can't all be enumerated. Every attempt to boil down midrash to a set of rules and definitions is bound for failure, because there is always in it some feature that is boundary defying and surprising.

SO, HOW DOES IT WORK?

The sages played creatively with biblical language, eliciting new ideas and original interpretations. Textual difficulties, real and imagined, stimulated the rabbis' religious thinking. Getting at a midrash's content requires first understanding the verse's original meaning, then identifying the way the midrashist is using the verse to create new meaning and establish the moral he is trying to convey via this reading to his listeners.

Here's an example of a derashah, which changes a word's vocalization (bearing in mind that the Hebrew alphabet consists entirely of consonants and the biblical text itself and as written in Torah scrolls is unvocalized) to elicit an educational message as well as deal with a theological problem. In the Garden of Eden, after Adam and Eve eat from the Tree of Knowledge, they hear God's voice approaching through the garden and hide from it among the trees. God calls out: *And Lord God called out to Adam and asked, Where are you?* (Gen 3:9). This verse raises a theological problem: Does God really not know where Adam is hiding? The midrashist solved this problem by changing the familiar vocalization. Instead of *ayekah* (Where are you?), he vocalizes it, *eykhah* (How?).³ God's question shifts from Adam's physical location (Where are you?) to his degraded moral state (How did this happen to you?). The point of the question is to express astonishment, and rebuke, for Adam's degradation, from listening to his creator to listening to the serpent, to falling from wholeness into sin. There is also here a note of mourning, a dirge, for this wondrous, traitorous creature, as "eykhah" is also the opening word of the Book of Lamentations, the biblical elegy for the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem. The real-live, educational message of this derashah is to emphasize the immense potential of human beings,

God's own handiwork, to recall the great expectations that God invests in them, and at the same time warn of the great temptation of sin, which may perhaps bring momentary pleasure but has far-reaching consequences that lead to moral failure, remoteness from God, and exile from the Garden.

With the aid of midrashic tools, the sages could reverse the plain sense of the text. A good example of this appears in the Genesis story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. After God informs Abraham of His intention to destroy the cities of the valley, Abraham cries out, *Don't do it, sweep away the righteous with the wicked, that so the righteous should be as the wicked; don't do it; shall not the Judge of all the earth do justly?* (Gen 18:25). On its face, Abraham is asking God to take His place as a judge and render proper judgment and justice. He argues that the righteous should be judged by their deeds, not by those of the city as a whole. Thus, justice will be done. Rabbi Levi introduces a derashah that turns the meaning upside down.⁴ He reads the verse not as a question but as stating a fact: the judge of the world should not do justice. Abraham asks God to not do justice and stay the hand of the full severity of the law, for the world cannot endure if God holds it to account to the last jot and tittle. In Rabbi Levi's view, the world's existence depends on *middat ha-hesed*, God's attribute of loving-kindness, that which enables the world to exist and endure. This derashah beautifully illustrates how one can, through midrashic tools, upend the meaning of the verse. By the plain sense, Abraham sought that God do justice, and by Rabbi Levi's derashah he asked precisely the opposite, that God not go by the letter of the law, and choose kindness instead. The idea behind this derashah is that loving-kindness, *hesed*, is woven into the very fabric of human society and enables its very existence.

The midrashim regularly deal with visual and physical aspects of the text. For instance, Rabbi Jonah asks why God chose to create the world and open the Torah with the letter *bet*, the first letter in the word *Bereshit* (and the second in the Hebrew alphabet).⁵ The answer to this question relates to the letter's graphic form: ׀

Rabbi Jonah thinks that the letter *bet* was chosen for its being closed on three sides and open only on one (pointing toward the next letters to follow, because Hebrew is read from right to left). The point is to teach that one shouldn't try to investigate what preceded Creation, or matters concerning divinity or the netherworld, but rather on the words of Torah to follow.

Rabbi Jonah is fixing interpretive boundaries regarding the midrashic enterprise in general, and he sees in the first letter a kind of key to the whole.

