

THE REBELLION AT THE REED SEA: OBSERVATIONS ON THE NATURE OF MIDRASH

By

IRA CHERNUS

University of Colorado

AMONG ALL THE genres of Hebrew literature, perhaps the most distinctive and original is Midrash. While much work has already been done in elucidating the specific characteristics of Midrash, further exploration of those characteristics may help us to gain a more precise definition and understanding of this genre. I want to offer here a brief discussion of one principal feature of Midrash: its harmonization of concern for the historically unique and concern for the supra-historical.

In creating Midrash, the rabbis were of course developing a literary form which would speak effectively to their specific historical situation. But to accomplish this, they searched into (*drš*) the written Scripture and found there what I. Heinemann has called "supra-historical principles . . . which transcend the truth of 'how it actually happened'" (1954, pp. 10-11). They could then enunciate these paradigmatic and eternally valid truths, show how they were exemplified in the historical particularities of the biblical past, and apply them to the historical particularities of their present. Many scholars have pointed to this "supra-historical" approach to the biblical text as a key feature of Midrash. But less attention has been given to the similar attitude often taken by the rabbis to Midrash itself. An important source of new midrash was the explication and development of "supra-historical" meanings implicit in existing midrashim.

This similarity in the use of biblical text and midrashic tradition points to a stylistic similarity which may have made this dynamic possible. Recently Kalman Bland has noted that Eric Auerbach's description of biblical narrative is equally true of much Midrash Aggadah: "Abruptness, suggestive influence of

the unexpressed 'background' quality, multiplicity of meanings and the need for interpretation, universal-historical claims'' (1976, p. 448). The genius of the rabbinic *daršanim* lay at least partly in their ability to respond to particular historical and exegetical problems by creating simple and yet suggestive and vivid images — word-pictures which, because of the multiple meanings inherent in them, could generate new meanings in new historical circumstances. While every midrash originated in a unique temporal situation, the best midrashim took on a sort of life of their own and bequeathed their supra-temporal meanings to the *daršanim* of later generations. I want to explore here one example of this subtle interplay between the universal and the particular which was a crucial factor in the development of this distinctive Hebrew genre.

R. Judah b. Ilai was a Palestinian *tanna* of the generation following the Hadrianic persecution. One of his midrashic interests was in the behavior of the Israelites at the crossing of the Reed Sea. His view is summed up in his saying: "They rebelled at the shore of the Sea, they rebelled in the Reed Sea, as it is said, 'But they rebelled at the Sea, in the Reed Sea' (Ps 106:7)" (*Abot dāRabbi Natan* 49b: cf. TB *'Araḳin* 15a and Saldarini, 1975, p. 225). What are these two separate rebellions to which R. Judah referred? The latter is the act of carrying an idol through the sea: "R. Judah b. Ilai said: An idol passed through the sea with Israel. What is the basis for this? 'A rival passed through the sea, the waves struck in the sea' (*Zech* 10:11). And the word 'rival' means nothing but an idol."¹ While this often-quoted midrash is usually found in the name of R. Judah or anonymously, it is occasionally attributed to R. Eliezer.

In fact, it seems to have its origin in an exegetical debate between R. Eliezer and R. Akiba which has been preserved only in the Talmud Yerushalmi:

It is taught in the name of R. Eliezer: An idol passed through the sea with Israel. What is the basis for this? 'Because of Your people which You redeemed for Yourself from Egypt, a nation and its gods'' (1 Sam 7:23). R. Akiba said to him: God forbid. If you say this you will be making the sacred profane. What is the meaning of "Which You redeemed for Yourself from Egypt"? As it were, it is as if You redeemed Yourself.²

1. Pəsiqta dāRab Kahanna 10:8, following the translation of Braude and Kapstein (1975, p. 194). Cf. *Tanhuma*, ed. Buber, *Rə'e* 14; *Exodus Rabbah* 41:1. This midrash is cited or alluded to, in altered or abbreviated forms, in many other texts (a full list is given in the note to Mandelbaum's edition of Pəsiqta dāRab Kahana *ad loc.*). The alterations and abbreviations are evidence of the long period of time between R. Judah b. Ilai's own lifetime and the final redaction of the various texts. Here, as elsewhere in this study, I have cited only those texts which seem to preserve the most plausible original version of the midrash.

