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DIRSHUNI AND CLASSICAL MIDRASH: FORM, LANGUAGE, CONTENTS, AND PURPOSE[1]

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Enshrining *Dirshuni* in "the new Jewish canon," Sarah Mulhern wrote:

> [T]he editors chose to restrict the collection to midrashim that worked within the interpretive rules, techniques, and structures of classical rabbinic midrash […] as an expression of the editors' view that these works ought to be read not as literature but sacred text. In striving to write in the forms of the Rabbis' midrashim, the midrashim of Dirshuni audaciously claim to be their equal.[2]

The burden of this brief essay is to investigate just how the midrashim of *Dirshuni* effect these claims. How similar are the midrashim in the

[1] I am grateful to Dr. Chumie Juni for the invitation to contribute this essay on a wonderful and important set of books. My thanks to Dr. Dov Weiss and Dalya Koller for reading earlier drafts of this essay and sharing their criticisms, and to the two anonymous reviewers for their suggestions for improvement, which made for a better article.

[2] Sarah Mulhern, "Tamar Biala and Nechama Weingarten-Mintz (eds.), *Dirshuni: Midrashei Nashim*, 2009, in *The New Jewish Canon*, ed. Yehuda Kurtzer and Claire E. Sufrin (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2020), 415–420, at 418–419.

collections to rabbinic midrash? And do they in fact serve the same purpose as their ostensible predecessors? To answer these questions, we will look at four aspects of the midrashim: the form of the passages, the language utilized, the contents of the midrashim, and the purposes of the literary productions.

1. Forms

The phenomenon of "women's midrash" grew up first in the United States.[3] In the 1970s, Israeli society was not yet producing anything so bold. Rivka Lubitch attributes this to the clearer and bolder sense of feminism that took hold in the United States, along with less reticence to "tamper" with Scripture.[4] Much of the early American midrashic enterprise, however, was not distinctively "midrashic" in form. It often came as a poem, or a painting, or even an essay. The questions raised were pointed and could be blunt in their presentation (but subtle in their analyses).[5] Even when the writing was less prosaic than an essay,[6] the

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[3] Jody Myers, "The Midrashic Enterprise of Contemporary Jewish Women," in *Jews and Gender: The Challenge to Hierarchy*, ed. Jonathan Frankel, Studies in Contemporary Jewry 16 (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the Institute of Contemporary Jewry, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2000), 119–141.

[4] Rivka Lubitch, "מדרשים פמניסטיים," in עין טובה, דו-שיח ופולמוס בתרבות ישראל: ספר יובל למלאת עי"ן שנים לטובה אילן, ed. Yosef Aḥituv, Naḥem Ilan, Menaḥem Ben-Sasson, Gili Sivan, and Avi Sagi (Bene Beraḳ: Ha-Ḳibbuẓ ha-Me'uḥad, 1999), 302–310, at 303.

[5] An influential essay by Ruth Behar, "Sarah and Hagar: The Heelprints upon Their Faces," in *Beginning Anew: A Woman's Companion to the High Holy Days*, ed. Gail Twersky and Judith A. Kates (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 35–43, for example, has much in common with the womanist arguments of Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993).

[6] For poetry as doing some of the same work—imagining the inner lives of characters underdeveloped in the biblical text—see Anat Koplowitz-Breier, "Retelling the Bible: Jewish Women's Midrashic Poems on Abishag the Shunammite," in *The Rhetoric of Topics and Forms*, ed. Gianna Zocco, Proceedings of the XXI Congress of the ICLA 4 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 353–365, and Anat Koplowitz-Breier, "Commemorating the Nameless Wives of the Bible: Midrashic Poems by Contemporary American-Jewish Women," *Religions* 11 (2020), 365 (19 pp.), with references to earlier work.

"midrashic" component was limited to the ideas, not the form.[7] But the form does matter, and the midrashim in *Dirshuni* consciously emulate midrashic form in addition to midrashic thinking.

What is midrashic form? Addressing this question is handicapped from the beginning by the dizzying variety of rabbinic texts that are subsumed under the term "midrash." One preliminary point is that the authors clearly have in mind aggadic midrashim, not halakhic midrashim.[8] This is of profound theological importance, and we shall return to it in the final section of the essay.

Even excluding halakhic midrash, the category of midrash (read: aggadic midrash) is still sprawling and diverse.[9] And there are three obvious ways in which the midrashim of *Dirshuni* differ, on the whole, from classical midrash. One midrash (pp. 18–19) is labeled in the commentary a *petiḥta*. In classical midrash, a *petiḥta*—literally "opening"—typically begins with a rabbi citing a verse from a far-flung textual context and then, through a series of questions and answers, leading the listener to the climax, which is the verse on which the midrash is commenting. The *petiḥta* in *Dirshuni* does not hew all that closely to the rules of that genre,

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[7] For a survey of English-language "feminist midrash" that includes novels, poems, essays, and other genres, see Rivkah M. Walton, "Lilith's Daughters, Miriam's Chorus: Two Decades of Feminist Midrash," *Religion & Literature* 43.2 (2011), 115–127.

[8] This dichotomy is easy to state but difficult to define. The Mekhilta, for example, contain huge amounts of aggadic midrash, perhaps 50% of the entire corpus. Its status as a "halakhic" midrash is supported, however, by its onset at Exodus 12 and not earlier.

[9] The literature is vast. For overviews, see Marc Hirschman, "Aggadic Midrash," in *The Literature of the Sages, Second Part: Midrash and Targum; Liturgy, Poetry, Mysticism; Contracts, Inscriptions, Ancient Science, and the Languages of Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Shmuel Safrai, Zeev Safrai, Joshua Schwartz, and Peter Tomson, CRINT 3b (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: Van Gorcum and Fortress, 2006), 107–132, revised as Menaḥem (Marc) Hirschman and Tamar Ḳadari, "מדרש אגדה," in ספרות חז"ל הארץ־ישראלית: כרך שני – לעולמה של ספרות חז"ל והקשריה, ed. David Rosenthal, Vered Noam, Menaḥem Ḳister, and Menaḥem Kahana (Jerusalem: Yad Yiẓḥaḳ Ben Ẕvi, 2018), 511–552; Myron B. Lerner, "The Works of Aggadic Midrash and the Esther Midrashim," in *The Literature of the Sages*, 133–229; Ḳadari, "מדרשי האגדה האמרואיים," in ספרות חז"ל הארץ-ישראלית: כרך א – מבואות לחיבורי ספרות חז"ל, 297–349.

