

PAST AND PRESENT IN MIDRASHIC LITERATURE*

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MIDRASH AGGADAH, the rabbinic exposition and elaboration of the biblical text, is a literature that deals with the past. The Darshan,¹ in common with other creative artists who attempt to present past or fictional events in a compelling way, may attempt to shift the temporal perspective of his audience. The narrative artist seeks to lure those whom he addresses out of their own time frame, what we may call the "actual present," into a new time frame in which the events described take place. This projected time frame has been called the "fictive present" in analyzing the technique of the novel (Mendilow, 1965, pp. 94ff), but I shall call it the "narrative present" in analyzing the rhetorical technique of the Midrash. The problem of achieving this mental shift in temporal perspectives is in some ways more difficult and in other ways easier for the Darshan than for his counterparts, the storyteller, dramatist, novelist and modern film-maker: more difficult in that neither he nor his audience, be it a congregation listening to a sermon in Talmudic times or the contemporary reader of Midrash, accept that the events to be described, the biblical narrative on which the Darshan elaborates, are imaginary; less

*In working on this study, I was fortunate in having the comment and criticism of my teacher, Prof. Joseph Heinemann ז"ל. What should have been an opportunity to thank him for this help, must now, sadly, be a humble tribute to his memory.

1. I use this term to refer not only to the "preacher" who delivered his oral homily in the synagogue, but also, more generally, to the often anonymous creators of the Midrash at all its stages, oral and literary.

difficult in that the biblical texts are already familiar to his audience (see Dan, 1971-72, p. 559) and thus already quite real to them. The following discussion is a preliminary examination of this important facet of Midrashic literature, the unique and often daring way in which the Midrash transports its audience out of their actual present and into the narrative present that is the biblical past.

I shall first call attention to the fact that there is a broad tendency in Jewish culture to mediate present experience through the archetypal biblical experience. Indicative of this tendency, for example, is the persistence of the phenomena of referring to nations, lands and languages by biblical epithets (Krauss, 1935) and titling books with biblical expressions (Saltkine, 1950, pp. 29-66, 209-222). Alongside this general tendency to imbue the actual present with biblical overtones, we may trace a more specific wish to mentally transport oneself into the past. This wish finds expression in the Midrashic elaboration of the Exodus narrative. The illustration which comes most readily to mind is the statement recited during the Passover Seder: "In each and every generation, each man is obligated to look upon himself as if he participated in the Exodus from Egypt." From the perspective of this centrally important passage in the Haggadah, the entire Seder service can be conceived of as a reliving in the present of the Exodus experience through words and physical symbols. This precept to imagine oneself a participant in the Exodus was rhetorically useful to the Darshan, who could shift the temporal perspective of his audience into biblical times by referring to the Exodus as if both he and they had personally participated in it:

R. Yannay said . . . when we came to the Sea we neglected no expression of praise with which we might have praised You . . . when we came to Sinai, like a man who pours liquid out through the mouth of a jug, so You pour upon us all the commandments. (*Tanḥuma*, Yitro 3)

What may seem strange here—that R. Yannay should refer to himself and those to whom he speaks as having been present at the crossing of the Red Sea and at the giving of the Torah²—reflects a particular type of poetic license. The Darshan may relate to his audience as if they were living within the time frame of the events he describes, that is, within the biblical past. This rhetorical stratagem serves as a preliminary illustration of the specific subject of the

2. This may be related to the notion that all the unborn souls were present at Sinai; see *Exodus Rabba* XXVIII 6 and the parallels cited by Ginzberg (1967-69, VI, p. 39, note 215). The passage quoted is an apt illustration of Köhler's statement (1966, p. 49): "The People Israel is an open quantity. At any time, any one of its individual members can say 'We,' concerning all those who came before in earlier times."

present paper, what I shall call the “Midrashic license” to blur the distinction between past and present.

