

Answering Questions, Adding Flourishes

An Introduction to *Midrash*

Study Session

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KOACH
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The following materials have been created by **KOACH** for the enhancement of your on-campus programming. They are designed to be adjustable based on your interests and the available time. This packet contains: background materials and a facilitator guide. The background materials and facilitator guide will help you build conversations around the text and create connections between the text and contemporary life.

Questions? Send them to: Weinstein@uscj.org

Introduction to Midrash

Facilitator Guide

Overview and Objective

The Hebrew word *midrash* is based upon the three-letter root *dalet, resh, shin*. In Jewish tradition this root means “to seek,” “to probe,” or “to explain.” When reading the Bible, the ancient rabbis often came across gaps or questions which required further study or “seeking.” Their response became the process of *midrash*, out of which sprouted a myriad of laws and stories. *Midrash* which is used to derive law is called *midrash halakhah*. *Midrash* which is used to fill gaps in the narrative, present ideas or teach values is called *midrash aggadah*. Some of these stories, like that of Abraham smashing the idols, are so familiar to us today that it is easy to forget that they are not actually in the Bible.

In this learning packet, we first look at a story that describes the importance of biblical interpretation and *midrash*. Then we will look at the Cain and Abel story in Genesis and explore how the rabbis created *midrash* from those biblical verses. The final section offers suggestions on how to create your own *midrash*.

Although this material is presented as a progression, you need not follow the format from beginning to end. Each section can stand on its own or be combined with other sections or additional texts. Perhaps you will want to use one of the texts as a basis for a *d’var torah*. Alternatively, you can place one of the texts on the center of your Shabbat dinner table and use it to spark an informal discussion. Be creative with the material and have fun!

Section One– The Importance of Interpretation

Read the following story:

מסכת מנחות דף כט/ב

אמר רב יהודה אמר רב בשעה שעלה משה למרום מצאו להקב"ה שיושב וקושר כתרים לאותיות אמר לפניו רבש"ע מי מעכב על ידך אמר לו אדם אחד יש שעתיד להיות בסוף כמה דורות ועקיבא בן יוסף שמו שעתיד לדרוש על כל קוץ וקוץ תילין תילין של הלכות אמר לפניו רבש"ע הראהו לי אמר לו חזור לאחורך הלך וישב בסוף שמונה שורות ולא היה יודע מה הן אומרים תשש כחו כיון שהגיע לדבר אחד אמרו לו תלמידיו רבי מנין לך אמר להן הלכה למשה מסיני נתיישבה דעתו חזר ובא לפני הקב"ה אמר לפניו רבונו של עולם יש לך אדם כזה ואתה נותן תורה ע"י.

Rabbi Yehudah said in the name of Rav: When Moses ascended on high, he found the Holy One, blessed be He, engaged in fixing crowns (decorative markings) to the letters [of the Torah]. Said Moses: "Lord of the Universe, who stays Your Hand?" [i.e. Is there anything lacking in the Torah so that additions are necessary?]. He answered, "There will arise a man at the end of many generations, Akiba ben Joseph by name [Rabbi Akiba] who will expand upon each decorative marking heaps and heaps of laws." "Lord of the Universe," said Moses, "permit me to see him." He replied, "Turn around." Moses went and sat down behind eight rows [of R. Akiba's disciples and listened to their discussion of the law]. Not being able to follow their arguments, he was ill at ease, but when they came to a certain subject and the disciple said to the master, "From where do you know it?" and the latter [Rabbi Akiba] replied, "It is law given to Moses at Sinai," he [Moses] was comforted. Thereupon he returned to the Holy One, blessed be He, and said "Lord of the Universe, You have such a man and You give Torah by me?!"

-Babylonian Talmud, Masekhet Menahot 29b

Translation from "A Living Tree: The Roots and Growth of Jewish Law" by Elliot N. Dorff and Arthur Rosett. State University of New York Press, Albany, 1988, p. 196.

1. In the first part of the story, Moses notices that in the Torah scroll, the Hebrew letters have flourishes (to which the *midrash* refers as crowns) on their edges. If you have a Torah scroll at Hillel, you can open it up and check out the scribal writing for yourselves. Ask students why Moses thinks that this is an important question to ask God (as compared to a deeper, philosophical question)? *One possible answer might be that the story wants to emphasize that even the most seemingly insignificant detail in the Torah can open the door to a myriad of interpretations.*

In the second part of the story, Moses sits in Rabbi Akiba's study hall. What lesson does Moses learn during this visit? What lessons does this story teach us about studying and interpreting the Bible?

3. In this story, God and Moses praise the Biblical interpretative skills of Rabbi Akiba (biography below). Do you believe that people today have the same credentials and/or ability to interpret Torah as did the great scholars such as Rabbi Akiba?

* Rabbi Akiba/Akiba ben Joseph- 50-135 CE. According to tradition, after living for many years as an impoverished, semi-literate shepherd, Rabbi Akiba began to study Jewish texts at the age of forty. Eventually, he became one of Judaism's greatest sages, engaging in structured Biblical interpretation that would form one of the base layers of the *Mishnah* (Oral Law). As the spiritual leader of the failed Bar Kochba revolt against the Romans, Rabbi Akiba was ultimately imprisoned and tortured to death.