It is important to emphasize that the midrashim, at times reversing the meaning of Scripture and transposing verses as they do, are not meant to negate the meaning of Scripture or undermine its sanctity. Our sages saw in Scripture the living words of a living God, the verses holding a vast treasure trove of insight and guidance and, in their folds, the past, present, and future. Engagement with Scripture through midrashic work revived the verses and made them relevant to the lives of the faithful. The *derashah* was a tool for the sages to grapple with the problems of the hour and, with its help, lay out for their students and listeners a complex world of beliefs, doctrines, and opinions.

WHERE CAN YOU FIND MIDRASHIM?

The many, many *derashot*, or midrashic creations, of the sages were gathered together in collections which came to be known as “midrashim. This process started at the beginning of the third century CE and proceeded to the beginning of the seventh century CE (some works underwent revision for a long time after). The materials were gathered around the specific biblical books to which they related. One central characteristic of these compositions is that they are not the work of any one sage but rather anthologies of teachings by different sages over centuries. The *derashot* in the midrashic collections are sometimes attributed to known sages and sometimes are anonymous. At times, we find in the midrashic collections matters unrelated to scriptural interpretation, such as tales of the sages’ contemporaries, aphorisms, maxims, and more.

Though the sages seem to have dealt with the entirety of Scripture, we have edited collections only on some of the biblical books. From the tannaitic period, we have collections on four of the five books of the Pentateuch: Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These compositions are known as *Midrashei Ha-Tannaim* or *Midrashei Halakhah*, because they also contain *derashot* on legal and halakhic matters, chiefly establishing clear rules regarding concrete practice and daily life. The midrashim of the amoraim encompass the following books of the Bible: Genesis, Leviticus, and the Five Scrolls (Lamentations, the Song of Songs,

Ruth, Ecclesiastes, and Esther). We also have amoraic midrashim built around the annual cycle rather than specific biblical books as such. These midrashim are also called *Midrashei Aggadah*, for they deal mainly with conceptual matters and the sages’ theological ideas, and hardly touch on legal or halakhic questions.⁶ In later periods other midrashic collections took shape around the books of the Pentateuch (*Tanhuma*), some of the Prophetic books (Samuel and Jonah), the Writings (Psalms and Proverbs), and other portions as well.

Despite midrash’s seeming confinement to one specific genre of interpretation of one specific set of texts, namely Scripture, the midrashic enterprise encompasses a surprising range of forms: delicately close readings alongside wildly imaginative renderings; legends that ascend the most sublime heights of religious thought, alongside comic descriptions; and more. The sages used a variety of rhetorical and literary forms. Their desire to center their work around the books of Scripture yielded an astounding interpretive and conceptual world. Moreover, aggadic midrashim regularly appear in the halakhic discussions of the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud; and they attest to the centrality and significance the sages accorded the midrashic interpretation of scripture.

Midrash continued to work its charms on succeeding generations and became a canonical text in itself. The riches it held served biblical commentators and thinkers, and theologians drew ideas from it. Its widespread diffusion throughout the Jewish diaspora is seen already in the Middle Ages. The midrashic collections were among the first to roll off the newly invented printing presses of the sixteenth century and were reprinted again and again in numerous editions. With the advent of the Internet, midrashim have become accessible to all via digital means. Thus the midrashic corpus has become a source of inspiration to teachers, scholars, artists, and thinkers in our day.

Midrash’s Unexpected Return

Recent generations have seen a renewed flourishing of midrashic writing, including among women. The phenomenon of women writing midrash began in the United States in the 1970s. At first at the margins, then with growing legitimacy in different circles, it gathered momentum and spread

to different geographic locations. The first appearance of this trend in Israel can be seen with the publication in 2003 of the booklet of Rivkah Lubitch, *Va-Telekh li-Drosh: Midrash Nashi Yotzer* (“And She Went Searching: Creative Women’s Midrash”).⁷ The fruits of women’s midrashic writing in the subsequent years we see, among others, in the two volumes of *Dirshuni—Midrashei Nashim* and in this book.⁸

The sages who produced the midrashim in the early centuries CE were elite male scholars. Their midrashic creativity reflects their perspectives on the biblical sources. We can learn from it their characteristic forms of expression and creative skill and the educational and moral messages they sought to impart to their contemporaries. We have not a single midrash written by a woman in those centuries. Although the texts at times give voice to female heroines and describe their deeds and works, those were formulated and transmitted to us by the sages. The estimation of any given female character, for good or ill, the way in which her place and role are depicted, was shaped by their point of view. So the very existence of midrashim written by women is a tremendous innovation in the annals of literary creativity in general and of Hebrew literary and cultural creativity in particular and holds within its folds many other innovations.

