

International Day of Study

Leader's Guide: Midrash

PART I: BACKGROUND READING

Background: What is *Midrash*?

Midrash is where scholarship, close reading and imagination meet. On that rich and fertile field of possibility, *midrash* is the tool that has been used for millennia to uncover and fill the hidden or missing content of the biblical text. We look for spaces, gaps, unspoken responses and repeated words. Wherever there is an irregularity, an unanswered question, a redundancy, there you will find *midrash* waiting to respond, to suggest, sometimes to surprise or to challenge.

Why do we need an inventive approach to our holy texts? Why do we need this genre of rabbinic literature? The glorious reality of the Bible is that it tells us everything and at the same time tells us so very little. The text itself is profoundly terse. Biblical Hebrew contains less than 10,000 words (literate readers of English need about 40,000 words in their vocabulary), so there is little linguistic nuance. A surprisingly large number of those words are categorized as *hapax legamenon*, meaning they are used once and only once in the biblical text, so that their meaning may be obscure and hard to pin down precisely. The Bible uses almost no adjectives and rarely explains why a character does what he or she does. The Bible is a text of action—nouns and verbs. We are told what people do but rarely why.

There is an additional issue to consider: *midrashists* work with the guiding principle that the text is the perfect and timeless word of God. So they are forced to draw understanding from it, in spite of the texts' purposeful silences, gaps, redundancies, inconsistencies, or because of them. The terseness of our texts, on the one hand frustrating and mute, invites questions instead, and these questions lead to *midrashic* interpretation. Consider a few examples:

- One of the most potent and disturbing accounts in the Bible, the nineteen lines of the *akedah*, (the account of the binding of Isaac, *Genesis 22:1-19*) is a text without a single adjective and without one word exploring the explosive emotions of this charged situation. We want to know somehow what Abraham is thinking as he lifts the knife; we want to know what Isaac is thinking as the knife is being raised.
- We want to know what Dinah, the voiceless victim of *Genesis 34:1-34*, thinks and feels after she is raped.
- We want to know how Rebecca could love one son so much more than another, how Rachel felt when her sister was in Jacob's bed, why Ruth follows Naomi instead of returning to her own people. We want to imagine what Esther was thinking as she approached Ahashverus' bed.

Midrash comes to rescue us, to validate our questions and suggest some answers. The word itself, *midrash*, is from the Hebrew root *d-r-sh*. All related Hebrew words with that root have something to do with digging, inquiring, searching, seeking, examining, and investigating. As early as the period

of the Dead Sea Scrolls, we see this term used to describe a method of inquiry into the verses of the Bible. Later the Sages¹ adopt this approach to texts, perhaps by way of the Dead Sea sect or perhaps as a reaction to the influences of the Hellenistic world in which they lived. In any case, the oldest surviving *midrashim* (plural of *midrash*) are from the middle of the Second Temple period and there is convincing evidence that they are a product of the Jewish community in the Land of Israel and not Babylonia. The Babylonian academies were focused almost exclusively on learning Jewish law, *halakbah*, and spent little time developing the creative realm of *aggadah*. We will focus on *midrash aggadah* in this lesson, which concerns itself with that large category of non-legal questions.

From the third century BCE to the period of the Crusades, the Land of Israel was at the center of cultural and religious conflicts. Struggles within the community, beginning with the Hellenists and Zealots gave way to disagreements in the schools of Hillel and Shammai, followed by struggles with outside provocateurs—the Samaritans, Dead Sea sects, nascent Christianity and later Rome, Byzantium and Islam. This was a fractious and fearful world for the Jews.

So what provoked this creative exploration of our texts? What historical or philosophical imperatives led us to agree to this technique of entering the text and prying it open rather than finding a single timely message and then sealing it shut? Jews were facing radical adjustments, foreign threats and cultural influences, intra-community strife, Christian polemic, and the loss of political independence and religious freedom. Opening the door, the rabbis had already declared in Talmud tractate *Sanhedrin 34a* “one biblical statement may carry many meanings.” *Midrash aggadah*, with its creative interpretive stance, holds the key for discovering new relevance, as well as solace, from our storehouse of ancient texts.

Classical *aggadic midrash* is divided into three periods.

The Early Period includes those *midrashim* collected during the *Amoraic* period (an *amora* was a rabbi of the Talmud), 400-600 CE. These *midrashim* began as sermons of the synagogue and were written down primarily in Galilean Aramaic, the language of the Jerusalem Talmud. These *midrashim* often follow a formal structure, which begin with a *proem*, a line from another part of Tanakh, that weaves a connecting thread through the *midrash*, playing off other seemingly unrelated texts. This elegant literary homiletic (sermonic) device was a favorite of the period. Because it begins the lesson with a quote from a seemingly unrelated verse, ultimately connecting a string of verses to expound and clarify, it feels a bit daring. It requires a level of textual familiarity that attests to the skill of the *midrashist* but at the same time attests to a unity among all the works in the Bible as we watch one distant verse support and amplify another.

These collections generally have the word *Rabbah* in their title, which means “large collection.” (For example *Genesis Rabbah*, *Leviticus Rabbah*, *Ruth Rabbah* and the first part of *Esther Rabbah*.)

The Middle Period contains *midrashim* of the Geonic period (the time of Babylonian rabbinic leadership) 640-1000 CE. More of the *midrashim* in this period are not connected to a specific text, and there is an increase in the number of references to the Garden of Eden and hell, angels and demons and other apocalyptic and mystical elements, reflecting the preoccupations of medieval society. They are primarily written in Hebrew. (For ex-

ample, *Pirke de Rebbe Eliezar, Tanhuma Midrashim and Pesikta Rabbati*.)

The Late Period are those *midrashim* compiled from earlier works, 1200-1550 CE. (For example, *Yalkut Shimoni, Midrash HaGadol*.)