and in any event, it is the only one that emulates this common rabbinic form. For obvious reasons, the number of named authorities cited in the midrashim is limited; Tanot, the soul of Jephthah's daughter (p. 89), has pride of place. The textual pluralism so characteristic of rabbinic midrash, where a phrase may be the subject of multiple ostensibly mutually exclusive interpretations, is rare here as well. In these ways, *Dirshuni* is more similar to the Tanḥuma midrashim and later texts such as Pirḳe de-Rabbi Eli'ezer, which have many fewer named authorities and are not pluralistic in their presentations.[10]

Midrash has its origins in oral performance, originally in public settings.[11] It is clear that women attended these sessions as well, even without their husbands. For example, a well-known story says that "Rabbi Meir used to sit and expound (דריש) on Sabbath eves, and there was one woman who listened to his *derashah*."[12] But from its beginnings, midrash was a text; otherwise, it would not have been preserved. It is hard to know how much changed in that process. Certainly one imagines that a public midrash must have been longer than the few lines, or even the few words, we get in the written versions.[13] Perhaps it included exposition of the ideas, embellishment of the textual analysis, further development of the meaning. The dynamic of *Dirshuni* is the opposite: these are literary creations, concise and compact from their beginnings. It is only in the

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[10] My thanks to Dov Weiss for making this point about the Tanḥuma and other midrashim. As a reviewer commented, this "lack of plurality" should not be construed in negative terms: Tanḥuma and Pirke de-Rabbi Eli'ezer offer longer, more integrated narratives.

[11] See Hirschman and Ḳadari, "מדרש אגדה," 525–526, and their discussion of Frankel's view on p. 542. For a diachronic approach to the question of public teaching—arguing that teaching was public until the last part of the Tannaitic period, when study turned into something practiced among the rabbis, not for the public—see Paul D. Mandel, *The Origins of Midrash: From Teaching to Text*, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 180 (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

[12] Leviticus Rabbah 9:9, ed. Margaliot, pp. 191–193, parallel in y. Soṭah 1:4 (15d). The problems in the story begin only because one week the session went too long and the food at home was burnt, not because she was attending a *derasha* alone.

[13] For a similar consideration regarding biblical prophecies, see Matitiahu Tsevat, "הנביאים כנואמים פומביים," *Shenaton la-Miḳra ve-la-Ḥeker ha-Mizraḥ ha-Ḳadum* 10 (1990), 147–151.

English version that we now have commentaries for each that articulate some of what the midrash is doing (see below). This self-conscious literary presentation, emulating the form of midrash, is far more effective in Hebrew than in English, since it derives much of its power from that emulation and evocation.

2. Language

Ronit Irshai has pointed out that as women have gained expertise in rabbinic literature, they have learned to speak the language of the traditional texts, and have used that ability "to create a feminist alternative."[14] The language provides not just a vocabulary but also an identity. While an English-language poem can arrogate for itself the name "midrash" through a title or an introductory framing, the midrashim of *Dirshuni* let their contents do the talking. They are self-evidently midrash.

The language also allows for a richer interplay with classical language and texts. This may begin with the title of the collection itself. According the editors, *Dirshuni* comes from Amos 5:4, the only place in the Hebrew Bible where this precise form appears.[15] But it may be wondered if there is an additional source lurking behind the title as well. The Talmud reports that Esther wrote to the Sages, "Write me (*kitvuni*) in the book!"[16] In that story, Esther is pleading with the male gatekeepers to include her, to enshrine her in *the* book.[17] The female hero needs to win male approval to be remembered.

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[14] Ronit Irshai, "'And I Find a Wife More Bitter Than Death' (Eccl 7:26): Feminist Hermeneutics, Women's Midrashim, and the Boundaries of Acceptance in Modern Orthodox Judaism," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 33 (2017), 73; Irshai, "Theology and Halakhah in Jewish Feminisms," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish Theology*, ed. Steven Kepnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 297–315, at 307.

[15] See the Hebrew preface and the English acknowledgments.

[16] The formulation כתבוני בספר, rather than כתבוני לדורות as in the Vilna edition, is found in most of the manuscripts: Oxford 366, Columbia 294–295, Vatican 134, British Library 400, Göttingen 3.

[17] For the Bible as *the* book in rabbinic thought, see Yaacov Sussmann, " תורה שבעל פה פשוטה כמשמעה: כוחו של קוצו של יו"ד," in *Mehqerei Talmud, Vol. III, Part 1 – Talmudic Studies Dedicated*

In moving from *kitvuni* to *dirshuni*, the book takes two steps forward and away from this dependence. First, it changes the addressee. No longer is the imperative verb addressed to the Men of the Great Assembly. Instead, taking its cue from the verse in Amos, the target is "the entire community" (237). Second, the collection now asks the audience—all the people of Israel—to interpret (*lidrosh*), rather than just to write. If Esther wanted to be canonized, *Dirshuni* wants to loosen the bonds of canonicity. Probe the stories, react to the stories, rewrite the stories! In this way, *Dirshuni* moves beyond Esther, who blazed the trail by getting into The Book. Not just finding a foothold in a corner of the Writings, *Dirshuni* appropriates the entire Bible, wresting control of it for the women who interpret.

The centrality of Israel in the production of these midrashim is due to the fluency of writers there with the Hebrew language—a skill that has, if anything, tragically declined even in vibrant diaspora communities such as the United States. The association of midrash with the Land of Israel is not new, however. Babylonian rabbis were ambivalent about midrash: the Bavli cites R. Ḥiyya b. Ami in the name of 'Ulla, "Since the Temple was destroyed, God has in His world only the four cubits of halakhah."[18] In fact, even though the Bavli contains massive amounts of non-legal material, it is a striking fact that the Babylonian Jews did not produce any literature other than the Talmud itself, and no midrashic collections such as Bereshit Rabbah, the Tanḥuma midrashim, or anything of the sort.[19]

This stands in stark contrast to the situation in the Land of Israel, from which we have also thousands of pages of midrash of different types;

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to the Memory of Professor Ephraim E. Urbach, ed. Yaacov Sussmann and David Rosenthal (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2005), 282–299.

[18] b. Berakhot 8a.