This anthology contains midrashim written by Israeli women in recent decades, with distinguishing characteristics of its own when compared to the women’s midrashim that preceded them. To get a sense of this, let’s look at the three components of midrashic process: the use of biblical verses, the use of the midrashic tool kit, and the theological and moral ideas reflected in these midrashim.

WHAT IS DISTINCTIVE ABOUT WOMEN’S INTERPRETATIONS OF SCRIPTURE?

Writing midrash takes deep knowledge not only of the biblical narrative but of the words themselves and of biblical grammar and syntax. Scholars have noted that the 1960s and 1970s saw an appreciable rise in the number of American women studying Bible and biblical interpretation in established educational institutions, which gave women unmediated access to Scripture.

From the first tendrils of women’s midrashic writing up to this book, the

extent to which women are drawn to female biblical figures is obvious. They feel deeply tied to them and easily identify with them when discussing the search for a mate, the tensions of marital life, the longing to embrace a child, the pains of childbirth, the difficulty of separation from a married daughter, exposure to domestic violence, silencing, rape, and more.

In writing on female biblical figures, we see innovation in training focus on the women and in sounding their voices. The number of women mentioned in the Bible is dramatically smaller than that of men. Their roles in the plots are limited, and the names of many of them go unmentioned. The midrashim written by women focusing on female figures give them visage and name, add depictions and feelings, articulate hidden thoughts, and vocalize their stances in their encounters with other biblical personages. Women writing about women regularly seek to dispel misleading impressions, to explain differently the motives for their actions. The writers generally display empathy and faithfulness to biblical women; only a few write critically of them. This writing from a point of identification can explain the force of the emotions coming to expression in midrashim written by women.

Nonetheless, the depiction of biblical women in women’s midrashim is by no means uniform and reflects the worldviews of the writers themselves, which vary greatly from one another. Jody Myers, an American scholar of modern Jewish history and religion, and one of the first to note and research women’s midrashic writing, understands the different faces of women’s midrashic writing in North America in its early decades in terms of writers’ affiliations to one social or religious group or another. Women in more conservative circles seek to ground and strengthen traditional concepts of women’s place in home and society. They emphasize the virtue of self-sacrifice, of acceptance and equanimity, and the magnitude of the assistance afforded by the woman behind the curtain. Women seeking to further feminist perspectives emphasize the daring, pioneering spirit and shattering of conventions. Interestingly, this dichotomy does not reflect the midrashim gathered in the volume of *Dirshuni*. As time goes on, women of similar backgrounds articulate a range of feminist views and sometimes opposing views, and at times the same writer offers different feminist perspectives in different midrashim.

Another current of recent change has been in the expanded range of

the writers toward biblical themes and topics not connected to women. For instance, women write midrashim on such topics as sexual violence between males, on theological issues such as humanity's relation to God, and post-Holocaust theology. The women's voices afford a new and different angle on these issues. Another current of change is exploration through midrash of issues that aren't biblical at all, such as tales of sages (a subgenre of the classical midrashim and, now, developed in the writers' imaginations); prayer; the Haggadah; Kabbalistic texts; and more.

HOW DO WOMEN USE MIDRASHIC TOOLS?

Every midrash holds a structural tension between preservation and innovation. The midrashist proceeds from the centrality of Scripture, seeks not to undermine it but to add another layer of meaning through which to express new ideas and connect them to contemporary questions. One can discern among some of the women midrashists, especially early on, a concern not to diminish the sanctity of Scripture and to present their writing as not threatening the status of messages of the Book of Books. The desire to retain hierarchy comes to expression in the use of language and intertextual citations seeking to legitimize new ideas by reliance on earlier exegeses.