The Immediacy of the Biblical Past

Isaac Heinemann (1970, p. 164), in illustrating what he identified as “the total abandonment of the notion of time” in the Aggadah, noted the Midrashic tendency to interpret the present tense in the biblical text as if it referred to an event happening in the actual present.³ He also called attention to the Midrashic interpretation of the biblical expression “On this day”:

ON THIS DAY THEY CAME INTO THE WILDERNESS OF SINAI
(Exod 19:1). Indeed, did they come on this very day?! Rather, when you are studying My words, let them not seem old to you, but as if the Torah were given today. “On that day” is not written, but ON THIS DAY. (*Tanhuma*, ed. Buber, Yitro 13)

The “as if” posture of the previous statement was also encountered above in the precept to regard oneself “as if” having participated in the Exodus. In both cases one is admonished to use his imagination to adopt an emotional attitude of *engagement* toward certain religious acts, the Passover recitation of the Exodus story or the study of the Torah.

The use of this “as if” time-shift in order to mentally prepare the audience for certain religious acts, can be noted in the conclusions of some proems.⁴ The first example is from a proem to the lection (biblical portion) read on Pentecost, the festival which celebrates the giving of the Torah:

The Holy One, blessed be He, said, “My children, read this portion every year. For [when you do so] I regard you as if you are standing before Mt. Sinai

3. Heinemann does not cite any exact Midrashic references but apparently refers to “WHO ARE COMING TO EGYPT (Exod 1:1) . . . this means, who are coming now” (*Midrash Šekel Tob*, ed. Buber, Shemot, p. 4 and parallels). Heinemann’s Chapter Four, entitled “Bringing the Distant Near” which deals with Midrashic anachronism (or: “achronism”), in its entirety is relevant to the discussion here. For the phrase “total abandonment of the notion of time,” see p. 43.

4. On the form and function of this basic homiletical pattern, see J. Heinemann (1971). The proem opens with a “remote” verse, usually from the Hagiographa, which is subsequently linked, usually by means of a series of Midrashic interpretations, with the first verse of the lection to which the proem relates. An example of a complete proem, from *Deuteronomy Rabba* IX 2, is quoted below.

and receiving the Torah.” When? ON THE THIRD NEW MOON AFTER THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL HAVE GONE FORTH OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT [ON THIS DAY THEY CAME INTO THE WILDERNESS OF SINAI] (Exod 19:1). (*Pesiqta Derav Kahana*, ed. Mandelbaum, p. 204)

Joseph Heinemann (1971, pp. 104ff) has argued that the proem pattern was developed as a short homily which was used to introduce the reading from the Torah in the synagogue service. If we read the proem-conclusion cited above in the light of this theory, the rhetorical artistry of the Darshan will be illuminated. He prepares the congregation emotionally for the subsequent reading of the Pentecost Torah-portion by setting the scene, as it were, for this religious act. The Darshan, speaking in the persona of God, addresses the congregation. This *theophoron* serves to equate the congregation with biblical Israel. The Darshan makes the religious act of reading the Torah-portion which depicts the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai into an actual experience of that historical event. Indeed, we have here a prime example of the narrative artist’s technique of coalescing the historical past and the actual present in order to create a sense of the narrative present.

A similar example of a proem-conclusion which serves to set the emotional tone for the Torah-reading is found in a proem to the lection read on the first of the four distinguished Sabbaths leading up to Passover, *parašat šəqalim* (Exod 30:11–16):

When [he was giving to Israel] *parašat šəqalim*, Moses said before the Holy One, blessed be He, “Lord of the World, when I am dead will I not be remembered?! The Holy One, blessed be He, answered him, “By your life, just as you are now standing and giving them *parašat šəqalim* and you are lifting up their heads, so every year when they read it before Me, it is as if you are standing there then and lifting up their heads.” Whence do we learn this? From what is read in the portion: THE LORD SAID TO MOSES, WHEN YOU RAISE UP THE HEAD OF THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL (Exod 30:11). (*Tanhuma*, Ki Tišša 3)

Here too the Darshan provides the congregation with an imaginary setting for the subsequent reading of the Torah-portion, in this case by means of a dramatic dialogue between Moses and God. When the congregation hears the opening verse of the lection it is as if Moses were standing there before them and “lifting up their heads,” that is, granting them special honor. Using this imaginative and dramatic interpretation of the verse, the Darshan arouses a sense of deep pride in the congregation by indirectly suggesting that they imagine the biblical event described at the beginning of the Torah-portion is

happening to them, now. By means of this stratagem, the actual present of the congregation is made to converge with the historical event depicted in the subsequent Torah-reading.