[19] To be clear, this is not because the Babylonian Rabbis were any less comfortable with Hebrew than their counterparts in Eretz Israel! For the broad cultural difference, see Shai Secunda, "Why the Talmud Is the Only Rabbinic Work from Babylonia," *TheGemara.com*, 2016, https://thegemara.com/article/why-the-talmud-is-the-only-rabbinic-work-from-babylonia/. There are two running midrashic collections incorporated within the Bavli: the midrash on Esther in b. Megillah. 10b–17a and the less cohesive midrash on Exodus 2 in b. Soṭah 11a–14a.

hundreds or thousands of *piyyuṭim*, liturgical poems which blend midrash with poetry, for every shabbat and festival of the year; expansive Targumim that incorporate midrashic motifs and elements into the "translation."[20] In addition to all this, there is synagogue art throughout the Land of Israel that reflects interpretive traditions known to us from midrash—and sometimes traditions *not* known to us from midrash. There is one great example of synagogue art known to us from the diaspora, at Dura Europos, and although in its dazzling diversity and richness it far outshines anything from Palestine, at least for the time being, it stands alone.[21]

This multimedia cornucopia of interpretation would hit the synagogue-goer in Byzantine Palestine from every side. Before the Torah reading, they would hear a midrash. The reading itself is accompanied by an interlinear translation that does not just translate, but expounds. One of the remarkable aspects was the custom of *piyyuṭ*: a long liturgical poem was recited after the reading of the Torah, which amplified the themes of the Torah reading, tying them together with midrashic contents and connecting them to the upcoming prayer.[22] Each week there would be a new *piyyuṭ*, perhaps by Yannai or Qilliri, tying the Torah reading to the themes of the upcoming prayer in highly inflected language. And the whole time, they may be standing on a mosaic depicting biblical scenes.[23]

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[20] The Targumim in use in Babylonia, Onqelos for the Torah and Jonathan for the Prophets, are highly literal, rarely adding anything beyond the text itself. And their origins, too, are in the Land of Israel!

[21] For the synagogue at Dura, see Carl H. Kraeling, *Dura-Europos: The Synagogue*, The Excavations at Dura-Europos, Final Report 8/1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956); the essays in Joseph Gutmann (ed.), *The Dura-Europos Synagogue: A Re-evaluation (1932–1992)*, South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism 25 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), and Rachel Hachlili, *Ancient Jewish Art and Archaeology in the Diaspora* Handbuch der Orientalistik, Erste Abteilung, Der Nahe und Mittlere Osten 35 (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 96–197. For mosaic floors in diaspora synagogues—which do *not* include biblical motifs—see Hachlili, 198–236.

[22] For an excellent introduction to this literature in English, see Laura Lieber, *Yannai on Genesis: An Invitation to Piyyut* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2010).

[23] For the last, see, for instance, the overview in Uzi Leibner, "Rabbinic Traditions and Synagogue Art," in *Jewish Art in Its Late Antique Context*, ed. Uzi Leibner and Catherine

The creativity inherent in all this is not paralleled by anything in Babylonia. While there may be all sorts of reasons for this cultural gap, I suspect that at the root it is a matter of language. A culture that feels at home in the language of the classical texts can take ownership over those texts. While Aramaic was used in both cultures, Hebrew was a language of popular composition and consumption in Israel but not in Babylonia, where the non-elites probably would not have been able to follow a Hebrew *derasha*, much less a *piyyuṭ* of Qilliri.

This may not be all that different from the situation today. "Women's midrash" began in the United States, but the connections to classical midrash were tenuous at best. There was no common language or form, and the authors did not often show familiarity with the methods of rabbinic midrash. The genres utilized were very different from those of classical midrash, and actually were usually distinctively modern genres such as an essay or a poem.[24] This did not make the texts produced less powerful, but it did change the nature of that power. These were texts that lay outside of the tradition, that approached it from a distinctly external perspective. With the shift to Israeli writers and the Hebrew language, it was not just the language that changed, but the position of the writers vis-à-vis older texts. These texts sound like midrash. They borrow from the formulations, from the terminology, and from the structure. The return to Hebrew also bespeaks a return to an insider discourse.

The Talmudic rabbis reflected on the association of midrash with the culture of the Land of Israel—and its foreignness to the Babylonian culture—in at least two passages that open multiple angles of insight into the world of midrash. First, y. Ma'asrot 3:4 (51a):[25]

Hezser (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 139–154, and other essays in that volume; see also Zeev Weiss, "Visual vs. Virtual Reality: Interpreting Synagogue Mosaic Art," in *The Synagogue in Ancient Palestine: Current Issues and Emerging Trends*, ed. Rick Bonnie, Raimo Hakola, Ulla Tervahauta (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021), 339–354.

[24] For an analysis of five poems on the daughter of Jephthah, see Anat Koplowitz-Breier, "A Nameless Bride of Death: Jephthah's Daughter in American Jewish Women's Poetry," *Open Theology* 6 (2020), 1–14.

[25] See also Hirschman and Ḳadari, "מדרש אגדה," 511.

> A story: R. Ze'ira, R. Abba b. Kahana, and R. Levi were sitting, and R. Ze'ira was rebuking people of aggadah, calling them "scribes of spells" (ספרי קוסמי). R. Abba b. Kahana said to him, "Why are you rebuking us? Ask and they will answer you." He said to him, "What is this that is written, 'For the rage of man brings thanks to You, the leftover rages You will gird' (Psalm 76:11)?" He said to him, "'For the rage of man brings thanks to You' – in this world, 'the leftover rages You will gird' – in the world to come."
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> He said to him, "Or perhaps we can say, 'for the rage of man brings thanks to You' – in the future world, 'the leftover rages You will gird' – in this world?" R. Levi said, "When You awaken Your rage on the wicked, they will see what You are doing and they will bring thanks to Your name." R. Ze'ira said, "This turns and turns again (היא הפכה והיא מהפכה),[26] and we learn nothing from it!"

In this story, the Babylonian Rabbi Ze'ira begins by criticizing the enterprise of midrash, and concludes having lost all patience with it. What does it accomplish if we can say one thing and its opposite, and call this midrash?

A second text is in the Bavli, in Ta'anit 5b. Here, R. Yoḥanan is asked by the Babylonian Rav Naḥman to say a word of Torah. After a delay, R. Yoḥanan complies by offering the gnomic claim, "Our father Jacob never died" (יעקב אבינו לא מת). Rav Naḥman is unimpressed: "Was it for nought that they lamented him and embalmed him and *buried* him?!" R. Yoḥanan retorts, "I am interpreting (דורש) Scripture!" and he goes on to draw out a lesson: "Just as Jacob's descendants are alive, so he too is still alive."[27]

As Joseph Heinemann observed, the notion of "I am interpreting Scripture"—the very foundation of the midrashic enterprise—seems in

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[26] The collocation הפכה ומהפכה may be an allusion to Avot 5:22, whether or not that originally referred to biblical interpretation. See Yoel Elitzur, "מידה' בלשון חז"ל והמשנה שערי לשון: מחקרים בלשון העברית, בארמית ובלשונות היהודים, האחרונה במסכת אבות," in מוגשים למשה בר-אשר, eds. Aharon Mamam, Steven Fassberg, and Yochanan Breuer, 3 vols. (Jerusalem: Bialik, 2007), 2.19–30, and Aaron Koller, "The Self-Referential Coda to *Avot* and the Egyptian-Israelite Literary Tradition of Wisdom," *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 8 (2017), 2–25.