One can see how over time and with the development of women's midrashic writing, these distinctions steadily disappear. The women's midrashim in this book are not seeking legitimacy for plowing the text again and again, interpreting them as did the sages. They take in hand the language and style of the classic midrashim in a range of forms and articulations.

Intimacy with the Hebrew Language One striking characteristic of this book, differentiating it from the midrashim written in North America, is the writers' intimacy with the language of the Bible and rabbinic literature. The writers speak Hebrew every day, feel at home in it, and use it as raw material with great untrammelled freedom. The midrashim in the Hebrew volumes of *Dirshuni* evince a clear return to the rabbinic tool kit and the rabbis' regularly playful engagement with words and their meanings. The writing in rabbinic language places the women firmly in the interpretive continuum and echoes the deep connections the sages themselves felt to the Hebrew language.

A Multiplicity of Views Rabbinic literature displays a polysemic multiplicity of views. The Talmuds and the midrashim offer a range of interpretations to every verse and idea. In this book, we can see that the women midrashists seek to retain this diversity of views in their own work. Some midrashim depict women's study in a beit midrash—house of study, referred to as *Beit Midrashah shel Beruriah*—Beruriah's House of Study. This concept was invented by the midrashist Rivkah Lubitch and has since won adherents among other women midrashists. This is an imaginary beit midrash of women, at whose head stands Beruriah, a well-known figure in rabbinic literature, daughter of the Tanna, Hanina ben Teradion, and the wife of Rabbi Meir (a leading sage of the Mishnah), who was known for her wisdom and learning. Other midrashim bring the diversity of views by presenting differing interpretations of one biblical text or another, each reflecting differing life experiences, states of mind, or moral and theological stances. At times the varying voices reflect the writer's own internal ambivalences or simply enable them to explore different potential interpretations.

This phenomenon of multiple voices, displaying the diversity of women's views, sends the message that women are not uniform in their views and must not be seen in essentialized terms as all sharing the same worldview and theology. The desire to sound voices silenced until now does not prevent other voices from being heard and encourages a stance of tolerance.

Talmudic Expressions In the volumes of *Dirshuni*, the place of the Babylonian Talmud as a source of inspiration is unmistakable. This phenomenon was made possible by the opening of the gates of Talmud study to women in recent decades. Unlike the study of Bible and midrash, the Talmud has always been seen as a masculine stronghold. Until recently, women were not allowed to study Talmud and were systematically excluded from every legal discussion that yielded authoritative rulings on Jewish law. Israeli anthropologist Tamar El-Or has shown that in recent decades, Modern Orthodox society in Israel has undergone dramatic change with the entry of women into the worlds of Talmud and Halakhah (traditional Jewish law) in women's high schools and higher education.

Starting in the 1980s, pluralistic batei midrash began to appear in Israel, part of a broader movement of Jewish cultural renewal, and these enabled women from a broader range of Israeli society to deeply explore Talmud and

other Jewish sources. Two of these new batei midrash in particular stand out: Niggun Nashim in Oranim College and Beit Midrash Elul in Jerusalem. Both encourage creative responses to the study of texts, and many of the midrashim in the volume of *Dirshuni* originated there.

One of the things that opened up the Talmud to broader ranks of society, and women in particular, was the monumental work of the late Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz. His massive translation of the Babylonian Talmud into modern Hebrew comes with running commentary, vocalization, explanations of Talmudic realia, and introductions. The first volumes appeared in 1967, and the many volumes that have followed have transformed the landscape of Talmudic study in Israel.

The midrashim in this book exhibit deep understanding of and engagement with Talmudic texts, reflected not least in the regular use of Hebrew and Aramaic Talmudic expressions taken from both legal and nonlegal rabbinic texts. Some midrashim are written entirely in the distinctive forms of Talmudic give-and-take. This writing in Talmudic style, hitherto the sole province of men, at times raises a protest against masculine perspectives from within and reverses power relations in bold and unexpected ways.