The Sages created *midrashim* in the academy and study-house to elaborate on the narrative, to deal with thorny theological issues, to rectify seeming discrepancies or inconsistencies in the narrative itself, to reconcile the sometimes troubling behavior of our biblical heroes with the laws of the land. That is a tall corrective order. Those *midrashim* from talmudic and rabbinic literature most often serve a didactic function by reinterpreting, explicating, and elaborating biblical texts to derive relevant moral lessons. Every superfluous word was fair game for explication; the rabbis used every possible linguistic tool to excavate a text. The most minute details or even long lists of place names and genealogies offered the opportunity for creative exegesis. Rabbinic creativity is nowhere more evident.

Classical *midrash aggadah* provides a window into the inventive minds of the rabbinic problem solvers, juicing the issues posed in the biblical text to address contemporary situations, confront theological issues, and poke spiritual stagnation.

Over time, the rabbis have used the tool of *midrash* to draw out and examine the women in our holy texts, sometimes to condemn and sometimes to rescue. Some of our Biblical women are nameless, others voiceless, and so *midrash* has been used to hear them speak, to give them motives, to explain cruel fates.

Midrash aggadah's approach to opening a text, rather than fixing and closing it, is what distinguishes it from *midrash halakbah*. This approach is also what beckons us to become *midrashists* ourselves. Unlike the search for an explanation which asks us to converge on an answer, midrash asks us to diverge, to exercise our creative muscle to make the text meaningful for ourselves, here and now.

The following *midrashim* of *Megillat Esther* are meant to provoke as well as amuse. They have been selected to reinforce the ways in which *midrash aggadah* has been used by the Sages to corral the text into a work consistent with their own theological visions. We will examine *midrashim* from several historical periods to appreciate how they reflect the social preoccupations and backdrop of the *midrashists*. But most especially, these *midrashim* are meant to open the conversation for new voices in the room, which is the very heart of the endeavor of *midrash*.

PART 2: INTRODUCTION TO MEGILLAT ESTHER

Megillat Esther is the subject of centuries of *midrashic* interpretation. One of the earliest sets of *midrashim* is found in the Talmud, *Tractate Megillah* 10b-17a. *Megillat Esther* is the only complete book interpreted in the text of the Talmud itself.

Two translations into Aramaic, *Targum Rishon* and *Targum Sheni*, are also considered commentaries because these translations took liberties, inserting explanations and weaving them into the body of the text. Most of these ancient *midrashim* were composed before the first or second centuries C. CE, reflecting a very ancient perspective.

Esther Rabbah was compiled in the 10th century, a time of extreme persecution for the Jews. Ironically the compilation contains mostly *midrashim* written 600 years earlier by scholars living during

Roman rule, another period of persecution and despair.

Scholars throughout the middle ages wrote commentaries in *Megillat Esther*.

- Rashi wrote a complete Hebrew commentary to *Esther* in the 11th century.
- In the 13th century there were many anonymous compilations. German pietists (*Hasidei Ashkenaz*) employed *gematria*² and *acrostics*³ in their analyses.
- In Spain, Abraham Ibn Ezra used the sophisticated analytic tools of philology and grammar as well as his familiarity with court life in composing his *midrashim*.
- There were commentaries from Italy, Provence, and Spain in the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries and an explosion of *midrashim* in the 16th century.

We will see that some of the medieval exegetes were troubled by earlier Talmudic *midrashim* because the Jews were now living among Moslems and Christians. They could not afford for their texts to be interpreted as ridiculing the gentile world.

¹The Sages, referred to as *HaZaL*, (acronym for *Hachachmeynu Zikram Li'Vrucha*, “our Sages, may their memory be a blessing”) was a group of Torah sages living in the lands of Israel and in Babylonia in the first to seventh centuries CE. Over the course of 600 years, they established the written law of the *Mishnah* and *Talmud*, set the liturgy of the *siddur*, composed liturgical poetry, translated the Bible into Aramaic as well as writing *midrash*.

²*Gematria*: The interpreter seeks meaning or explanation of word or group of words to the numerical value of the letters.

³Acrostics is a literary convention in which successive or alternating verses, or clusters of verses, begin with the letters of the alphabet in sequence. (e.g. the *Ashrei* prayer)

PART II: LEADERS'S GUIDE

This unit contains three discrete sections. Read each section and decide which approach you would like to employ. Perhaps you might decide to pick a midrash from each section. Regardless of your choice, there is enough interesting and accessible material for many hours of study.

Section I (texts A, B, C and D) compares early talmudic *midrash* to those written in the Middle Ages and reveals how *midrash* reflects the political and theological agendas of those writing it. Those preferring close text reading (of fanciful and surprising midrash) against the backdrop of history might favor this approach.

Section II (texts E and F) focuses on an intertextual comparison of the stories of Esther and Joseph. Those who want to go further with the intertextual approach used in today's Bible study session, (Esther and the exodus story), but using comparative reading through *midrash*, might choose this second section.

Section III (texts G and H) is recommended if you think your group might enjoy creative exercises. In this section, you will explore the medieval innovation of interpreting two psalms through the eyes of Esther and continue in this creative vein by writing (and performing) *midrashim*.

[Summaries of Sections I - III are on page 21]

What you choose and what you have time for is up to you. You can summarize some sections and focus on others. Have fun!

OBJECTIVES

- Participants will look at *midrashim* written in different time periods to gain a sense of how *midrash* reflects the theological, political and social concerns of the period in which it is composed.
- Participants will read early *midrashim* to appreciate the imaginative inventions the rabbis employed to reorient the excesses of the story so that *Megillat Esther* would represent a world of ideal rabbinic Torah values. Esther will be transformed into a devout and pious woman, Mordecai will emerge as a Torah scholar and Vashti a devilish villain.
- Participants will understand how the politics of medieval society created *midrashic* "revisionism" and re-interpretations.
- Participants will read an intertextual *midrash* comparing Esther to another biblical hero, Joseph.
- Participants will recognize the effort of commentators to connect the book of *Esther* to *Psalms* 22 and 23, thereby bringing both prayer and God into a text that overtly contains neither.
- Participants will try their own hands at creating modern *midrash* by looking at one event in the story through the eyes and inner monologue of a character.