The Rhetorical Use of Paraphrase

The preceding examples demonstrate the necessity for the modern reader or researcher of this literature to try to imaginatively recreate for himself the homiletical situation in which the Midrash came into being. This approach enables us to recapture some of the original rhetorical artistry embedded in the Midrash—which though today is a written literature, was once an oral art form. A rather common Midrashic technique whose rhetorical force is revealed by using this methodology is the use of direct paraphrase of biblical verses. When a verse which preserves God's direct address to Israel is expounded in this way, the Darshan may still be heard addressing his audience in an almost prophetic way, that is, speaking with the voice of God.

YOU HAVE SEEN (Exod 19:3). I am not speaking to you on the basis of tradition; I am not sending you documents; I am not presenting witnesses to you, rather YOU HAVE SEEN WHAT I DID TO THE EGYPTIANS. (*Mekhilta Derabbi Yishmael*, Bahodesh, Ch. 2, ed. Horovitz-Rabin, p. 207)

This example of homiletical paraphrase almost certainly preserves in close to original form a snippet of an oral homily. Its oral rhetorical character can still be sensed in the thrice repeated negative pattern-sentence. More and more reliable types of evidence are arranged in a kind of ideational crescendo which is resolved by a positive statement of the biblical phrase being expounded, "You have seen." This verse, originally addressed by God to biblical Israel is readdressed by the Darshan to their descendants, the people of Israel who make up his audience. We can see at work here, once again, the Midrashic license mentioned above. The Darshan addresses his audience as if they were biblical Israel, as if they themselves had seen what God did to the Egyptians at the time of the Exodus.

Let us analyze another closely related example of this rhetorical use of paraphrase:

AND NOW IF YOU WILL OBEY (Exod 19:15). Right now! Resolve yourselves [to keep the commandments], for all beginnings are difficult. (*ibid.*, p. 208)

Here again, by paraphrasing a verse originally addressed to biblical Israel, the Darshan readdresses the biblical text to his audience. But here the intention is not to mentally transport the audience back into the biblical past; rather the Darshan, speaking in a prophetic tenor, re-echoes the verse into the present. By changing the biblical conditional into the imperative mood, he converts this verse into a zealous admonition to observe the commandments.⁵ The “and now” (*və'atta*) of the verse has little or no temporal force. The Darshan, however, not only translates this biblical expression into the equivalent Mishnaic Hebrew expression, “now” (*akšav*) (Bendavid, 1967-71, I, p. 358); he uses the expression in such a way as to give it the most emphatic temporal force. This opening phrase, which I have translated “Right now!,” is reinforced by the concluding statement, “for all beginnings are difficult.” We shall further examine the important and varied use made of the expression “now” to create a sense of the narrative present in the following discussion.

Time-Linked Terminology

A common rhetorical device in world literature which gives a sense of immediacy to fictional or historical narration is the use of the historical present tense, that is, the use of the present tense in speaking of events which took place in the past. The extent to which Hebrew literature in general and Mid-rashic literature in particular may be said to employ this tense as a literary device rather than as a mere habit of speech is a most complicated problem.⁶

5. The phrase I have translated “Resolve yourselves [to observe the commandments]” (*qab-bəlu 'aleykem*) reflects and restates, in the imperative mood, the rabbinic concept of *qabbalat 'ot hammišvot* (acceptance of the yoke of the commandments); see for example *Sifra* (on Lev 11:45), ed. Weiss, p. 57b.