Legal Discussions in Women's Midrashim The opening of the gates of Talmudic study to women has resulted, among other things, in their entry into the world of Halakhah, traditional Jewish law, which in the past was the exclusive preserve of men. Changes like these came as a revolution from below, beginning in the margins, dismissed by the establishment but penetrating to its heart, in time. In increasing numbers, women began to enter the world of halakhic adjudication and rule-making as *yoatzot halakhah*, halakhic counselors, *to'anut rabbaniyot*, pleaders in rabbinic courts, and *poskot*, rendering halakhic judgments and writing learned articles and opinions.

Perusing the biographies of the women whose midrashim appear in this book reveals that many of them are indeed active in these halakhic areas too, so one distinctive feature of this book is the striking extent to which halakhic issues relating to women feature in the midrashim: *agunot* (grass widows), *aqarut hilkhaitit* (conception made difficult by misalignment between halakhic rules and women's varying menstrual cycles), *mesuravot get* (women whose husbands refuse to grant them a divorce), *yibum* (levirate marriage), and *mamzerut* (illegitimate children).

These midrashim make use of the familiar terminology of Midrashei Halakhah and make use of citations reflecting deep knowledge of halakhic literature through the centuries, from the Talmud, through the Middle Ages, up to the writings of contemporary halakhic authorities.

Blessings and Prayers Rabbinic literature contains blessings and prayers composed for different and special occasions, seeking to infuse significant moments in life with religious meaning. In this book, you will find midrashim in which the writers complete or add to traditional prayers and blessings, as well as introduce new ones that they feel are missing from their religious worlds, giving expression to women's subjective experiences that the male halakhic world cannot provide.

The world of ritual includes liturgical texts conveying the individual's connection to the community and the participants' identification with what the ritual represents. In this light, one cannot but be struck by the absence of women from traditional liturgies, such as the Passover Haggadah, prayers for rain and dew, and many others. A number of midrashim in this book seek to fill that void. The writers employ the familiar forms of prayers or conventional liturgies but put women and their actions at the center. This assertion demands the community to recognize women's place in the history of the Jewish people and emphasizes the importance of identification with female figures as part of the religious experience of men and women alike.

WHAT IDEAS AND IDEOLOGIES ARE THESE MIDRASHIM TRYING TO CONVEY?

Up to now, we have been exploring innovations in the ways women's midrashim offer new ways of reading biblical narratives and the ways they use rabbinic literary methods, style, and language. It is time to take a look at a third angle: the distinctive messages these women seek to impart via the moral and ideological world emerging from these midrashim.

Patriarchal Perspectives as Mistaken Understandings of God's Will and His Torah One issue regularly arising in this book is contention with offensive patriarchal notions, inappropriate comments about women, and the absence of gender equality. A dominant message is that these stances reflect

a mistaken understanding of God's ways. This is not what God truly wants. The writers show how to use the same idiom and rabbinic tools to create a different and better reality. In some of the midrashim, God is described as looking with sorrow on human mistakes, yet because of the interpretive freedom He has given humanity and the absence of prophecy after the destruction of the Temple, He is unable to intervene.

One especially fascinating character appearing in the women's midrashim is Tanot, a literary figure appearing in a midrash of Rivkah Lubitch about Jephthah's daughter (see page 89). Tanot becomes a motif in the midrashim of other writers as well. Tanot is the soul of Jephthah's daughter, offered up as a sacrifice by her father, functioning as a heavenly intermediary between humanity and God. Tanot, sitting at the feet of the Shekhinah—the female countenance of God in rabbinic tradition—and pleading before Her women's wounds at the hands of patriarchy.

In some of the midrashim, God is attentive to the women's cries over the injustices done to them and seeks to redress the injustices in His world. Some offer the hope that in the future, the truth will come to light, and there will be repair.

The Significance of a Feminine Point of View Different midrashim in this book engage women in forming their own identities by their own lights, in discovering feminine sexuality or describing the ways in which men come to feminist consciousness, as they come to understand the independence and subjectivity of women, bearers of will and aspirations of their own. An idea that appears in several midrashim is that women experience reality differently owing to biology and their life experiences.

