



Midrash and the Rabbinic Imagination

Rabbi Ethan Tucker



Key Distinctions in Judaism?

בין ישראל לעמים

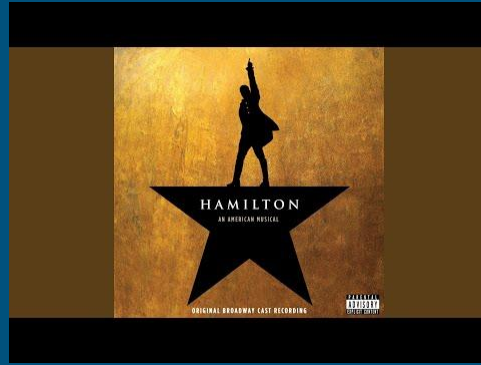
בין הקדש ובין קדש הקדשים

בין פשט לדרש

Daniel Boyarin,
Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash

“The text of the Torah is gapped and dialogical, and into the gaps the reader slips, interpreting and completing the text in accordance with the codes of his or her culture.”

Reading the Torah Like a Love Letter



My dearest Angelica

My dearest, Angelica

“One Stroke and You’ve Consumed My Waking Days”

My dearest Angelica

- Conventional
- “Dearest” is a modifier

My dearest, Angelica

- Less Common
- “Dearest” stands in apposition

What Piques Angelica's Attention?

1. Awareness of a more common, alternate formulation, suggesting that the version in front of her is pregnant with meaning.
2. She comes to the letter with a set of emotions that affect her reading of it.

Genesis 1:1—How To Translate?

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ:

Declarative Sentence:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

Subordinate Clause:

When God began creating the heavens and the earth...

The Grammatical Problem

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ:

1. The word בָּרָא is a third-person, singular, past-tense verb. It is not an infinitive. The infinitive form would be בְּרֹא, which is used elsewhere.
2. The word בְּרֵאשִׁית is always used in connection with the word that follows, in the sense of “in the beginning of...”

A Midrash–Bereshit Rabbah 1:1

רבי הושעיה רבה פתח (משלי ח) ואהיה
אצלו אמן...

אמן אמן, התורה אומרת אני הייתי כלי
אומנתו של הקדוש ברוך הוא, בנוהג
שבעולם מלך בשר ודם בונה פלטין, אינו
בונה אותה מדעת עצמו אלא מדעת אמן,
והאמן אינו בונה אותה מדעת עצמו, אלא
דיפתראות, ופינקסאות יש לו, לדעת היאך
הוא עושה חדרים, היאך הוא עושה פשפושין

R. Hoshaya the Great opened with the verse:
“I was with him as an *amon*... (Proverbs 8)

Amon=Uman, an artisan’s tool. The Torah
says: “I was God’s tool.” When a flesh and
blood king builds a palace, he doesn’t just
build it from his own mind; he has an
architect. And the architect doesn’t just build
it from his own mind; he has notebooks and
tablets to know how to make the rooms and
the passageways

A Midrash—Bereshit Rabbah 1:1

כך היה הקדוש ברוך הוא מביט
בתורה, ובורא את העולם,
והתורה אמרה בראשית ברא
אלהים, ואין ראשית אלא תורה,
היאך מה דאת אמר (משלי ח)
ה' קנני ראשית דרכו.

In the same way, the Holy and Blessed One looked into the Torah and created the world, and the Torah said, “God created the world with *reishit*”, and *reishit* is none other than Torah, as it says, “God created me first of all.” (Proverbs 8)

What Happened Here?

- We addressed a grammatical problem
- We expressed a powerful idea

Careful (re)reading

- The first sentence of the Torah is indeed a declarative sentence, and the word **בְּרָא** means what it normally means: “he created.”
- The word **בְּרֵאשִׁית** is reread so that it need not connect with what follows. It becomes a *prepositional phrase*, and the explaining the *medium* with which God created the world, the *noun* **רֵאשִׁית**, which refers to the Torah.

The Idea

- Can the Torah really be the contingent product of human history?
- How can the Jewish covenant with God be something that is not essential to the world?
- No, the Torah is the very blueprint of the world, and the Torah itself, read carefully, yields this truth.

The Essence of Midrash

A Text Worthy of Note



Midrash



An Idea in Need of Articulation

Midrash: A Workshop

The Midrash

שמות לב:א - ו

וַיֵּרָא הָעָם כִּי-בִישָׁשׁ מֹשֶׁה לָרֶדֶת מִן-הָהָר וַיִּקְהֵל הָעָם עַל-אֶהֱרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ

Shemot 32:1-6

When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aaron and said to him, “Come, make us a god who shall go before us...”

Aaron said to them, “Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.”...

This he took from them and cast in a mold, and made it into a molten calf. And they exclaimed, “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!”

When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron announced: “Tomorrow shall be a festival for the Lord!”...

The Midrash

מדרש תנחומא פרשת כי תשא סימן יג
באותה שעה אמר להם חור: קשה עורף! אין
אתם נזכרים מה עשה לכם?
עמדו והרגוהו, ונתכנסו על אהרן, שנאמר
ויקהל העם על אהרן...אמרו לו: אם תעשה
לנו אלהים מוטב, ואם לאו אנו עושין לך כשם
שעשינו לחור!
וירא אהרן, ראה מה שעשו לחור, ויבן מזבח,
הבין מזבוח...

Midrash Tanhuma Ki Tissa 13

At that time [when the people were demanding to fashion a god in Moshe's absence], Hur said to them: You stiff-necked people! Have you no memory of what He did for you?
They rose up and killed him.
They then gathered around Aharon, as it says, "And the people congregated around Aharon"...they said to him: if you make us a god, all will be well and good. But if you don't, we will do to you what we did to Hur!
"Aharon saw"—he saw what they had done to Hur.
Vayiven mizbeah (lit. "he built an altar")—*hevin mizavuah*; he understood from the one who had been slaughtered...

The Text

- In Shemot 17, Hur is paired with Aharon as a significant figure tasked with propping up Moshe's hands in the war against Amalek.
- In Shemot 24, the last piece of narrative before Moshe ascends Mt. Sinai, Aharon *and* Hur are assigned the task of dealing with any issues that arise while Moshe is gone. When we get to our narrative, Hur is nowhere to be found! Where has he gone?
- Hur mysteriously and laconically reappears in Shemot 31 as the grandfather of Betzalel, the architect of the *mishkan*, the desert Tabernacle.

The Ideas

On a basic level, Hur's death helps make Aharon's apparent spinelessness more palatable and his selection as high priest nonetheless somewhat imaginable.

The story of the Golden Calf is not just a moment of rebellion, it stands at a crossroads in the story of what to do with *gold*. Does it become a golden calf, or is the prime metal used for building a home for God?

Hur's presence in our midrash not only fills a plot hole, but it also sharpens the competing vision that his line represents, and sets up this moment of national apostasy as an ongoing tension Israel must deal with around wealth, patience and dealing with the absence of leadership and even God.

The Goals of Learning and Teaching Midrash

- Fluency in the Biblical Text
- Fostering Deep Love of the Torah
- Encouraging Coming to the Torah with Big Ideas
- Giving the Gift of the Experience of Reading the Torah like a Love Letter



Midrash and the Rabbinic Imagination

Rabbi Ethan Tucker