Introduction to All Three Sections

Just think about the story. What are some of the problems that the rabbis must confront when reading this text? Some answers are:

- There is intermarriage between Esther and the king that the text never criticizes.
- Esther uses sexual allure to “get what she wants.”
- Esther sleeps with an uncircumcised heathen and the text does not criticize her.
- Esther never prays or mentions God’s name: in fact NO ONE, even Mordecai, mentions God. Even when the Jews are saved in the end, God is not mentioned.
- The issues of non-kosher food and drink and not keeping *Shabbat* are problematic.
- The celebration—indeed the whole book—has a Hellenistic tone of raucous excess.
- The characters are silly rather than compelling, characteristic of burlesque and comedy.
- The Persian Empire was known for its tolerant policy of those living within the empire, so the story seems improbable.

SECTION I

Reading *Midrashim* from the Rabbis to the Middle Ages

The early rabbis use midrash to make sense of this burlesque-like quality of the story. Esther is, after all, a part of our holy scriptures and, for the early rabbis, it is essential that the story be recast so that the values of rabbinic Judaism and observance of Torah law are maintained.

- Nothing in the text describes Esther as a model of religious piety or modesty, so how can the rabbis “rescue” her behavior?
- And what are we to make of Vashti? In some ways Vashti may even be thought praiseworthy because she refuses to obey a request she finds untoward, and by so doing, loses her throne.

The rabbis actually solve most of these textual problems through their fanciful and engaging *midrashim* in the Talmud, Tractate *Megillah*. (Keep in mind that *Esther* is the only book of *Tanakh* that is fully analyzed and commented on in the Talmud.)

The inventive emendations from Tractate *Megillah* 10b-17a are a provocative and inventive story re-told, adding imaginative layers to this entertaining story of court intrigue peopled by exaggerated villains and heroes.

The rabbis’ mission, to “correct” the text and make it reflect the Judaism that they espoused, meant “expanding” on almost every line, making the villains ridiculous and idiotic, the Jews exemplars of Torah law, faith, devotion and prayer.

Text A

Have the group read these midrashim aloud one by one. The purpose of reading aloud is to surprise and entertain and should take no more than a few minutes.

For each talmudic *midrash*, ask yourself:

- What problem in the text might have motivated the rabbis to write this midrash?
- How does the midrash change the story that we are reading?

For instance, the bizarre *midrash* from *Shabbos 55b*, that Mordecai nursed Baby Esther from his own breasts(!) might be saying something about his being the sole influence on her—nourishing her physically as well as morally—that in mother’s milk there is an irrevocable bond, that she was “untouched” by heathens, even as an infant/orphan.

The fact that the rabbis also marry Esther to Mordecai makes these midrashic innovations all the more eyebrow raising.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Megillah 12b (Commenting on Esther 1:10 and 1:12 **“on the seventh day the king’s heart was merry with wine”....“and Queen Vashti refused.”**)

We are told that contrary to the text, Ahashverus kills Vashti in a drunken rage. The Talmud goes on to assure us that she deserved to die, not because she refused to appear naked before the king but because she used to strip Jewish girls and make them work naked on Shabbat. So that means her punishment is not random but “measure for measure”—as she sinned, so was she punished.

(commenting on Esther 1:12 **“...and Queen Vashti refused to come at the king’s behest...and his anger burnt within him.”**) We learn that the reason Vashti did not appear before the king naked was not out of modesty nor because the request insulted her status but rather because she had leprosy, and (in a later passage), because she in fact had a tail placed there by the angel Gabriel.

B.T. Shabbos 53b plus a gloss of Tosefot Yeshonim (commenting on *Esther* 2:7 **“and he was a nurse for Hadassah, she is Esther, his cousin for she had no father and mother.”**) When Mordecai adopted the newborn Esther—her mother had died at her birth and her father had died at her conception—he could not find a wet nurse. God miraculously caused milk to gush from Mordecai’s own breasts and he nursed her.

B.T. Meg. 13a (commenting on *Esther* 2:7 **“...and he raised Hadassah, who is Esther...”**) connects the name of Myrtle—English for Hadassah—to her appearance.) Esther was of average height and greenish complexion, (which is why she was named Myrtle, a greenish plant of average size). The rabbis explain that her greenish coloring was a result of the pain she

felt at being taken into Ahashverus' court. The rabbis add, however, that she still appeared beautiful to those looking at her, implying that others did not see her inner pain.

(commenting on Esther 2:7 **“And when her father and mother had died, Mordecai took her as his daughter”**) Esther was not Mordecai's adopted daughter, as the text states, but rather his wife. The rabbis take the liberty to read the Hebrew word for daughter (*bat*) as *bayit*, which in mishnaic Hebrew can mean 'wife'.

B.T. Meg. 13b (commenting on Esther 2:20 **“...and the bidding of Mordechai, Esther did.”**) The rabbis tell us that Ahashverus would force Esther to have sex, after which she would bathe and then consult with the rabbis to see if she was ritually pure; if the rabbis agreed that she was ritually clean, she would then go to Mordecai's bed.

B.T. Meg. 14b. The rabbis interrupt the discussion of Esther with a discussion of the seven women they deem prophets—Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Huldah, and Esther. This section actually ends with an indictment of women who take too public a role in the community. [Note: This commentary exposes some deep ambivalence about women. The indictment seems especially ironic in commentary on a book about a bold heroine who delivers her people using her wit, daring and public position. What if Esther had not put herself forward in a public way?