6. For the use of the historical present in Western literatures, see Shipley (1943, p. 298). The Indo-European division of time into past, present and future is not an essential part of Semitic conventions of tense; for the relationship between grammar and the concept of time, see Steiner (1975, pp. 156ff). In biblical Hebrew the participle is occasionally used to represent past actions or states; see Gesenius (1910, § 116, o). However, in Mishnaic Hebrew and modern Hebrew the participle can be said to function as a present tense, see Bendavid (1967-71, I, p. 260); Mishnaic Hebrew tends to translate the biblical “historical or dramatic present” into the appropriate past, present or future (*ibid.*, II, pp. 545ff). The use of the “historical present” was apparently quite widespread in Aramaic literature, as it was in Akkadian, *ibid.*, II, p. 538. Sokoloff (1968-69, p. 144) cites several examples of the use of the participle as a “narrative past” in *Genesis Rabba* (MS Vatican 30); he notes that this linguistic phenomenon is not a feature of the first phase of Mishnaic Hebrew, but is quite common in the second (literary) phase of Mishnaic Hebrew, and attributes this development to the influence of Aramaic. Both Sokoloff and Bendavid (1967-71,

Let us turn, therefore, to a similar but more demonstrable stratagem for imbuing the elaborated biblical narrative with a sense of immediacy, the use of time-linked terminology in Midrashic exegesis:

This is what scripture says: I RETURNED, AND SAW UNDER THE SUN, THAT THE RACE IS NOT TO THE SWIFT, etc. (Eccl 9:11). What does "that the race is not to the swift" mean? R. Tanhuma said: This verse refers to Moses. How so? Yesterday he ascended to the firmament like an eagle; now he has asked to cross the Jordan and is not permitted, as it says: THOU SHALT NOT GO OVER THIS JORDAN (Deut 3:27). NOR IS THE BATTLE TO THE STRONG (Eccl 9:11)—Yesterday the angels were trembling before him and now he says: FOR I WAS AFRAID OF THE ANGER AND HOT DISPLEASURE (Deut 9:19). NEITHER DO THE WISE HAVE BREAD (i.e. the Torah) (Eccl 9:11)—Yesterday: A WISE MAN SCALETH THE CITY OF THE MIGHTY AND BRINGS DOWN THE STRENGTH OF ITS CONFIDENCE (Prov 21:22) (i.e. Moses ascended to heaven against the opposition of the angels and brought down the Torah); and now it is taken from him and given to Joshua ben Nun. Yesterday he was speaking [commandingly] like a rich man: TURN FROM THY FIERCE WRATH AND REPENT OF THIS EVIL AGAINST THY PEOPLE (Exod 32:12); and now he speaks [beseechingly] like a poor man: AND I BESOUGHT [THE LORD AT THAT TIME—when God did not permit Moses to enter Canaan] (Deut 3:23). . . . Finally, NOR IS THERE FAVOR FOR THOSE WHO KNOW, [FOR THE AFFLICTION OF TIME, i.e. death, BEFALLS EVERYONE] (Eccl 9:11)—Yesterday, he knew how to influence his Creator: [WHEN THE ARK SET FORWARD, MOSES WOULD SAY] RISE UP, O LORD . . . [AND WHEN IT RESTED, HE WOULD SAY] RETURN, O LORD (Num 10:35–36); and now, after having beseeched [God] for all of seven days,⁷ in the end the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: BEHOLD, THY DAYS APPROACH THAT THOU MUST DIE (Deut 31:14). (*Deuteronomy Rabba* IX 2)

On the exegetical level, this poem relates each successive phrase of the opening "remote" verse (Eccl 9:11) to major events in the life of Moses. The

I, p. 284 [29]) note that this use of the participle was often changed to the past tense by later copyists who felt it to be strange. In view of these considerations, from the most elemental linguistic problems of cultural and historical variation in the concept of time to the most specific problems of variant readings in rabbinic texts, it would be naive to demonstrate a major type of Midrashic "time-shift" on the basis of grammatical tense alone.

7. According to *Leviticus Rabba* XI 6, Moses pleaded to be allowed to enter the Land of Israel for the first seven days of the month of Adar. According to *Seder 'Olam*, ch. X, on the sixth of Adar, God said to Moses "Behold, thy days approach that thou must die."