[27] Translation from the text of MS Yad ha-Rav Herzog 1, T-S NS 329.735, and Oxford 366.

this text to be lost on the Babylonian Amora.[28] Rav Naḥman takes the claim quite literally, and points out that even if Jacob were not dead when they started the process of embalming and burying him, he certainly was by the end of it! This literal meaning, however, was never what R. Yoḥanan had in mind, and his correction, "I am interpreting Scripture," is meant to license a way of reading that need not be factually true, but instead makes an ideological point. We will return to this text below from a different angle.

Some of the authors in *Dirshuni* mobilize particular rabbinic expressions in crafting their midrashim. "Beruriah's Torah" is a play on "Rabbi Meir's Torah,"[29] "do not read" (אל תקרי) appears often, and debates in the form of "one said, and another said" are on virtually every page of rabbinic midrash, and color *Dirshuni*'s language as well.

A paradox of the current discussion is that despite all that was just said, we are here centered on the *English translation* of *Dirshuni*. Much of the foregoing loses its resonance and its power in English, for the simple reason that most people who have read a lot of midrash read it in the original.[30] The translation—felicitous though it is, even lyrical at times—is thus a betrayal of sorts of what makes *Dirshuni* so powerful to begin with. It is, however, true that there are many people who are interested in *Dirshuni* for whom the English opens up an otherwise closed collection. Whether those readers will appreciate the midrashim in all their textual glory is to be hoped.

And this leads to the next paradox of the English edition: here, there are commentaries. Little needs to be said about this, since Biala, who wrote the commentaries (which were then translated by Ilana Kurshan), noted the paradox herself:

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[28] Joseph Heinemann, אגדות ותולדותיהן: עיונים בהשתלשלותן של מסורות (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), 163–164.

[29] On which see below, in n. 32, end.

[30] Despite the availability of midrashim in English translation for many decades, these do not conjure the same recognition that comes from the stock phraseology of midrash in Hebrew, and my impression is that these have not penetrated the Jewish American mentality on the literary level. It would be gladdening to hear evidence to the contrary, though.

> I wrote the commentaries with a heavy heart. A midrash, like a poem, can be understood in many ways and bear different meanings. An element of secrecy, holding meanings close to the chest, may be what preserves its call and power. Opening up the text through commentary risks flattening its meaning, but I hope it will open the door to more readers. (*Dirshuni*, xli)

As a *phenomenon*, this is certainly true. English *Dirshuni* will make its part in the world outside of Israel in a way that the Hebrew originals never could.[31] But as literature, reading *Dirshuni* in English may in fact be a case of—to use an inappropriately gendered parable—kissing the bride through a veil.

3. Content

Dirshuni stresses that women's voices are absent from classical rabbinic literature. Of course, this is not *entirely* true although it is profoundly true. Beruriah is quoted as having engaged in biblical interpretation that is entirely conventional by rabbinic standards. So while a woman is cited as producing midrash, the voice of those midrashim is not discernibly feminist or even feminine.[32] The one possible exception is

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[31] In fact, the university library in England in which I am writing this owns the English edition but not the Hebrew originals. Fortunately, the Hebrew is on Sefaria, accessible to all.

[32] For midrashic biblical interpretations of Beruriah, see her "eulogy" for her gang-running brother in Lamentations Rabbah 3:6; her application of 2 Samuel 23:5 to rabbinic study in b. 'Eruvin 53b–54a; her debate with a *min* about Isaiah 54:1 in b. Berakhot 10a, and her midrashic critique of Rabbi Meir also in b. Berakhot 10a. On this last passage, see Aryeh Cohen, *Justice in the City: An Argument from the Sources of Rabbinic Judaism* (New Perspectives in Post-Rabbinic Judaism; Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013), 138–142. Despite how this passage is sometimes cited and understood, Beruriah's interpretation is highly midrashic. The text as vocalized has יִתַּמּוּ חַטָּאִים מִן הָאָרֶץ, and חַטָּאִים, the plural of חַטָּא, means exactly "sinners" (חוטאים), the meaning Beruriah sought to deny was present in the text. Instead, she reads it as if it were vocalized חֲטָאִים "sins," the plural of the segolate חֵטְא. It is conceivable, but I think gratuitous and unlikely, that she actually *read* differently. For the possibility that the text as read by the Rabbis differed at times from the Masoretic vocalization, see David Henshke, "דדיך מיין": משהו למסורות המקרא שלתנאים," *Jewish Studies, an Internet Journal* 10 (2012), 1–24. We are reminded, too, of course, of the fact that "Rabbi Meir's Torah" is sometimes said to have reflected different readings than the MT,

a midrashic exchange with a heretic about the theological meaning of "barrenness," in which Beruriah argues that it is far better to be barren than to have children who are wicked and go to hell. Beruriah was not barren, but according to a late midrash, her two sons died young,[33] so here it is possible that we hear a distinctively maternal voice justifying the lack of a legacy in theological terms.[34]

The goal of *Dirshuni* is not just to bring the voices of female people to the midrashic table, but to bring recognizably *women's voices*, which means here at a minimum an attentiveness to issues of gender and sexuality, to the absent voices of powerless characters, and to the profound ethical gap between the ancient texts and the modern world. Some of these concerns are to be found—unsystematically, to be sure—in classical midrash as

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which themselves may be midrashic. See discussion in Armin Lange, "Rabbi Meir and the Severus Scroll," in *"Let the Wise Listen and Add to Their Learning" (Prov. 1:5). Festschrift for Günter Stemberger on the Occasion of His 75th Birthday* (ed. Constanza Cordoni and Gerhard Langer; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 51–74.

[33] Midrash Mishle 31:2. In this passage, a gloss on "who can find a valorous woman?", the midrash tells that Beruriah hid the deaths of their boys from Rabbi Meir until after shabbat, and then broke the news to him with a rabbinic legal parable. When he howled in pain at the loss, she replied, "But we are simply returning borrowed items (i.e., the boys' souls) to their owner (i.e., God)." This portrait of a "valorous woman" is strikingly different from stereotypical "women's voices" today. For the text, see Burton L. Visotzky, *Midrash Mishle: A Critical Edition Based on Vatican MS. Ebr. 44* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1990), 190–192, and for a translation, Visotzky, *The Midrash on Proverbs* (Yale Judaica Series; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 121. See the comments of Henry A. Fischel, "Story and History: Observation on Greco-Roman Rhetoric and Pharisaism," in *American Oriental Society, Middle West Branch, Semi-Centennial Volume: A Collection of Original Essays*, ed. Denis Sinor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press for the International Affairs Center), 59–88, esp. 69–70, reprinted in *Essays in Greco-Roman and Related Talmudic Literature*, ed. Henry A. Fischel (New York: Ktav 1977), 443–472, at 453–454.