B.T. Meg. 15a, B.T. Sanhedrin 74b, and the Zohar. The rabbis comment that Esther's marriage to Mordecai should mean that her engaging in extra-marital relations with Ahashverus makes her forbidden for sex with her husband Mordecai, but they reason that because she is not having sex with the heathen king willingly, she is still available to her husband. And speaking of sex, we are assured that Esther does not enjoy sex with the king.

In B.T. Sanhedrin 74b **“Abbaye said, ‘Esther was like the ground’**” (i.e., totally passive). In the Zohar (Ra'ya mehema Ki Tetzei 3:276a) the mystical work composed in 13th century Spain, Esther never actually has sex with Ahashverus. Rather, a female spirit doubles for Esther so that she is not physically involved. Regardless of whether Esther is there in the flesh or not, or whether she is engaged in sex or remains passive and non-responsive, the rabbis tell us that Ahashverus was certainly satisfied.

B.T. Yoma 29a tells us, **“Just as a female deer is always enticing to her mate, so did Esther arouse Ahashverus' passion at each meeting as if it were the first time he was with her.”**

B.T. Meg. 15b (commenting on Esther 5:2 **“And when the king noticed Queen Esther standing in the court, she won his favor and the**

king extended the golden scepter to Esther.”) The rabbis posit that three angels accompanied Esther into the dangerous court of the king when she goes in uninvited, and by so doing risks the king’s displeasure and even death. Of the three angels, one was there to hold her head high since she was physically exhausted from her days of fasting; a second was there to enhance her and make her especially charming to the king, and the third angel stretched the king’s scepter out to touch her hand. The rabbis continue discussing exactly how far the angel stretched the scepter—the hypotheses range from two to two hundred units.

B.T. Meg. 16a (commenting on *Esther* 6:11 “**Then Haman took the garments and the horse....**”) We learn that Mordecai spent his time at the palace gates of the town teaching Torah to his disciples.

Now that we have read the free and fanciful hand with which the rabbis enhance the text, we’ll look at one midrash in detail to see how the rabbis solve one of their pressing problems—how did Esther manage to keep *Shabbat* and keep kosher while she lived in the palace? For the rabbis of the Talmud it is essential that she did, unsupported as that notion is by the story itself. Remember, they construct a world of rabbinic Judaism from this text without apology or excuse.

In the following *midrash*, the rabbis provide answers to the following questions that concern them deeply:

- In the hostile and foreign environment of the palace of the king, or the harem of the king to be more precise, how does Esther keep track of the days of the week so that she will know when to observe Shabbat? And, while we’re at it, how is she able to observe Shabbat without being detected?
- How is Esther able to eat kosher food in this world of unrestricted food and wine?

Text B

Cleverly the rabbis look to verse 2:9 to find answers to these questions. Can you?

Try reading the verse before reading their inventive reply. Can you use this verse to prove that Esther kept kosher and kept *Shabbat*?

Esther 2:9 And the maiden pleased him [Hegai, the keeper of the women] and she won his favor, and he hastened [to bring] her ointments and her portions to give [them] to her, and the seven maidens fitting to give her from the king’s house, and he changed her and her maidens to the best [accommodations] in the house of the women.

[ask again] Can you detect any clue in this verse about Esther's observing *Shabbat* or *kashrut*. [Wait for answers]

Let's now look at the rabbis' answer. [The **bold** text is the citation from the biblical text; the non-bold text is the talmudic commentary.]

B.T. Megillah 13a (commenting on Esther 2:9) **And the seven maids [fitting to give her from the king's house]**. The Talmud explains: Rava said: For Esther would count the days of the week through them to keep track of which day was the sabbath. Her seven maids worked in rotation, each one assigned to a specific day of the week. Thus when "sabbath" maid arrived, Esther knew it was the sabbath.

The verse continues: **And he changed her and her maidens**... The verse implies that Hegai, the custodian of the maidens, did something special for Esther and her maids that he did not do for the other maids. There is a dispute as to what this special favor is. Rav said: that he [Hegai] fed her Jewish [kosher] food and Shmuel said: that he fed her fatty hog bacon. And Yohanan said: [that he fed her] seeds. And similarly it says regarding Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah: **So the steward took away their food and gave them seeds.**

In answer to the first question—how does Esther kept *Shabbat*—the commentators explain:

- If Esther were not working one day of the week, it would have aroused suspicion that she was a Jew.
- She therefore assigned each maid a day of the week on which they were to serve her, so six of them thought Esther worked on their assigned day.
- The one she assigned to the seventh day was told that Esther never worked, so her being idle on that day was not considered out of the ordinary to that particular maid. The rabbis are not troubled by the possibility that the maids might talk with each other and discuss Esther's habits.

As to the dispute about what Hegai's "special favor" is:

- Rav says that Esther would receive kosher food from Hegai even at the risk of being discovered a Jew. This idea is rejected by Shmuel and Yohanan.

Additional amusing rabbinic commentary on this discussion include:

It was common knowledge in the harem that Esther had grown up in Mordecai's house, but the "palace buzz" was that he had found her and adopted her, meaning she was not Jewish.

Esther told them that she liked kosher food because she was used to it, and that it might affect her beauty.

Everyone in the region knew that kosher food was healthier than non-kosher food and her request would have been granted by Hegai for health reasons.

The end of this commentary reinforces her devotion to kashrut with an intertextual reference to another book of Scripture, *Daniel*. By quoting *Daniel* 1:16, the rabbis accomplish several things:

- The *Daniel* verse concerns four Jews who are being groomed to serve in Nebuchadnezzar's palace. They are given a steward who provides them with food from the royal kitchen but they ask to be given seeds instead and remain healthier than those eating the royal food. (*Daniel* 1:12-15)
- The rabbis assert that Vashti is the granddaughter of Nebuchadnezzar in whose court Daniel serves, so this link gives Esther's plight additional scriptural and historic ties.

Now a moment to consider the surprising notion that Esther feasted on pork.