The message arising from these midrashim is that the feminine point of view is essential for the world's balanced existence. Women's voices can bring about change and avoid catastrophe, domestic and political. Their rebellion and protest are meaningful even when their views do not prevail, as they endure as a sign and symbol for the generations to come. Women's faith flows from a deep, unmediated connection to God, since they have been exposed at firsthand to His ways, partners as they are to bringing life into the world. And so in a number of the midrashim, God pays careful attention to what women say and honors what they think.

In Her Image Divinity in women's midrashim is at times depicted as female, or as a Being who has feminine dimensions. According to these writers, God's being depicted as male and Her being accorded conventionally masculine attributes is the result of patriarchal conceptions, reflecting a partial and mistaken understanding of God. In this book, divinity is at times portrayed as a compassionate mother, as a woman seeking a mate, or as a woman who has miscarried and is now hopeless and depressed. The moral and ideological message here is that the model of God derives from the model of what is human. This is a reversal of the idea that humanity is created in God's image. God is recreated in the image of male or female. God is depicted as lacking, in need of completion and support. The humanity that God has created reveals to Him/Her new sides in themselves. This theological reversal enlarges and fortifies the divine image, enabling the faithful to identify more easily with it.

Women's Erudition as Spiritual Experience Within women's midrashim, we find reflections on the writing itself and its consequences. The writers seek to raise consciousness and stimulate discussion of the process in which we find ourselves today in which women work to achieve lives of study and spiritual experience akin to those of men. They depict the steep prices paid by women who lived in conservative Jewish frameworks, which encouraged only men to develop spiritually and assume leadership. They search for spousal relationships that will enable both partners to develop spiritually and to actualize themselves.

The sages believed that the study of Scripture and the work of biblical interpretation are of religious value. The ability to discover new facets and understandings is a form of revelation and a reenactment of the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. The ideology arising from the pages of *Dirshuni* is that women's engagement in the study and interpretation of Scripture and the discovery of new meanings is a process of revelation too. Hence, the phenomenon of women forging midrash is a kind of historical repair and recreates the revelation at Sinai anew, this time with women's meaningful participation.

In some of the midrashim, midrash is conceived of as an expression of longing for nearness to God and the result of a long quest. Some of the

women exhibit awareness of the personal and social costs that they are likely to pay for their innovation, audacity, and the messages they are trying to convey. At the same time there is a sense of mission: they see this work as creating a better, repaired, reality for themselves and their daughters.

Democratization of Religious Authority: Women's Involvement in the World of Halakhah Rabbinic literature is replete with discussions of legal issues affecting everyday life. The sages created midrashei aggadah and, alongside them, midrashei halakhah tying biblical verses to legal matters. Similarly, the women in this book deal with legal issues through scriptural interpretation and so seek to influence contemporary halakhic discourse.

Among the contributors to this book are women who in their professional lives are responsible for the welfare and well-being of different women. They are physicians, attorneys, therapists, and educators, as well as advocates who represent women in the rabbinic court system. Through their writings, they offer criticism of the halakhic system, which displays lack of understanding of women, their bodies, and their life cycles. In the midrashim, they express their frustration at the conservatism and calcification of the rabbinic courts with regard to *mesuravot get*, levirate marriage and illegitimacy. Some of the midrashim contend with rabbinic legal pronouncements dealing with women's roles in the home, in education and childrearing, and in their standing as legal persons.

The women in the images offer reasoned, grounded halakhic solutions to problems or point to openings that will facilitate change in the system of adjudication itself that falls on deaf ears. The injustice is depicted as the result of conservatism, or poor judgment, misinterpretation of the spirit of the law in a way contrary to God's true will. The message is a demand from contemporary halakhic decision-makers to follow in the path of the sages, to show boldness and creativity so that the Halakhah finds solutions to the painful problems of today rather than being something petrified.

In some midrashim, God wails and mourns for the absence of justice in His world and the reality in which He and His intentions are distorted. Other midrashim depict a utopian reality in which a feminine *beit midrash* explores an halakhic issue that causes severe social distress and after a well-reasoned discussion establishes a precedential decision achieving the right result.