[34] This is the first passage b. Berakhot 10a cited in n. 32 above (which is the second relevant passage on that page). On this text, see Michal Bar-Asher Siegal and Elitzur Bar-Asher Siegal, "'Rejoice, O barren one who Bore no Child' (Isaiah 54:1): Beruria and the Jewish-Christian conversation in the Babylonian Talmud," in *The Faces of Torah: Studies in the Texts and Contexts of Ancient Judaism in Honor of Steven Fraade*, ed. Michal Bar-Asher Siegal, Tzvi Novick, and Christine Hayes, Journal of Ancient Judaism Supplements 22 (Göttingen: Vendenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 199–219; Michal Bar-Asher Siegal, *Jewish-Christian Dialogues on Scripture in Late Antiquity: Heretic Narratives of the Babylonian Talmud* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 108–141.

well, although those were written by men. We will exemplify this point by considering one theme in some detail.

In an insightful essay, Ronit Irshai highlights the theology of one of the midrashim in *Dirshuni*, Tamar Biala's midrash on the Ten Commandments.[35] In this midrash, a young woman is distraught when she realizes that the theophany at Sinai was directed at men alone, as she knows from the fact that the Commandments include, "Do not covet your fellow's wife." In the end, God speaks to the woman, and explains that the fault lies with the messenger, not the divine will:

> The Holy Blessed One lifted up her head and said, "Since Moshe distanced himself from women, for he separated from his wife Zipporah, he brought only men near the mountain, as is said, 'And Moshe brought the people toward God from the camp' (Ex 19:17) … Because he had not been among humanity—specifically, women—for he had not been with his wife, Zipporah, for a long time, he did not remember that women too have desire, and so he did not include them in [that] prohibition.[36]

For Irshai, this midrash has not provoked the vituperative reactions that some others in the collection have, despite the profound criticism of Moses latent within, because "Biala recruits God to the side of women, whose new interpretation may therefore be understood as another link in the interpretive chain."[37]

Furthermore, says Irshai, there are precedents for such approaches in the rabbinic tradition itself; she points to the searing interpretation offered by Daniel the Tailor for Qohelet 4:1, "I saw all the oppressed." According to this midrashist, "the oppressed" in this verse are the *mamzerim*, those born of illicit relationships, who committed no crime yet suffer the consequences of their parents' actions. "Their oppressors have power," says the verse; this is the High Court in Jerusalem, "who comes at them with the force of the Torah and pushes them away." "And there is none to

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[35] Irshai, "'And I Find a Wife More Bitter Than Death' (Eccl 7:26)," 69–86.

[36] Biala, *Dirshuni*, 71–76.

[37] Irshai, "'And I Find a Wife More Bitter Than Death'," 84.

comfort them": this is a reference to God, who ought to comfort them but can do nothing but promise that their lot will be better in the World to Come.[38]

An even closer theological parallel, with even farther-reaching implications, may be found in Sifre Numbers 133 on the daughters of Zelophechad. In the midrash's version of the claim, the women are troubled precisely by the theological implication of divine sexism, and it is this that leads them to challenge the law:

> "The daughters of Zelophechad approached"—when the daughters of Zelophechad heard that the land was to be divided among the tribes, but not [given] to women, they gathered together to take counsel. They said, "God's mercies are not like human mercies (לא כרחמי בשר ודם רחמי מקום). Human mercies favor men over women (רחמי בשר ודם, רחמיו על הזכרים יתר מן הנקבות). But the One who Spoke and the World Came Into Being is different: his mercies are equal to all (אבל מישאמר והיה העולם אינו כן, רחמיו על הכל), as it says, 'He gives bread to all flesh, etc.,' 'he gives the animal its food,' and 'the Lord is good to all.'"[39]

The claim is that although the law as revealed is discriminatory, it is not conceivable that this was the principle behind the law.[40] Here, as in Biala's midrash of the Ten Commandments and the midrash on *mamzerim* by Daniel the Tailor, God's ethical stance is vindicated. This midrash in the Sifre and Biala's further agree that the divine will in its pristine form is revealed to be egalitarian in its ethos. It is the act of human (read: male) mediation that injects the overlay of discrimination. Furthermore, in this midrash as in Biala's, the truth of the profound egalitarianism is revealed

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[38] Leviticus Rabbah 32:7, ed. Margaliot (Jerusalem: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1953), 881, and see the secondary version of the midrash in Qohelet Rabbah 4:1, discussed by Marc Hirschman in his מדרש קהלת רבה א-ו (Jerusalem: Machon Schechter, 2017), 235. Hirschman points out that the one other midrash preserved in the name of Daniel the Tailor (Bereshit Rabbah 64:7, ed. Theodor & Albeck, p. 707) also bespeaks a sympathy with the downtrodden. See also David Hartman, *A Living Covenant: The Innovative Spirit in Traditional Judaism* (New York: Free Press, 1985), 59, cited by Irshai.

[39] Sifre Numbers 133, text in Menaḥem Ḳahana, *Sifre Bamidbar: mahadurah mevo'eret*, 4 vols. in 7 (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2011–2015), 1.58; 2.443; and see Kahana's comments in 4.1124–1125.

[40] See also Tanḥuma (ed. Buber), Nitzavim 2.

by the pained question of a woman not willing to accept that God discriminates: "God's mercies are not like human mercies!"

What makes this midrash even more daring than Biala's is that the women are vindicated *in the legal realm*. The biblical story continues, of course, with a legal innovation, allowing the daughters to inherit.[41] As the midrash puts it:

> "The Lord said to Moses, the daughters of Zelophechad speak properly"—Zelophechad's daughters demand correctly, for this is how the section is written before Me in heaven (שכך פרשה כתובה לפניי במרום). Fortunate is one to whom the Holy One accedes![42]

In a sense, the idea that "the section is written before Me in heaven" is a conservative move in the face of apparent radical legal change within the Torah:[43] the law did *not* change, says the midrash, but was only revealed in stages. And yet there is an open-endedness to this that dangles something even more radical before the reader: how many other sections were written differently "before God" that could have looked different if only someone had asked?

A closely similar move is made in another midrash in the collection, Rivka Lubitch's short midrash on the line in Genesis 3:16, "And your desire will be for your man, and he will rule over you." Here Lubitch employs the character of Tanot, a female counterpart of the figure of Elijah the prophet who appears so often in rabbinic literature:[44]

> Tanot asked the Shekhinah: "In Beruriah's Torah it is written, 'And your desire will be for your woman and she will rule over you'."