Darshan—R. Tanḥuma, according to the text⁸—illustrates how Moses was repeatedly granted great powers, but in each case was subsequently reduced to total powerlessness. This progression of events leads to Moses's beseeching God to let him enter the promised land and concludes with God's refusal, in which He informs Moses of his approaching death. On the aesthetic level, it should be noted that the entire proem has been given an almost poetic structure by the use of *mesarchia*, the repetition of the same words at the beginning and middle of each component part (see Shipley, 1943, s.v.). These repeated words are the exegetical formula, "yesterday . . . and now." As usual in Midrashic passages which employ this formula, this exegetical pattern is used here to highlight reversals of circumstances which occurred within the biblical narrative.⁹ However, the use of time-linked terminology, such as "yesterday" and "now" to refer to events which occurred in the biblical past also has an important psychological effect. These terms, which normally refer to the immediate past and present, serve to bring the biblical texts cited into present reality. The rhetorical effect is sometimes reinforced by the use of the historical present tense after the word "now." By using the word "now" to make the concluding link to the lection verse, "Behold . . . thou must die," the Darshan transports God's portentous announcement to Moses into a narrative present. One can readily imagine how such a dramatic use of "now"¹⁰ in its original oral *Sitz im Leben*, moved the audience to listen to the subsequent Torah-reading with a sense of emotional participation.

Let us examine a second example of the use of very similar exegetical terminology:

R. Azariah said in the name of R. Simon . . . thus, in the past the Holy One, blessed be He, would receive sacrifices up on high, as it is said, AND THE LORD SMELLED THE PLEASING ODOR [of Noah's burnt offering] (Gen 8:21). But now He receives down below, I COME TO MY GARDEN, MY

8. The force of such attributions to R. Tanḥuma, particularly as here in the first proem following a Halakhic proem, remains unclear. In all but one of the 28 chapters of *Pesiqta Rabbati* that open with a Halakhic proem, this unit is followed by a proem attributed to R. Tanḥuma (Zunz-Albeck, 1954, p. 118, note 8). A similar pattern is found elsewhere in *Deuteronomy Rabba* III 9, 13; IV 2; VIII 3.

9. See for example, *Genesis Rabba* XXX 8. Bacher (1923, I, p. 95, s.v. 'aḅar; II, p. 156, s.v. 'etmol; p. 250, s.v. 'aḅar) and Albeck (1965, p. 23, s.v. 'etmol . . . (və)'aḅar; p. 39, s.v. lašē'aḅar . . . (və)'aḅar) note that these expressions are used to point out the difference between past and present.

10. A comparable repetitious use of "now" to heighten the immediacy and excitement of descriptive narration can be exemplified in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, I, ii, 196–198: "I boarded the King's ship: now on the beak, / Now in the waist, the deck, in every cabin, / I flamed amazement."

SISTER, MY BRIDE (Cant 5:1). (*Pesiqta Derav Kahana*, ed. Mandelbaum, p. 1)

Again the thematic content of this midrash becomes clearer once we understand the connection to the lection verse which is cited only at the conclusion of the proem in which this passage is found. "On the day when Moses had finished setting up the Tabernacle" (Num 7:1) is interpreted with the help of the verse from Canticles as the day on which God descended to earth to receive the sacrifices of Israel. On the exegetical level, the expression "now" (*'aḳṣav*) links the midrash directly to the verse from Canticles and also points to the lection verse which is being interpreted indirectly.¹¹ Indeed, this is the normal exegetical function of the expression "now," to introduce the "main point," that is, the verse or biblical event which is central to the Midrashic exposition. But on the rhetorical level, by using what is normally a time-linked expression to mean "now, here in the biblical text," the temporal point of reference of the exposition becomes the biblical text under discussion. From a psychological perspective, the hearer or reader is subtly being drawn to view the biblical narrative from within the biblical time-frame. Thus, in this example, which is excerpted from a proem, the use of such time-linked terminology may be seen to have helped set an emotional tone of *engagement* for the coming reading of the biblical portion which deals with the setting up of the Tabernacle. The somewhat surprising comment, "and now He receives [sacrifices] down below" not only alludes to the first verse of the lection; it also serves to mentally transfer the audience into a past time in which sacrifices were still a present reality.