2. Talmud Yerushalmi, *Sukkah* 4:3 end. The crux here is the last word of the biblical verse, "LWHYW," which R. Eliezer interpreted as a plural form and R. Akiba as a singular.

Both rabbis were responding to the fundamentally exegetical problem of a difficult biblical text, but both created images whose implicit meanings far transcended the purely exegetical dimension. R. Judah, who may have heard the tradition from his father, a student of R. Eliezer (Strack, 1931, p.113), drew out some of the implications of R. Eliezer's image by linking it to a different biblical verse. Thus he indicated that he was not primarily concerned with the exegetical problem. Rather, he focussed on this midrash as a paradigmatic instance of the need to choose between God and His rivals, stressing that the choice of the idol over God constituted an act of rebellion. While we do not know whether or to what extent this idea was intended by R. Eliezer, we might say that it existed independently in the image, waiting for future generations to extract and explicate it.

Later generations were so impressed with R. Judah's interpretation of this image, in fact, that R. Eliezer's words were conflated with R. Judah's and therefore transmitted in a seemingly irrelevant context:

Whenever Israel is enslaved, the *Šəḳina*, as it were, is enslaved with them . . . as it says, "Because of Your people which You redeemed for Yourself from Egypt, a nation and its God." R. Eliezer says: An idol passed through the sea with Israel, as it is said, "A rival passed through the sea, the waves struck in the sea" . . . R. Akiba says: If it were not written in Scripture it would be impossible to say it: As it were, Israel said before the Holy One blessed be He: You have redeemed Yourself.³

If the original debate between R. Eliezer and R. Akiba had not been preserved elsewhere, we could not explain the presence of R. Eliezer's comment in this context because it has been linked to R. Judah's proof-text and not R. Eliezer's own.

R. Judah may have chosen the verse from Zechariah as his proof-text in part because of the relationship between the two images in it: the idol in the sea and the waves striking. For we find that the first of the two rebellions of which he spoke is related particularly to the waves of the sea:

R. Judah says: . . . As soon as the tribes were standing on the shore of the sea, this one said "I will not descend first" and this one said "I will not descend first," as it is said, "Ephraim has encompassed me with lies, and the house of

3. *Məḳilta dəRabbi Yišma'el*, p. 51; *Siprey Bammidbar*, *Bəha' alotəka* 84. It is striking that both these texts were probably redacted before the redaction of the Talmud Yerushalmi, yet the latter preserves the original version of the midrash, while the redactors of both these "tannaitic" midrashim either did not know or did not choose to use the original. The midrash *Tanhuma*, *Rə'e* 16, reflects another stage in the conflation of R. Judah's midrash with R. Eliezer's: the midrash is attributed to "R. Judah b. Eliezer."

Israel with deceit'' (Hos 12:1). While they were standing around consulting, Nahšon ben 'Aminadab jumped and fell into the sea. Concerning him Scripture says: ''Save me, O God, for the waters have come unto the soul,'' and it says, ''I sink in deep mire where there is no standing. I have come into deep water where the flood overwhelms me,'' and it says, ''Do not let the flood overwhelm me, do not let the depth swallow me up, do not let the pit shut its mouth on me'' (Ps 69:2,3,16).⁴

Here the rebellion consists of an unwillingness to face apparent death, which in turn a sign of a lack of trust in God.

This midrashic image is also one that R. Judah learned from one of his teachers — R. Tarfon — but transformed to make his own point. R. Tarfon, according to our texts, once asked his students why the tribe of Judah had merited the kingship. After the students advanced several answers which were refuted by the master, he himself offered the correct solution:

When the tribes stood at the shore of the sea, each one said, ''I will not descend first,'' as it is said, ''Ephraim has encompassed me with lies, and the house of Israel with deceit, but Judah still descends with God,'' (Hos 12:1; RSV margin: ''roams with God'') . . . Nahšon ben 'Aminadab and his tribe after him jumped into the waves of the sea. (*Mekilta d'Rabbi Yišma'el*, p. 105; cf. *Midrash Təhillim* 76:2).