- According to the Talmud (B.T. Hullin 17a), fatty hog bacon was considered a delicacy.
- Rashi (11th century) comments that Esther ate it, but was not punished because she was forced to eat it.
- Tosafot (12/13th century talmudists) counters that Esther most certainly did not partake of the pork.
- Other sources say that she ate the tops of lettuce and that the seeds she ate were edible ones, like peas and beans.

What Esther ate is of utmost importance and speculation to the rabbis of the Talmud, and later.

Revisions in the Middle Ages

Question: What conditions of the Middle Ages influence the midrashic interpretation of the scroll of *Esther*? What are the historical pressures and social issues of medieval life for Jews?

Some possible answers are:

- This is the period of the Inquisition, the Conversos and Crypto Jews.
- Living in diaspora communities meant being always under threat of extinction or expulsion.
- Maintaining non-incendiary Jewish-Gentile relations was crucial.
- The reality was that Jewish communities were under constant threat of either expulsion or persecution during the Middle Ages.
- This was a period characterized by a sense of impending doom.
- The religious/theological preoccupations of the rabbis who wrote the Talmud were

replaced in the Middle Ages by philosophy, linguistics and grammar, as part of the medieval process of interpretation.

The book of *Esther*, depicting a Jew hiding her identity, must have resonated with medieval Jews who lived under the cloud of the Inquisition, forcing them to hide their Judaism while functioning in the world at large. In the Middle Ages, Esther becomes the model of the crypto-Jew, living one way in public, another in private.

This book is concerned with living and surviving in the diaspora rather than returning to Zion.

- In the talmudic *midrash* Esther and Mordecai are turned into observant Jews.
- Vashti and Ahashverus are vilified. To justify Vashti's harsh fate, the talmudic rabbis draw her as lewd and evil, capable of humiliating Jewish girls by making them clean naked on the Sabbath. Vashti herself becomes the victim of leprosy and grows a hideous tail.

Part of this vilification comes to haunt Jews in the Middle Ages when the Jews must defend their texts to Karaites, Moslems and Christians. The vilification of Vashti and Ahashverus seemed uncomfortably close to ridicule of non-Jews. After all, Vashti is a minor player in the text and, if anything, seems a victim unwilling to capitulate to her husband's whims.

In this next [text D], we'll look at the revisions the medieval commentators make to the Talmudic commentary about Vashti's tail.

Text D

Ibn Ezra (a 14th century exegete living in Islamic Spain) did not hesitate to reinterpret thorny rabbinic commentaries. When it comes to Vashti's tail, for instance, Ibn Ezra softens the ridicule factor of this description by reinterpreting it metaphorically. He clarifies that "having a tail," meant that Ahashverus simply saw her as ugly.

Moses ben Isaac Halayo, expands on Ibn Ezra: a "tail" was the metaphoric justice meted out by Gabriel. In this way, both commentators soften the hostile and potentially misunderstood *midrashim* of the talmudic rabbis. In the Middle Ages, such reinterpretations were not unusual.

Zachariah ben Saruk continues the reinterpretation and remarks that God had given Vashti the idea that she was "treated as a tail" by the king since he sent the lowly eunuchs to escort her, demeaning her by making her walk behind them—like their tail.

Discussion Question: *How did medieval commentators deal with fantastic stories about Vashti's tail? Why was it necessary?*

[They refer to classical rabbinic sources but do not hesitate to reinterpret and revise what might be viewed as incendiary by their society.]

SECTION II

Intertextual Analysis

In our study of midrashim on *Megillat Esther*, we will examine two biblical works: the stories of Esther and Joseph. The rabbis believed that they could give additional credibility to *Megillat Esther*, by playing it off against other works of Scripture.

As we saw in our previous session employing this intertextual method, we are able to add yet another dimension to understanding the story.

Esther and Joseph

Megillat Esther can be linked thematically to several other books of the Bible, many of which involve Jewish life and existence outside the Land of Israel. Which stories come to mind?

Answers might include:

- The exodus from Egypt, as discussed extensively in the previous lesson.
- I Samuel 15*, the story of Saul and the Amalekite king, Agag, offers a foreshadowing of their descendants, Mordecai and Haman. (Saul is from the tribe of Benjamin, as is Mordecai; Haman is a descendant of Agag.)
- I Kings*, David's search for a young virgin to warm his bed parallels the Persian monarch's search throughout his kingdom for a young virgin to warm his bed.
- II Kings*, Batsheva enters the king's sanctum unbidden and risks his wrath to request a political favor. (Batsheva enters David's sanctum to assure that her son, Solomon, will be crowned king after David.)
- Daniel 1-6*, there are many parallels between this young Jew, Daniel, in a Babylonian court and our young queen in the Persian court.

We will look at another biblical account that has many thematic and linguistic similarities, the comparison of Esther and Joseph. This comparison is explored in Chapter VII in *Esther Rabbah*.

Question: *What comparisons can you make?*

Some possible answers include:

- Both stories take place outside of Israel, rare for the Bible.
- Both Esther and Joseph rise to a lofty position in a foreign government.
- Both use their high position to save Israel.
- Both use their physical beauty and wit to attain their position.
- In both stories a good act is forgotten for a long time—in *Esther*, Mordecai's rescue of the king, and in *Genesis*, Joseph's interpretation of the cupbearer's dream.
- Esther and Joseph both reveal their true identities at the end of a great feast.
- Both stories seem to proceed without Divine intervention.

- Both stories involve character development, and both change dramatically through a series of challenges and emotional risks. Joseph changes from being haughty and self-absorbed, Esther from being passive and self-absorbed.
- Both are pursued sexually by non-Jews, (Joseph is pursued by Potiphar’s wife) and both marry non-Jews.

In *Esther Rabbah* 7:7, we read that “**R. Johanan said in the name of R. Benjamin, son of R. Levi ‘the descendants of Rachel are alike in miracles they experience and in their greatness.’**”

What do Rachel’s descendants have to do with the scroll of *Esther*?