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[41] The victory is limited even in Numbers 27 and is severely undercut in the sequel in chapter 36. This aspect is not relevant to the current discussion, however.

[42] Sifre Numbers 134, text in Ḳahana, *Sifre Bamidbar*, 1.59, and commentary on 4.1134–1135.

[43] As Kahana points out, this idea is contiguous with notions found in Second Temple literature as well.

[44] The name is appropriately based on a midrashic reading of Judges 11:40, according to which Tanot is the name of Jephthah's daughter.

> The Shekhinah said to her: These and those words are true (אלו ואלו דברי אמת), and both were said in the same utterance (ושניהם בדיבור אחד נאמרו), since whoever desires someone is ruled by them; but the Torah of Moses spoke in the language of human beings (אלא שדיברה תורת משה בלשון בני אדם), which is to say, males (אלו הזכרים).[45]

Virtually every phrase in this daring and dramatic midrash is taken from rabbinic literature. And as we have seen, even the theology—that "before God in heaven" the Torah is more egalitarian—is not foreign to the Rabbis.

To return to a question raised above, we can now articulate one further feature that divides the earlier American efforts from those represented in *Dirshuni*, a feature that is well articulated by Jody Myers in her essay on the former texts:

> Most contemporary women midrashists do not believe in the divine authorship of the Torah. They regard it as a human product, the work of men who composed, recorded, and edited their work over a lengthy period of time before the texts were finally canonized. … But it can certainly offer clues to the reality of women's lives, and it is abundant in data testifying to men's perception of women, as well as to their construction of women's place in men's lives.[46]

The midrashim in *Dirshuni*, on the other hand, are quite faith-ful. The writers seem to deeply believe that if God were properly understood, religion would be a far less patriarchal and far more egalitarian space. This means, of course, stripping away not just the misogyny of the Talmud, but also the warping lenses of Scripture itself, since it too is the result of male

[45] Lubitch, *Dirshuni*, 9.

[46] Myers, "The Midrashic Enterprise of Contemporary Jewish Women," 130.

mediation of the divine word.[47] The theology here is radical.[48] And yet it is a radical theology that believes in the redemptive power of religion, the truth of revelation, and the centrality of the Jewish tradition.

This theological stance and the Hebrew language discussed in the previous section make *Dirshuni* seem much more familiar to Jewish communities that are accustomed to study of classical texts in the original languages. In practice, this category includes Israeli Jews and the Orthodox community in the diaspora. For those people, *Dirshuni* sounds more familiar. Depending on the readers' proclivities, that familiarity makes it either more satisfying or more disturbing.

Some of those who are disturbed may simply not realize how subversive rabbinic midrash itself is at times. It is a self-policing genre. Sometimes Rabbis exclaimed, "Enough, Meir!"[49] or "Akiva! What are you doing with *Aggadah*?! Go take your words to the laws of purity and impurity!"[50] Such exchanges show that there were lines that ought not be

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[47] Medieval Jewish thinkers such as Albo and Abarbanel would, on the whole, agree with this assessment, although (a) they would exempt the Torah itself from this generalization and (b) they would not, of course, be prepared to follow the modern thinking to its conclusion that therefore Scripture needs revision on gender grounds. For the crux of the issue, see Moshe Greenberg, "Jewish Conceptions of the Human Factor in Biblical Prophecy," in *Justice and the Holy: Essays in Honor of Walter Harrelson*, eds. Douglas A. Knight and Peter J. Paris (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 145–162, reprinted in Greenberg, *Studies in the Bible and Jewish Thought* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995), 405–419.

[48] It is clearly related to the theology articulated by Tamar Ross; see Ross, "Modern Orthodoxy and the Challenge of Feminism," in *Jews and Gender* (above, n. 3), 3–38, and Ross, *Expanding the Palace of Torah: Orthodoxy and Feminism*, Brandeis Series on Jewish Women (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2004).

[49] For Rabbi Meir's theological daring, and the opprobrium it provoked, see Bereshit Rabbah 36:1 = Leviticus Rabbah 5:1. Elsewhere Rabbi Meir is castigated for interpreting Shir ha-Shirim as reflecting negatively on Israel, with a reference to the Golden Calf (Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah 1:12 and 2:4). See also Ḳohelet Rabbah 1:9. Note too that when Elisha ben Avuyah is riding alongside the walking Rabbi Meir on the shabbat, the phrase he uses to tell him to stop is the same "Enough, Meir" (דייך מאיר) (y. Ḥaggigah 2:1), an evocative usage that may deserve to be unpacked further.

[50] b. Sanhedrin 38b = b. Ḥaggigah 14a, where Rabbi Akiva interprets the plural "thrones" in Daniel 7:9 as being one for God and one for David; this is considered sacrilegious by a colleague: "Rabbi Yose ha-Gelili said to him, 'Akiva! How long with you make the Divine

crossed. And yet the texts preserve the offending midrashim *along with* the criticism thereof. Even when *Dirshuni*'s midrashim are seemingly at their most radical, there are often continuities with early sources.

As an example, let us look at Lubitch's midrash on the Akedah (*Dirshuni*, 32–33).[51] For Lubitch, the missing voice of Sarah is troubling. Ancient readers, too, noted the absence of Sarah.[52] Christian poets writing the story in Syriac regularly included dialogues between Abraham and Sarah on the wisdom and propriety of the Akedah.[53] But rather than simply lamenting the loss of Sarah's voice,[54] Lubitch posits that the voice can be reconstructed, and that its hidden presence actually solves another mystery about the story.[55] Lubitch's midrash reads:

> God tested Sarah. The angel told her: "Take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to yourself (לכי לך *leḵi laḵ*) to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering." And Sarah said: "No. For a mother will not slaughter her son."

Presence (*shekhinah*) profane?'" It is then said that Rabbi Akiva changed his interpretation: "one for justice and one for righteousness," and it is this that provokes the line cited above, translated from MS Yad ha-Rav Herzog 1 for Sanhedrin; my thanks to Dov Weiss for reminding me of this passage.

[51] Lubitch, *Dirshuni*, 32–33.

[52] W. Lee Humphreys, "Where's Sarah? Echoes of a Silent Voice in the *Akedah*," *Soundings* 81 (1998), 491–512.