Jacob Neusner has characterized R. Tarfon as ''direct and straight-forward, not much given to fantasy. . . . He was not adept at seeking hidden meaning in the words of scripture'' (1965, pp. 76,77). If R. Tarfon offered such a strained exegesis in order to prove the Judahites' right to rule, he was probably motivated by some circumstance concerning political rule in his own time. Neusner himself, following the suggestion of Saul Lieberman, has set this conversation in the days preceding the deposition of Rabban Gamliel of Yavneh, seeing in it a description of the characteristics necessary for the Patriarch (1965, pp. 91–94 and note 45). Joseph Heinemann has criticized this interpretation as being without foundation (1974, p. 83), and it is true that Neusner offers little evidence to back it up.

Heinemann's own interpretation is quite different. He claims that R. Tarfon's intention was ''to raise the banner of rebellion and martyrdom'' in the time of the Hadrianic persecution, to call for ''an act of daring, heroism, and martyrdom . . . by those who dare to take the great leap'' (1974, pp. 81–82). He points out that in the next generation, while R. Judah repeated R. Tarfon's

4. *Mekilta d'Rabbi Yišma'el*, p. 105. Cf. *Talmud Babli*, *Soṭa* 36b–37a and *Tosafot ad loc.*; *Midrash Təhillim* 114:5; *Pirqey d'Rabbi 'Eli'ezer* 42, ed. Luria, 98 a and b.

midrash, R. Meir offered an opposing version (based on the Targum to Ps 68:24) in which Benjamin descended first and was rewarded by having the residence of the *Səkina* in its territory. In R. Meir's time, says Heinemann, when political rebellion was no longer a viable option, the restoration of political independence took second place to a concern for the return of the *Səkina* to Zion. The problem with such an interpretation is that, if R. Tarfon was calling for rebellion, Heinemann can not (and does not try to) explain why R. Judah repeated the midrash when it would have been irrelevant. In fact, M. Avi-Yonah has identified R. Judah as the leader in his generation of the moderates who opposed any overt anti-Roman activity (1976, p.65). Moreover, there is no indication that R. Tarfon, or any other rabbi, ever interpreted the events at the Reed Sea in terms of military confrontation. Certainly the midrash could have made the Israelites turn and attack the Egyptians, but in all the relevant texts it is God and the angels who do the fighting, while the Israelites are exhorted to pray and trust in God.⁵ R. Tarfon praised the Judahites not because they fought back against Egypt, but because they fled from the Egyptians and jumped into the sea. The same criticism may be made of Louis Finkelstein's interpretation, which sees R. Tarfon calling for support of the rebellion against Trajan in 117 (1962, p. 231).

It seems, then, that R. Tarfon may well have had some political point in mind, but the difficulty of fixing the historical *sitz im leben* makes it impossible to say with certainty what the point was. Once again, however, R. Judah's development of the image shows us how the image transcends its original situation just because of its vagueness and consequent richness — a richness which has enabled these scholars confidently to assign it to such different historical circumstances.

It is difficult to know precisely how R. Judah re-worked this midrash because we can not fix R. Tarfon's original words with certainty. In addition to the version cited above, there is another version of R. Tarfon's midrash which is particularly interesting:

When the tribes stood at the sea, this one said "I will descend first" and this one said "I will descend first." The tribe of Judah jumped and descended first and sanctified the name of God. And concerning that time it says, "Save me, O God, for the waters have come unto the soul; I sink in deep mire" (Ps 69:2,3).⁶

5. A good representative sampling of these midrashim, mostly attributed to Tannaim, may be found throughout the tractate *Vayəhi Bəšallah* of the *Məkilta dəRabbi Yišma'el*.

6. Tosefta *Bərakot* 4:16. W. Bacher (1921, p. 83, note 6) argues for the priority of this version, which is the version used by Neusner. But Bacher's arguments deal with the earlier parts of the pericope, while the midrash we are discussing occurs at the end. Finkelstein (1962, p.346, note 37) argues for the priority of the *Məkilta* version cited above.