- In *Esther* 2:5 we are introduced to Mordecai, a Judean living in Shushan “the son of Yair the son of Shimei the son of Kish, a Benjamite” who had been exiled by Nebuchadnezzar. This family line identifies Mordecai as a Benjamite.
- Benjamin and Joseph were the two sons of Rachel and Jacob. The *midrash* is alerting us to the connection between these two texts.

In comparing these two texts, we find a surprising number of syntactical [having to do with words and language] and literary similarities. In Text E that follows, the words or phrases that are exactly the same in Hebrew in both texts have been **bolded**.

Think about linguistic and thematic connections. It has been suggested that the writer of *Esther* may have used this section of the Joseph story as a literary model.

Text E

Genesis 39:10 **When she spoke to Joseph day after day, he did not listen to her request to lie beside her to be with her...**

Esther 3:4 **When they spoke to him day after day and he did not listen to them,** they told Haman to see whether Mordecai’s resolve would prevail, for he had explained to them that he was a Jew.

Question: *What connections do you see in the examples above?*

[The linguistic and thematic connection made between Joseph’s ordeal of resisting seduction compared to Mordecai’s ordeal in resisting idol worship].

Genesis 41:34-37 **Let Pharaoh take steps to appoint overseers (p’ka-deem) over the land** and organize the land of Egypt in the seven years of plenty. Let all the food of these good years be gathered **and let the grain be collected under Pharaoh’s authority as food to be stored in the cities.** Let that food be a reserve for the land for the seven years of famine that will come upon the land of Egypt so that the land may not perish in the famine. **The plan pleased Pharaoh** and all his courtiers.

Esther 2:3-4 **Let your majesty appoint officers (p'kee-deem) in ever province of your realm. Let all the good-looking virgins be gathered at the fortress Shushan in the harem under the supervision of Hegei,** the king's eunuch, guardian of the women. Let them be provided with their cosmetics. And let the maiden who pleases your majesty be queen instead of Vashti. **The plan pleased the king** and he acted upon it.

Question: *What is the connection between these verses?*

[In this pair of examples, notice the linguistic parallels in the descriptions of organizing the kingdom and reorganizing the king's household.]

Genesis 43:14 **And May El Shaddai dispose the man to mercy toward you that he may release to you your beloved brother, as well as Benjamin. As for me, if I am to be bereaved, I shall be bereaved.**

Esther 4:16 **Go assemble the Jews who live in Shushan and fast on my behalf. Do not drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens will observe the same fast. Then I shall go to the king though it is contrary to the law and if I am to perish, then I shall perish.**

Leader: *What is the connection between them?*

[Possible answer: The above thematic parallel connects Jacob's willingness to risk suffering the loss of his son Benjamin to Esther's willingness to risk her own life for the common good.]

Genesis 44:34 **For how can I go back to my father unless the boy is with me? Let me not find my father grieving.**

Esther 8:6 **For how can I bear to see the despair that will befall my people. How can I bear to find my community destroyed?**

[Possible answer: This example continues the parallels in the language of despair.]

The final example compares the descriptions of public honor heaped on Joseph by Pharaoh and heaped on Mordecai by Haman. In both descriptions we see the same symbols of status and honor bestowed on Joseph and Mordecai—a signet ring, royal robes, a parade, and public acclaim.

Genesis 41:42-43 **And Pharaoh took off his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph's hand and dressed him in robes of fine linen** and put a gold chain around his neck. He made him ride in the second chariot and **they cried before him "Abreck."** Then he placed him over all the land of Egypt.

Esther 6:11 **So Haman took the garb and the horse and arrayed Mordecai and paraded him through the city square, and he proclaimed before him, This is what is done for the man who whom**

the king desires to honor!”

Esther 8:2 The king took off his ring which he had taken from Haman and gave it to Mordecai and Esther put Mordecai in charge of Haman’s property.

Question: Do noticing these linguistic and thematic connections between Esther and Joseph change your understanding of Megillat Esther? How?

Text F

In Text F that follows, we will see that the Talmud confirms the connection between Joseph and Esther by asking yet another question: where can we find God’s hidden hand at work in these two texts?

The Talmud comments on the fact that Joseph and Mordecai both seem to be the victims of serendipity in their rise from being inconsequential (Joseph, a prisoner; Mordecai, a guy lurking around the palace) to being noticed, revered, and rewarded. The Talmud asks, “Can we see God’s hand at work in this seeming lucky break?”

B.T. Meg. 13b In those days while Mordecai was sitting in the king’s gate, Bigthan and Teresh became angry...and they planned to assassinate King Ahashverus.

The Gemara notes: Reb Chiya bar Abba said in the name of Reb Yochnan, The Holy One Blessed be He, caused a master to be angry with his servants in order to fulfill the will of a righteous man. And who was this righteous man? Joseph. As it says, and there with us was a Hebrew youth...And conversely the Holy One, Blessed Be He, caused servants to be angry with their master in order to perform a miracle for the righteous man. And who was this righteous man? Mordecai. As it is written, **and the matter became known to Mordecai.**

This *midrash* asks why Bigthan and Teresh become angry:

- This is just like the situation with Joseph, whose master became angry with his baker and wine steward. Anger, Pharaoh’s toward Joseph and Bigthan and Teresh’s toward Ahashverus, is the first step in the salvation of our heroes, Joseph and Mordecai.
- In both cases God manipulates intense anger over seemingly trivial irritations.
- Rashi affirms that the causes of the anger are trivial (though keep in mind, that neither text specifies what causes the anger) and then suggests exactly what the trivial irritations are. God, we learn, creates this misplaced anger to enable the miracle that saved both Joseph and Mordecai. There is no serendipity in the biblical world.

Question: Why is it so important to the rabbis that God be involved in these events?