The Timelessness of the Sacrificial Cult

This whole concept of the sacrificial cult serves as an illustration of the anachronistic attitude of post-biblical Judaism to phenomena of central importance which, because of historical developments, have effectively been relegated to the past.¹² The destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. put an abrupt

11. Note that in MS Oxford 152 there are additions which clarify this implicit connection: "And now [with the setting up of the Tabernacle] He receives [the sacrifices] down below."

12. A similar example of such anachronism is the rabbinic attitude toward idolatry. As Lieberman (1962, pp. 115–127) has shown, though there was no need to preach to Jews in the rabbinic period to deter them from practicing idol worship, the Rabbis continued the prophetic tradition of satiric polemic against idolatry as a literary elaboration of the Bible. Cf. Urbach (1959, pp. 149ff).

end to the sacrificial cult which had up until that time played such a major role in the life of the Jewish people. One fundamental response which the Rabbis offered for this catastrophe was the doctrine that prayer replaces the Temple service (Elbogen, 1972, p. 190). Yet there was a subordinate tendency, on the part of some, to cling tenaciously to the notion that the sacrificial cult continued, either potentially or in some transmuted sense. From the generation of the Tanna'im immediately following the destruction of the Temple until modern times, there have been those who held the opinion that sacrifices may be offered even though the Temple is no longer standing.¹³ Moreover, there developed the notion of the Heavenly Temple (Aptowitz, 1931). This transmuted Temple was said to "be directed against the Temple down below," that is, invisibly hovering over the ruins of the historical Temple. In this Heavenly Temple, daily sacrifices continued to be offered by the angel Michael or Metatron for the expiation of Israel's sins. Yet, there was also a line of thinking which apparently claimed that sacrifices continued to be offered in the ruins of the "Temple down below"; the officiant at these nebulous sacrifices, which shall continue until the resurrection of the dead, is the biblical priest Phineas, who is identified with Elijah.¹⁴

What interests us here is the way in which these notions about the ongoing nature of the sacrificial cult find rhetorical expression in the Midrashic tendency to blur the distinction between the past and present. We can already see that the allusion, in the passage cited above, to God's receiving sacrifices down below, now, may depend in part on this broad complex of vague notions that the sacrificial cult is in some sense still a part of present reality. The Temple and its cult, since "its first sanctification availed both for its own time and for the time to come" (Mishnah, 'Eduyot, 8:6) is, as it were, a "timeless" institution and in some sense must continue to be part of present reality.¹⁵

13. See Mishnah, 'Eduyot, 8:6 and the brief survey of the literature on this question until modern times by Z. Kaplan (1971).

14. ". . . from the time that the Temple was destroyed, he [Phineas-Elijah] sacrifices two daily-burnt offerings every day in expiation of Israel's sins . . ." (*Batey Midrašot*, ed. Wertheimer, I, p. 296). Aptowitz (1931, p. 260, note 6) argues that these sacrifices too take place in the Heavenly Temple, against the understanding of R. Menaḥem Azariah of Fano. This latter understanding is also cited by R. Hanokh Zundel ('*Anap Yosep to Tanhuma*, Ki Tišša 3). The legend of Elijah offering daily sacrifices in the ruins of the Temple in Jerusalem re-emerges in Shmuel Yosef Agnon's *In the Heart of the Seas*, Ch. 5; the author's *alter ego*, R. Shmuel Yosef, relates this to "sweeten the meal with legends that glorify the Land of Israel."

15. See *Sifre* (on Num 25:13) 131, ed. Horovitz, p. 173 and Aptowitz (1931, pp. 269–270, note 7). Also note that the two medieval authorities mentioned above in note 14 stress that the sacrifices must go on because existence is not possible without them. According to *Numbers*

“And you would not bring Me the Omer?!”

In conclusion, a somewhat more thorough analysis of an example of Midrashic homiletics is presented which further illustrates a number of the points raised in this paper. The example is once again a poem;¹⁶ but as it is quite extensive, I excerpt only the passages which are most relevant to the particular aspects I wish to discuss. For easier reference in the following discussion, the individual passages, which are cited in their original order, are identified by letter.