[53] There is a Syriac tradition of incorporating Sarah's voice into the narrative in theologically fascinating ways as well. One may begin with Sebastian Brock, "Sarah and the Aqedah," *Le Muséon* 87 (1974), 67–77; see also Maria E. Doerfler, *Jephthah's Daughter, Sarah's Son: The Death of Children in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 75–102, and further references in Aaron Koller, "The Akedah in a Different Voice," in *Linguistic and Philological Studies of the Hebrew Bible and its Manuscripts: In Honor of Gary A. Rendsburg*, Studia Semitica Neerlandica, vol. 75, ed. Vincent D. Beiler and Aaron D. Rubin (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 196–213.

[54] See, for instance, Phyllis Trible, "Genesis 22: The Sacrifice of Sarah," in *"Not in Heaven": Coherence and Complexity in Biblical Narrative*, ed. Jason Rosenblatt and Joseph C. Sitterson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 170–191, and the critique in Wendy Zierler, "In Search of a Feminist Reading of the Akedah," *Nashim* 9 (2005): 10–26.

[55] The following is based on Koller, "The Akedah in a Different Voice."

> And in the morning she arose, was roused and trembled, for the boy was not there, and neither was his father Abraham. She spread her eyes to God in Heaven and said: "Master of the World! I know that one who slaughters his son in the name of God—in the end has no son and has no god. Forgive Abraham, who sinned in this matter. Recall, please, that the mother would not contemplate sacrificing her son to God, and save the boy from his hand."
>
> At just that moment Abraham reached out his hand to the knife to slaughter his son. And the angel of the Lord called to him: "Do not reach out your hand against the boy, for now I know that you fear God" (Genesis 22:12), *although* you did not spare your son. And therefore it says, "All that she shall say to you, you should listen to her" (Genesis 21:12), and therefore "for through Isaac you shall have heirs" (there).

This other mystery, more subtle, emerges from a close comparison of the story of Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis 21 and the story of the Akedah in Genesis 22. The two stories are parallel: God tells Abraham that he needs to get rid of his son (21:12–13; 22:1–2); Abraham "wakes up early in the morning" and takes his supplies (21:14; 22:3); both sons nearly die (21:15–16; 22:9–10) until an angel offers a reprieve (21:17; 22:11–12). In both cases, the parent lifts their eyes and sees something new: a well of water in the case of Hagar (21:19) and a ram in the case of Abraham (22:13), and both end with blessings (21:18; 22:16–17) and a notice related to the child's later marriage (21:21; 22:20–24).[56]

But if the stories are parallel, something is missing in the Akedah. The angel appears to Hagar after she "lifted her voice and cried" (21:16). But Abraham never does cry, so why does an angel come to him? Abraham's silence was a source of consternation to ancient readers. A series of *piyyutim* claim that Abraham did not merit to receive the Torah because

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[56] See Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 104–110, and Uriel Simon, "גירוש ישמעאל: העקדה שקדמה לעקדת יצחק," in עקידת יצחק לזרעו: מבט בעין ישראלית: לזכרו של יצחק הירשברג ה״ד, ed. Israel Rozenson and Binyamin Lau (Jerusalem: ha-Ḳeren le-hanṣaḥat Yiṣḥaḳ Hirshberg, 2003), 377–380.

"he forgot how a father is supposed to have mercy on a son (כרחם אב על בנים *kə-raḥem ʾaḇ ʿal banim*), a prayer or plea he should have offered!"[57]

Lubitch's midrash brilliantly answers one question with the other. Although we do not hear Sarah's voice in the surface of the text, it can be detected beneath that surface. Sarah's voice is the voice of protest otherwise painfully absent from the story. And in fact, this plays a crucial role in the story, for without Sarah's voice, Isaac would not have survived. God would save the child only when a parent protested against the injustice of the loss. Hagar performed this role well, but Abraham failed to do so. Fortunately, Sarah at her tent discerned what was needed and offered the necessary protest. And God responded appropriately, sparing the life of Isaac at the last moment because of his mother's prayer.

This is a brilliantly creative and original midrash, packed into just a few lines. And yet methodologically and even thematically, it can be seen as continuous with the ways that ancient readers responded to the text. A textual conundrum is solved by an ideological one, and the text hums happily along.

4. Why midrash?

What is midrash for, for the Rabbis and for *Dirshuni*? Midrash is such a diverse category that it would seem that no simple answer to this question is possible. At different points, midrash seeks to educate, to elucidate, to amend, to appropriate, and to entertain.[58] On a fundamental level, though, the entire enterprise is driven by one assumption: that the Torah is infallibly and infinitely true, and therefore that the more one probes it, the more angles one approaches it from, the more surface

[57] This is the formulation of Eleazar b. Rabbi Qilliri; see Shulamit Elitzur, אלעזר בירבי קליר: קדושתאות ליום מתן תורה (Jerusalem: Meḳiṣe Nirdamim, 2000), 185, and discussion in Elitzur's introduction, 67–73 and eadem, "החטא אברהם אבינו בעקדו את יצחק?" in עקידת יצחק לזרעו, 215–224.

[58] For an explicit example of this last category, see Esther Rabbah 1:8, where Rabbi Aḳiva seeks to wake up his students with a midrash.

irregularities can identified and exploited, and the more connections can be made, the closer we can come to grasping the Torah is all its splendor.

As we have already seen, not all the Rabbis were so enamored of this, or at least they thought there might be better ways of grasping the divine will. Rabbi Ze'ira is cited as saying, "This turns and turns again and we learn nothing from it!" And Rav Naḥman objected to Rabbi Yoḥanan's midrash by pointing out that it was implausible in the extreme. Rabbi Yoḥanan, it will be recalled, had said that "Our father Jacob did not die," and when Rav Naḥman objected, said, "I am interpreting Scripture," concluding that "as Jacob's descendants are still alive, so too is he still alive." The fascinating point here is that there is a textual hook for this midrash that is *never cited in the midrash itself*, as noted already by Rashi.[59] The key is a simple comparison of the death notices of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob:

> Abraham passed away (*vayyigva'*) and he died (*vayyamot*) in good old age, elderly and satisfied, and he was gathered to his kin (*vayye'asef el 'ammav*) (Gen 25:8).
>
> Isaac passed away (*vayyigva'*) and he died (*vayyamot*) and he was gathered to his kin (*vayye'asef el 'ammav*), elderly and satisfied of days. (Gen 35:29).
>
> Jacob … passed away (*vayyigva'*) and he was gathered to his kin (*vayye'asef el 'ammav*) (Gen 49:33).

The close reader of Genesis will sit up and take notice at the end of Genesis 49. The claim יעקב אבינו לא מת is an incisive and precise formulation: the word מת is missing in the death notice of Jacob. Thus, alone of all the patriarchs,[60] *Jacob does not "die"*!