[Possible answer: When God is conspicuously absent from an entire scroll, as in both Esther and Song of Songs,

or from direct mention, as in the Joseph cycle in Genesis, this is a huge problem. Restoring God's presence through midrash becomes a driving force for commentary.]

The Talmud attributes this happenstance to an act of God. Pharaoh's anger with his chamberlains, the cupbearer and the baker, consigns to the very prison in which Joseph was imprisoned. There, Joseph interprets their dreams correctly, and is eventually summoned from prison to interpret Pharaoh's dream. As a reward for his foretelling of the famine, Joseph is appointed viceroy over Egypt. (Gen 40:1; 41:1-45) Thus, Rabbi Yohanan notes that the reason God made Pharaoh angry with his chamberlain was to affect Joseph's release from prison.

Leader: Rashi's commentary to the biblical text of Gen. 40:1 suggests why the chamberlains had been imprisoned by Pharaoh in the first place. He surmises that the reason was an insignificant one: Pharaoh found a fly in his wine and a pebble in his bread. Because it would be unusual for the Pharaoh to place his chamberlains in jail for such minor infractions, Rashi explains that God had caused Pharaoh to get excessively angry with his servants for these trivial mistakes and to imprison them. It was God's intervention that, however circuitously, led to Joseph's release.

Leader: Additionally, in *Megillat Esther*, the king's servants, Bigthan and Teresh, become angry with Ahashverus and plot to poison him because, the rabbis say, Ahashverus deprived them of sleep. The *midrash* compares these two stories: "As it is most unusual for servants to kill their master just because he deprived them of sleep, we must explain that God caused them to overreact— in order to miraculously elevate Mordecai."

Discussion Questions: *Does this connection between Joseph and Mordecai change your view of them? Looking at these two situations together, are you able to see God's invisible hand more clearly?*

SECTION III

You Are There: Finding Esther's Voice In *Midrash*

The absence of any reference to God, Jewish ritual, or prayer in the Scroll of Esther proved to be quite troublesome for those justifying its inclusion in the canon.

In Section I, we read some *midrashim* on *Megillat Esther* that illustrate how the early rabbis needed to attribute norms of religious behavior to Mordecai and Esther during the rabbinic period. In Section II, we saw the rabbis' efforts to connect Esther and Mordecai to Joseph and Daniel and Moses.

In this section of *midrashim* on *Megillat Esther*, we will see how the rabbis attempt to put words of the psalms themselves in the mouths and hearts of the key Purim players.

- The rabbis mold two psalms to Purim.
- The rabbis "assign" both Psalms 22 and 23 to Esther.

Text G: Psalm 22

Leader: According to rabbinic commentary, King David was able to foresee the bleak period of Babylonian and Persian exile and wrote Psalm 22 about Esther.

- In the Talmud, (*Megillah* 13a) David should have killed Shimi the Benjamite for cursing him, but he (miraculously) foresaw that Shimi would be the progenitor of Mordecai, who, 700 years later, would rescue the Jews in Persia from extinction (2 Sam. 16:11).
- Some rabbis read this psalm as if David, able to see into the dark future of Jewish exile and oppression, composed this psalm to describe and bemoan the situation in Shushan.
- Another talmudic commentator in *Megillah* 15b, commenting on the verse in Esther 5:1 “...and she stood in the inner court of the king’s house...” put the words of Psalm 22 into Esther’s mouth. Now forsaken and forlorn, she recites this psalm as a prayer to God.

Leader: We will now become the dramatist/interpreter. We will read Psalm 22 twice, first as if David were speaking about a bleak future he can see, and then as if Esther herself were speaking these words as she walks into the court of Ahashverus, uninvited.

Figure out what these lines might mean channeled through their hearts, souls and mouths. Can we make it work?

[As you read this psalm aloud, read it a few lines at a time and have the reader interpret it through the eyes of David or Esther. Within their particular contexts, what meaning does it impart?]

Text G

Psalm 22

For the Conductor on the *Ayelet Hashachar*, A song of David

My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? So far from saving me,
from the words of my roar?

O my God! I call out by day and you do not answer; by night there is no
respite for me.

Yet you are the holy one, enthroned upon the praise of Israel.

In You our father’s trusted, they trusted and You delivered them.

To You they cried out and were rescued; in You they trusted and were
not shamed.

But I am a worm and not a man, scorn of humility, despised of nations.

All who see me, deride me; they open their mouths, they wag their
heads.

Reliance on God! He will deliver him! He will save him for He desires
him.

Because you drew me forth from my womb, and made me secure in my
mother’s breasts.

I was cast upon You from birth, from my mother’s womb you have been
my God.

Be not aloof from me for distress is near, for there is none to help.

Many bulls surround me, Bashan’s mighty ones encircle me.

They open their mouths against me like a tearing roaring lion.

I am poured out like water, and all my bones become disjointed.

My spittle is dry like baked clay, and my tongue sticks to my palate. In
the dust of breath you set me down.

For dogs surround me, a pack of evildoers encloses me like a lion on my hands and feet.
 I count all my bones; they look on and gloat over me.
 They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.
 But you God, be not far from me. My strength hasten to my assistance
 Deliver my soul from the sword, my only one from the grip of the dog.
 Save me from the lion's mouth as you have answered from the horns of Reimim
 I will proclaim Your Name to my brethren; in the midst of the congregation I will praise You.
 You who fear God, praise Him. All of you, the seed of Jacob, praise Him.
 Be frightened of him, all you seed of Israel.
 For He has neither despised nor loathed the screams of the poor, nor has He concealed His face from him, but when he cried to Him for help He heard.
 You are the cause of my praise in the great congregation. I will fulfill my vows before those who fear Him.
 The humble will eat and be satisfied, those who seek God will praise Him. May your hearts be alive forever.
 All the ends of the earth will remember and turn back to God. All the families of nations will bow down before You.
 For the kingship belong to God and He rules the nations.
 They will eat the fat of the land and bow down; All who go to the dust will kneel before Him, but He will not revive his soul. By the seed that will serve Him the Lord will be proclaimed to the generation.
 They will come and tell of his righteousness to the newborn nation, that which He has done.