- (a) R. Jonah said: In the normal course of events a man may get a pound of meat. See what trouble and effort he goes through until he will have finally gotten it cooked! And the Holy One, blessed be He, causes the winds to blow, the clouds to rise and the rains to fall; He causes the crops to grow and dries them, and sets out a table before each person. And you would not bring Him the Omer?!¹⁷
- (b) R. Hiyya bar Abba said: In the normal course of events a man washes his clothing on rainy days. See what trouble and effort he goes through until he gets them dried. And I cause the winds to blow, the clouds to rise and the rains to fall; I cause the crops to grow and dry them, and set out a table before each person. And you would not bring Me the Omer?!
- (c) R. Benayah said: See what trouble and effort they go through until they bring the Omer! As we learn in the Mishnah: They reaped it, put it into baskets and brought it to the Temple Court. They would parch it with fire . . . How was it made ready? The messengers of the court would go out already on the day preceding the festival . . . all the towns near to there would assemble together there so that it might be reaped with great ceremony.
- (d) R. Berekhiah said: I am a cook and you would not give me to taste the dish I have prepared for you that I might know what it needs?! . . .

Rabba XV 6, though the sacrifices have ceased, the lamps give light in front of the lampstand forever.

16. *Leviticus Rabba* XXVIII 1–3, ed. Margulies, pp. 648–656. This is a poem to the lection beginning *Lev* 23:10; the opening verse is *Ecc* 1:3. For the parallel versions of this poem, see Margulies' note, p. 648.

17. 'omer, lit. "sheaf," also the measure (about four liters) of barley flour offered in the Temple on the second day of Passover; see below, passage (c). Depending on intonation, the final sentence may either be understood as a direct statement, in which case it has a chastising tone, "And you are not bringing Him the Omer!"; or as a negative rhetorical question in which case it has a tone of admonishment. The latter alternative parallels the rhetorical tone of passage (f). My translation, which reflects this alternative, admittedly reflects my interpretation of the poem as a whole. Compare the slightly different version in *Pesiqta Derav Kahana* (p. 136).

- (e) R. Joshua of Sikhni said in the name of R. Levi: I am a sentry and you would not give me my wages for guarding?! . . .
- (f) R. Simon said: The Holy One, blessed be He, said to man, "Now that you have plowed, reaped, bound and piled into sheaves, if I do not provide you with a bit of wind would you be able to winnow?! And so, would you not even repay me for that wind?!" Thus it is written **WHAT GAIN HAS HE THAT HE TOILED FOR THE WIND** (Eccl 5:15).¹⁸
- (g) R. Abin said: The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel, "Come and discern how I am different from you. When you give the Omer, you give one Omer for all of you; and yet when you receive [the manna in the desert] you receive **AN OMER A PIECE ACCORDING TO THE NUMBER OF YOUR INDIVIDUALS** (Exod 16:16), and [the one Omer you give] is not of wheat but of barley. Nevertheless, be most careful to bring it at its appointed time. Thus Moses admonished Israel, saying to them **WHEN YOU COME INTO THE LAND WHICH I GIVE YOU AND REAP ITS HARVEST, YOU SHALL BRING AN OMER OF THE FIRST FRUITS OF YOUR HARVEST TO THE PRIEST** (Lev 23:10).

We must forego a thorough thematic and exegetical analysis and merely point out several striking features of this proem. The rhetorical character of the material—the almost exclusive use of the historical present tense, the numerous rhetorical questions and expressions, and the sing-song repetition of words and pattern sentences—suggests that the individual passages each cited in the name of a different authority preserve snippets of originally oral homilies. Yet the highly structured repetitiveness of the passages—(a) and (b) preserve an almost identical verbal pattern, as do (e) and (f); the phrase "See what trouble and effort . . ." recurs in (a), (b) and (c)—suggests that the proem as a whole is the work of a highly skilled compositor¹⁹ who imposed his artistic design on the material which he utilized. This design, the

18. My translation of the second rhetorical question is based on the readings in MSS Oxford 2335, Paris 149 and the early printed editions which are similar to the versions found in *Pesiqta Derav Kahana*, pp. 137–138. Note that the concluding verse here is parallel to the proem verse (Eccl 1:3), but there is a complex play on the word *laruah*, which in the context of the verse, means "for nought," but which the Darshan also interprets in its root sense, "for the wind." It seems that he also interprets the whole biblical phrase not as a rhetorical question, but as a question and answer, "What gain has he that he toiled? To [receive] the wind [from God]."