Section Two – Biblical Midrash

בראשית פרק ד

ח ויאמר קין אל־הקל אחיו ויהי בהיותם בשדה ויקם קין אל־הקל אחיו ויהרגהו: ט ויאמר יהוה אל־קין אי הקל אחיך ויאמר לא ידעתי השמר אחי אנכי: י ויאמר מה עשית קול דמי אחיך צעקים אלי מן־האדמה:

8. And Cain said to Abel his brother...

But it was when they were in the field
That Cain rose up against Abel his brother
And he killed him.

9. And God said to Cain: Where is Abel your brother?

And he said: I do not know. Am I the guardian of my brother?

10. And He said: What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood cries out to me from the soil!

Bereishit 4:8-10

1. Read through the Cain and Abel story from Genesis 4. Have students point out questions which the story raises. Encourage a range of discussion, from descriptive details (about settings and character traits) to questions focusing on philosophical issues. To help the process, you might want to read the following questions out loud before reading the passage for the first time: Are there any gaps in the Cain and Abel story? What additional information do you want to know about Cain and Abel? Are there any parts of the story that aren't clear? Does the story raise any theological issues? What questions does the Cain and Abel story raise about interpersonal behavior? What about the way humans and God interact?

2. Look at the following two *midrashim*. For each *midrash*, try to discern:

- Which problem in the Cain and Abel story is the author of the *midrash* addressing?
- What techniques does the *midrash* author use to address the problem?
(For example, does he make a comparison, tell a story etc?)
- Is the *midrash* effective or believable?
- Does the *midrash* teach us any further lessons about life?

מדרש רבה בראשית פרשה כב:ז

ז ויאמר קין אל הבל אחיו ויהי בהיותם וגו' על מה היו מדיינים אמרו בואו ונחלוק את העולם אחד נטל הקרקעות ואחד נטל את המטלטלין דין אמר ארעא דאת קאים עליה דידי ודין אמר מה דאת לביש דידי דין אמר חלוץ ודין אמר פרח מתוך כך ויקם קין אל הבל אחיו ויהרגהו

"CAIN SAID TO ABEL HIS BROTHER...(Bereishit 4:8). About what did they argue? 'Come,' they said. 'Let us divide the world.' One took the land and the other the movable property (animals, tools, clothes, etc.). The former said, 'The land you stand on is mine,' while the latter retorted, 'What you are wearing is mine.' One said, 'Strip.' The other responded, 'Fly [off the ground].' Because of this argument, CAIN ROSE UP AGAINST ABEL HIS BROTHER."

Genesis Midrash Rabbah 22

מדרש רבה בראשית פרשה כב

אר"ש בן יוחאי קשה הדבר לאומרו ואי אפשר לפה לפרשו לב' אתליטין שהיו עומדין ומתגוששים לפני המלך אילו רצה המלך פירשן ולא רצה המלך לפרשן נתחזק אחד על חבירו והרגו והיה מצווח ואמר מאן יבעי דיני קדם מלכא כך קול דמי אחיך צועקים אלי מן האדמה.

Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai said, "This verse is difficult to recite and it is impossible for one's mouth to explain it. [For example, let us say there were] two gladiators that were standing and fighting before the King [for the king's entertainment]. If the king wanted to separate them, he could. And if he [the king] did not want to separate them, one gladiator could overtake the other and kill him. The one who was about to die may cry out, 'Who will intercede for me before the King' [as it is only the king himself who can stop the fighting]? Similarly [we understand], 'the voice of your brother's blood cries out to me from the earth.'"

Genesis Midrash Rabbah 22

Section Three – Creating Your Own *Midrash*

1. Sometimes, the most profound insights are revealed in our spontaneous interactions. Try an improv game to create a spontaneous, modern *midrash* about Cain and Abel. Assign characters (both from the Bible and of your own creation) such as Cain, Abel, God, Adam, Eve, a mediator, innocent bystanders, etc. Pick a setting such as a talk show, a bar, court, a bus stop, or a therapist's office. Stage a reunion between Cain and Abel. What issues are raised in the conversation? Change locations and have a new group of actors play the characters.
2. Write a monologue filling in the biblical gap regarding what Cain said to his brother before killing him.

Additional Resources

- Book of Legends/Sefer Ha-Aggadah: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash by Hayyim Nahman Bialik and Y.H. Rawnitzky. Shoken, 1992 (English Addition).
- Searching for Meaning in Midrash: Lessons for Everyday Living by Michael Katz and Gershon Schwartz. JPS, 2002.
- The Bible As It Was by James L. Kugel. Belknap, 1997.
- "Midrash and Jewish Study," by David Stern in The Jewish Study Bible. Oxford, 2004
- Torah in Motion by Susan Freedman. Fictionwise, 2001 (eBook only about Dance Midrash).