This text is unique in two ways. It is the only version of R. Tarfon's midrash which employs the verses from Psalm 69 stressing the imminence of death, and it is the only one which omits Hos 12:1 as the proof-text. J. Heinemann shows convincingly that R. Tarfon needed the Hosea verse because, by reading it as "Judah still descends with God," he found the necessary exegetical basis for his ostensibly political midrash (1974, p. 80). The omission of this verse indicates that the Tosefta is not the original, and it raises the possibility that the Psalm 69 verses were substituted for the Hosea verse. Since every version of the midrash attributed to R. Judah includes the extensive quotations from Psalm 69, its use in this context may very well have been an original contribution of his. This suggests that, once again, R. Judah has taken one implication in an existing midrashic image and developed it explicitly by linking it to new biblical texts. In doing so, he would have further developed his paradigm of faith and rebellion, implying that even at the redemptive moment faith demands a willingness to accept death, though not necessarily a willingness to fight military battles.

This same point may, of course, have been more or less explicit in R. Tarfon's original words. But even if it was, R. Judah did something new with the image. R. Tarfon's concern was with the heroism of a single individual or family who had political power; as Neusner summarizes it: "The reason Judah merited the monarchy was that he went so bravely to meet danger and appeared as an example to strengthen the faith of others in the Holy One, and such a man is certainly suited for domination" (1965, p. 94). R. Judah, on the other hand, seems to have been more concerned with the Israelites as a whole and their inability to follow such an example. In his hands the text of Hos 12:1, which he included in his version of the midrash, took on new meaning. It was now not only exegetically necessary and perhaps politically significant, but it expressed the faithlessness and deception of the Israelites toward God: "Ephraim has encompassed me with lies, and the house of Israel with deceit." This emphasis on the rebellion of the majority of Israel underscored the spiritual heroism of the Judahites, but it also implied that such heroism was expected of all Israel as a proper faith response to God. Again we may say that this point already existed implicitly in R. Tarfon's image, regardless of his exact words, and that R. Judah's contribution was to extract and develop it.

In sum, we can say that R. Judah's view of the crossing of the Reed Sea was a synthesis of two sources — R. Eliezer's solution to a problem of pure exegesis and R. Tarfon's applied exegesis in response to a particular historical-political moment. But in each case the concrete situation gave rise to an image rich in possibilities — richer perhaps than its author intended or even knew. These possibilities were explicated by R. Judah because he viewed these midrashim in

much the same way he viewed the biblical text. He knew that each midrash had been created in a particular time and place, just as the crossing of the Reed Sea had occurred only once, in a particular time and place. But at the same time he saw the midrashim, like the biblical event itself, as a source of paradigmatic lessons with supra-temporal value.

We would very much like to know, of course, what (if any) specific historical circumstance moved R. Judah to develop these midrashim in these particular ways. No one can doubt that scholarly reconstructions of historical *sitze im leben* have immeasurably advanced our understanding of midrash. But there are numerous cases, like those discussed here, in which our best efforts in this direction seem to be fruitless because they must remain so totally speculative. If we want nevertheless to understand these "intractable" midrashim, and if to understand means to understand the intentions of the authors, we would apparently be well advised to follow the path indicated by the authors themselves. We must recognize that the midrashic image synthesizes historical and supra-historical levels of meaning, and we must recognize that to the rabbis themselves the latter were as important as (and in some cases more important than) the former. Viewing Midrash as a genre which is inherently dynamic and process-oriented, we must understand each particular midrash in terms of its relationship to its past and future as well as its present. And that, again, means to see each midrash as a fusion of historical and supra-historical concerns. For, as is evident from the examples offered here, it is just this fusion which enables the midrashic image to be a fertile source of new midrash when it is asked to speak to a new situation. Thus, as Midrash extracts from the particularity of the past that which is universally valid, it also transforms the particularity of the present and future by recasting it in light of the universal. The dynamic which is of the essence of Midrash makes the temporal a vehicle for the perception of that which is eternal.

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