Repairing Social Failures: Rape, Sexual Abuse, and Incest Different midrashim describe the dreadful societal failure of hiding and denying the sexual abuse of children, rape, and incest. They use familiar biblical stories, like the rapes of Dinah and Tamar, while boldly interpreting other biblical stories in a creative way, discerning there too similar phenomena, such as Noah and his sons, Ishmael and Abraham's daughter, Mordechai and Esther. The writers' aim is to show a widespread phenomenon from the days of the Bible to the present. The midrashim illuminate the respective failures of family and community and the silencing of victims precisely by the people closest to them, who thus become accomplices to the crime. For the victims, this is one more blow and one more obstacle to overcoming and healing. The midrashim demand taking immediate responsibility rather than staying silent.

Accepting the Other as a Religious and Moral Imperative Some midrashim raise a call for an accepting and open stance toward different persons and varied families in our social fabric. These midrashim work to legitimize alternative families of our day in reliance on biblical stories at the heart of social consensus. They explore the ways of life of the different families and moral potential they hold as a model for moral sensitivity and inclusion. Other midrashim deal with women who are at a socioeconomic disadvantage and urge compassion toward the children of foreign workers. The demand to embrace them is portrayed as a divine religious obligation and human moral imperative.

Conclusion

This introduction has presented the enchanted world of midrash, an ancient and unique literary genre that has enjoyed a remarkable return in recent decades thanks to women writers. The word "midrash" means searching and investigating and thus reflects as well the search and exploration of the women writers themselves—a search for their feminine identities and distinctive voices and for their equal place in a society of study and creativity. Women's midrashim, like those of the sages, forge new ties between Scripture and burning issues and contemporary questions in audacious and innovative ways.

Their writing uncovers pain, distress, dealing with loss, vulnerability,

and awareness of a deeply flawed reality badly in need of repair. And at the same time, these Midrashim offer a breeze of great hope for change, or renewal, and the making of a better world for themselves and the generations to come.

Notes

1. In the Bible, the root D-R-SH appears, meaning to search for and explore after God (see, e.g., Deut 13:15, Gen 25:22). Over time, it underwent a dramatic shift to mean search for and exploring after the meaning of Scripture: *For Ezra devoted himself to search out—li-drosh—God’s Torah* (Ez 7:10).

2. Mishnah Avot 5:2: Turn it over and over, for everything is in it. Talmud Yerushalmi Peah 1:1: Rabbi Menna said: *For it is no empty thing to you* (Deut 32:47)—and if it is empty, the empty one is you, and why, because you don’t work at it hard enough, for *it is your life* (ibid.), when it is your life, when you are hard at work at it.

3. Midrash Bereshit Rabbah, 19:9 (Theodor-Albeck, ed., 178–79): *And Lord God called out to Adam and asked where are you?* What happened to you? Yesterday, acting by my mind, today by the serpent’s! Yesterday, from one end of the world to the other, and now, hiding inside a garden tree.

4. Midrash Bereshit Rabbah, 49:9 (Theodor-Albeck, ed., 511): Rabbi Levi said: *Will not the judge of all the world do justice?* (Gen 18:25) If it is a world You seek, there is no justice. And if it is justice You seek, there is no world. You’re grabbing the rope from both ends. You’re asking for a world, and for justice. And if You don’t relent a little, the world cannot stand.

5. Midrash Bereshit Rabbah 1:10–11 (Theodor-Albeck, ed., 8–10).

6. One must distinguish between the word “aggadah” (legend), which in modern Hebrew means a fiction or folk tale (as in the Brothers Grimm), and the word “aggadah” as used by the sages, which means nonlegal material.

7. Rivkah Lubitch, *Va-Telekh li-Drosh: Midrash Nashi Yotzer* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University/Gottesfeld Institute for the Study of Women, 2003).

8. *Dirshuni—Midrashei Nashim*, vol. 1, Nehama Weingarten-Mintz and Tamar Biala, eds. (Tel Aviv and Jerusalem: Miskal-Yedioth Ahronoth Books and the Jewish Agency for Israel, 2009); *Dirshuni—Midrashei Nashim*, vol. 2, Tamar Biala, ed. (Tel Aviv: Miskal-Yedioth Ahronoth Books, 2018).

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