19. I use the term "compositor" to refer to the anonymous artist responsible for the proem in its present composite nature, that is, made up of numerous citations. The term "editor" or "author" I would reserve for the author of the literary homily as a whole, in this case *Leviticus Rabba*, Ch. XXVIII. On this question, see J. Heinemann (1969–70).

aesthetic structure of the proem, finds particular expression in the seven-fold recurrence, in various forms, of the admonition to bring the Omer [(a), (b); metaphorically in (d) and (e); indirectly in (f); and twice in (g)].

This is the feature that is most striking. The individual authorities cited, all of whom may be dated to the post-destruction period, seem to have been admonishing their audiences to bring the Omer, despite the fact that the Omer could not be brought, since the sacrificial cult did not function after the destruction of the Temple. It seems to me that this perplexing and apparently anomalous admonition of the audience to bring the Omer can best be understood against the background of the timelessness of the sacrificial cult and by reference to what I have called the Midrashic license to blur the distinction between the historical past and the actual present. We have here yet another example of the Darshan's tendency to address his audience as if they were living in the biblical past with which he is dealing.

Let us pay particular attention to the changes in who is addressed by whom in the passages cited above. In passages (a), (b), (d) and (e), it seems that the compositor of the proem, citing various authorities, is admonishing his audience to bring the Omer. Note that passage (b), by changing in the middle to the first person, is subtly changed into an implicitly theophoric admonition; passages (d) and (e) are also implicitly theophoric. In passage (f), "man" in the abstract²⁰ is addressed by God, and in (g), God admonishes Israel to bring the Omer at its appointed time. This leads directly to a straightforward statement of the plain meaning of the lection verse; "Moses admonished Israel . . . 'You shall bring an Omer.'" We have here a progression: the Darshan begins by directly addressing the biblical commandment at his audience and gradually leads to the biblical commandment itself. The seven-fold repetition of the admonishment pattern functions as a psychologically effective mechanism for progressively equating the audience, who are admonished to bring the Omer, with biblical Israel, who are commanded to bring the Omer in the lection about to be read.²¹ In this way, the audience is emotionally prepared for the Torah-reading by being mentally drawn into its time-frame—a rhetorical stratagem we noted above. The audience's natural reaction to the question "And you would not bring Him the Omer?!" was most likely "But of course

20. *Leviticus Rabba*, ed. Margulies, p. 655, l. 3 and variants: 'adam (ze) may mean "a (certain) man," but in this context seems to mean, "man" (in the abstract).

21. Relevant to this point is the rabbinic notion that reading the biblical passages about, and studying the laws of, the sacrificial cult are equivalent to offering the sacrifices themselves, see *Leviticus Rabba* VII 3, p. 155 and the parallels which Margulies cites in his note there to 1.5. This notion is similar to the idea encountered in *Pesiqta Derav Kahana* (cited above).

we would!’’ Thus the admonition pattern would have the psychological effect not of chastising the audience but rather that of inspiring them with a sense of their own willingness to bring the Omer, were they but able. We can also sense that this elaborate and sophisticated rhetorical stratagem depends in some degree on the nebulous notions about the ongoing nature of the sacrificial cult which were briefly examined above. The interaction, in this poem, of rhetorical, psychological and ideational factors allows us to glimpse a more profound aspect of the homiletical conventions illustrated above. Ultimately, the Midrashic license to blur the distinctions between past and present is but one expression, in temporal terms, of a religious *Weltanschauung* which accepts that the Bible and its imaginative elaboration transpire within a ‘‘timeless’’ realm, where past and future realities are part of the here and now.

This poem on the Omer, therefore, exemplifies and unites many facets of the whole complex of issues which we have been examining. The Midrash, and other narrative art forms that attempt to present the past in a compelling way, tend to play with temporal frames of reference. But the Darshan does so with a sacred purpose. He sets himself the task of making the sacred biblical past a present reality and a living experience for his audience. And often he succeeds.

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