Text H: Psalm 23

In the Middle Ages, Saba, a sage and itinerant preacher, uses Esther as a historical context for Psalm 23. He contends that the text of Psalm 23 is actually spoken by Esther as she approaches Ahashverus, the very scenario the rabbis suggested in the Psalm 22. Strange as this may seem to us now, this would not be an unusual enterprise for the medieval mind.

Take a look at this sample of the connections that Saba makes and try your hand at making others. For instance, Saba suggests:

- “Still waters” might refer to the remission of taxes by Ahashverus.
- “The valley of the shadow of death” could describe her emotional state as she enters the presence of the king uninvited.
- “My cup overflows” may refer to Esther’s banquet which Haman and Mordecai.
- “Dwelling in the house of the lord” would refer to Esther’s desire to witness the rebuilding of the Temple.

As you reach line, what do you think Esther might mean as she prays? Can you imagine this psalm being spoken by Esther as she enters the king's presence uninvited? Does it work?

Text H

Psalm 23

A song of David: God is my shepherd; I shall not want.

In lush meadows He lays me down. Beside tranquil waters He leads me

He restores my soul. He leads me on paths of justice for his Name's sake.

Though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for

You are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in full view of my enemies. You anointed my head with oil, my cup overflows.

May only goodness and kindness pursue me all the days of my life,

And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Finding Esther's Voice: Writing Modern *Midrash*

We have seen that those interpreting this text bring to their understanding the context of their own social, political, and emotional concerns. What conditions in today's world would change our view of Esther? How do our own midrashic eyes see the text in 2005?

At Purim, we read a text whose hero is a woman.

- In the course of the story, we hear Esther speak to Ahashverus, Haman and Mordecai, and we certainly see her actions. However we know nothing of Esther's inner life.
- Chapters 1-3 Esther appears passive, then undergoes a remarkable transformation in chapter 4, when she begins to accept both responsibility as a powerful, well-positioned Jew and its incumbent risks.
- In 4:17, Mordecai has begun to obey Esther. ("So Mordecai went to the city and did just as Esther had commanded him.") Her actions from this point forward are her own; she takes charge.

Now it's your turn to write a modern *midrash*. Let's look at Esther's inner life on two separate occasions, before and after her transformation. And for fun, let's look into the inner life of Ahashverus at the very same moments.

Writing *Midrash*

Divide participants into multiples of two groups – depending on the size of your primary group. It less than 20, divide into 10 each.

One group will create two one-minute "internal monologues" of Esther's before and after her transformation:

- When she sees Ahashverus for the first time as she approaches him for her bedroom "try-out" to be queen.
- When she enters the king's presence uninvited and risks her life by her act of daring independence.

The other group will come up with two one-minute “internal monologues” of Ahashverus at those same moments:

- When he first sees Esther enter his chamber for her “try-out” to become queen.
- When Esther enters his presence uninvited and he “extends his scepter.” [Note: the term “extending his scepter” has been understood as a sexual reference by some commentators.]

Give the groups two to three minutes to write. Have the groups (or you can chose to let people work independently) choose an actor to read their midrash aloud. It could be fun to try and merge these two sets of midrashim—thoughts from Esther followed by thoughts from the king, a “conversation” of sorts. Remember there is nothing out of bounds here.

This should be creative and great fun—and possibly offer us our own modern understanding of this ancient scroll. By “becoming” Esther, we can give her voice new resonance—one of the goals of midrash.

SUMMARY

Section I: In this brief look at *midrash* on Esther, we have taken a historical approach to demonstrate how *midrash* reflects the concerns—religious, historical, social, and political—of those writing these interpretations.

The rabbis of the Talmud needed to bring the texts into alignment with normative Jewish law, even if that required super-human contortions. In the medieval period the commentators found themselves uncomfortable with some of the talmudic interpretations, particularly those that implied intolerance or insult to gentiles. Life in the Middle Ages was at best tenuous, and often dangerous, so they were inclined to soften some interpretations that might put them in jeopardy. Also the tools of medieval commentators had changed. They were more concerned with issues of philology, grammar and philosophy, hallmarks of their midrashic work, than whether Esther and Mordecai kept kosher.

Sections II and III: Intertextual *midrash*, connecting Esther to other [older] Biblical works, showed invention and wit, sometimes stretching connections to the breaking point. But the exercise itself reflects the concerns of the rabbis—that all the texts in scripture are linked, consistent, and not contradictory. This unity of Scriptures is essential to their view.

The fact that there is neither God nor prayer in the *Megillat Esther* is troublesome for those justifying its inclusion in the canon. With the attribution of psalms and connections of Esther and Mordecai to Joseph and Moses and Daniel, the family line of Rachel and so forth, the unity, presence of God, and even the language of prayer through psalms are superimposed on this text.

The ability to join into the conversation is ours, as well. We are invited to join the conversation of modern *midrashic* voices, using the lenses of women today, reflecting our own wit and wisdom, creativity and invention.

Sources and Recommended Reading

Bronner, Leila Leah, *From Eve to Esther: Rabbinic Reconstructions of Biblical Women*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1994

Israel, Steve and Zion, Noam, "*Speaking of Women*": *A Study of Gender Roles and Relationships Through the Book of Esther* (Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem), 2004

The Five Megillot, Judaica Press, 1992

The JPS Bible Commentary: Esther, Commentary by Adele Berlin, JPS Press, 2001.

Midrash Rabbah: Esther, Soncino Press, 1983

Talmud Bavli: Tractate Megillah, The Schottenstein Edition, Mesoprah Publications, 1999

Walfish, Barry Dov, *Esther in Medieval Garb: Jewish Interpretations of the Book of Esther in the Middle Ages*, SUNY Press, 1983