We can thus reconstruct something of the origins of R. Yoḥanan's midrash. The midrashist started with the textual observation, the missing מת of Genesis 49:33. Perhaps this sparked some thinking about various

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[59] See his commentary on Genesis 49:33. See also Ramban *ad loc*.

[60] Compare also the death of Ishmael: "He passed away (*vayyigva'*) and he died (*vayyamot*) and he was gathered to his kin (*vayye'asef el 'ammav*)" (Gen. 25:17).

types of death, since Jacob did "pass away" and "was gathered to his kin," both locutions for death in biblical Hebrew. What kind of death did Abraham and Isaac suffer that Jacob did not? The answer may have suggested itself: Abraham and Isaac each had a child—Ishmael and Esau, respectively—who were not members of the covenantal community, a fate that Jacob escaped. Thus, Jacob's children are uniquely "alive." This allows the midrashist to close the circle. Jacob did not "die" because his descendants are all still spiritually alive. "I am interpreting Scripture!"

Textual idiosyncrasies and aberrations for a midrashist have been compared to the grain of sand for an oyster. They are fodder for thought, to be rubbed over and over, turned, toyed with, and built upon, and finally a pearl emerges.[61] This midrash is a good example of that. An interpreter with a different mentality with regard to textual details may gloss over the lack of the verb מת in Genesis 49:33.[62] But for a midrashically oriented reader, the lack of the word is a grain of sand. What pearl can be created around it?

Rabbi Yoḥanan's midrash is a combination of textual interpretation and ideological preaching; here the textual leads the ideological. This sort of thinking does not appear to be represented in *Dirshuni*, where the ideological leads the textual, and not the other way around. The problem in Genesis 3:16 ("your desire will be for your man, and he will rule over you") is not textual or grammatical. The resistance to a straightforward reading (represented in four midrashim in *Dirshuni*) comes from the obviously troubling implications of the verse for gender roles and the question of equality. There is very little, if anything, in *Dirshuni* about the graphic form of the text ("why is the ה broken on the side?") or funny grammatical forms. Instead, the midrashists focus on bigger issues.

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[61] Hirschman and Ḳadari, "מדרש אגדה," 519–520.

[62] For an extreme example, see Ibn Ezra's lengthy metaphor in his introduction to Exodus 20:1, where he compares ideas to the soul and words to the body and argues that the shape of the body does not matter as long as it holds the soul, which is the important part. Thus, for Ibn Ezra, different ways of expressing the same idea are equivalent and need no comment or explanation.

The midrashist of *Dirshuni* looks at the plain reading and says, "Well, that *can't* be right, since it clashes with a central value." It is important to stress that this type of reading is found in rabbinic literature as well. For example, Psalm 44:24, "Wake up! Why do You sleep, O Lord? Awaken, do not reject us forever!" presupposes that God is asleep. The Rabbis look at this and say, "Well, that *can't* be right!" Uncomfortable with the presupposition, they tackle it head on and neutralize it: "Is there sleep with regard to God (וכי יש שינה לפני המקום)? … Rather, God *as if* sleeps, when Israel is in straits and the other nations are thriving."[63]

Other rabbinic texts voice objections to God's actions on moral grounds.[64] To take an example closer in topic (if not in ethos) to those of *Dirshuni*, the Sifra discusses the implications of a phrase from Leviticus 15:33, "one who is unwell shall be in her state of *niddah*." Now, *niddah* can mean "shunned," and so "the original elders used to say, 'She shall be shunned: she shall not paint her eyes, and not put on makeup until she immerses in water." This, however, was rejected as a reading of the verse by Rabbi Aḳiva. His objection was not textual, but interpersonal: "This will cause strife, and he may even wish to divorce her!" Instead, he concluded, the phrase simply means that she remains impure until immersion.[65]

To return to the central point: Is *Dirshuni* driven by the same considerations as classical midrash? It seems that on a fundamental level, the answer is yes. Given the theological assumptions articulated above in

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[63] y. Ma'aser Sheni 5:5; y. Soṭah 9:11; Esther Rabbah 10:1; b. Sotah 48a; etc.

[64] For the motif of protest against God on ethical grounds, see Dov Weiss, *Pious Irreverence: Confronting God in Rabbinic Judaism*, Divinations (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), esp. 122–148.

[65] Sifra Metzora' Zavim 9:12, MS Vatican 66 p. 365, also in b. Shabbat 64b, where the objection is formulated slightly differently: "If so, you are causing her to be repulsive to her husband, and then her husband will divorce her!" For Rabbi Aḳiva's vision of marital love underlying this interpretation, see Judah Goldin, "Toward a Profile of the Tanna, Aqiba ben Joseph," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 96 (1976): 38–56, esp. 50–51. For the hermeneutical theory that licenses this reading, see Moshe Halbertal, מהפכות פרשניות בהתהוותן: ערכים כשיקולים פרשניים במדרשי הלכה (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1997).

Section 3, a midrashist has to respond to certain passages in the Torah with recoil. Can it really be that God would dictate that man should rule over woman? Is it possible that God would demand the sacrifice of Isaac from Abraham and not consult or even include Sarah? Can the Haggadah systematically exclude daughters from the narrative of the Jewish people?

A faithful reading leads to a clear "no" in response to all of these questions. Just as Rabbi Aḳiva said that it is not possible that the Torah meant for a couple to drift apart during her menstrual period, and so the text must mean something else, it is not possible for the Torah to be discriminatory, and so the text must mean something else.

This allows for one final observation about the midrashic endeavor. In a sense, Rabbi Ze'ira is right: "This turns and turns again, and we learn nothing from it!" But this is precisely what makes it so useful as a genre as well. An attempt to overturn halakhah would strike deep at the root of contemporary Orthodox Judaism. Aggadic midrash, even theologically profound and radical midrash, leaves that edifice untouched. The writers and their readers can thereby remain traditional in practice and identity, even while raising the most profound questions about the Torah and its enduring value.[66] In this way, too, *Dirshuni* is continuous with rabbinic midrash. The Rabbis also had daring things to say, and the traditional genres were flexible enough to accommodate even the most radical.[67] "In those days, and in this time," *Dirshuni* shows that the traditions of rabbinic midrash are alive and well.

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[66] Note Irshai, "Theology and Halakhah" (above, n. 14), 307: "Despite their declared commitment to halakhah, they are not limited by theological inhibitions."

[67] See the discussions of Moshe Halbertal, "אלמלא מקרא כתוב אי אפשר לאמרו," *Tarbiz* 68 (1999), 39–59, and Adiel Schremer, "'The Lord has forsaken the Land': Radical Explanations of the Military and Political Defeat of the Jews in Tannaitic Literature," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 59 (2008), 183–200.