

Midrash

My article in support of Esau upset some of my readers. Some seem to think that one may only make use of previously sanctioned official interpretations, and others think it is heretical to disagree with rabbinic interpretation. There is another section of my readership that thinks the opposite. So I think I ought to tackle the issue of Midrash head on.

The Talmud, the repository of most authoritative rabbinic sources, is divided roughly into three categories. The first, Halacha, deals with the complete spectrum of Law from civil to ritual. Very often in the Talmud we are left with conflicting opinions. And, of course, since then new laws, situations, and precedents have proliferated. Eventually, on matters of law one has to come to a conclusion. This is determined over time by practice, scholarship, and debate. Codes, compendia, and responsa have taken Jewish law to constantly changing levels (sometimes controversially) as it deals with life as lived today.

Aggada is a catch-all for folklore, history, folk medicine, and all the miscellany that any great culture accumulates. So if there is an Aggada that says the earth is flat, or will last for 6,000 years, or that a cat's placenta enables one to see evil spirits, or that there are Phoenixes or flying towers, these ideas, fascinating as they are, are not definitive in the way that law is. As Maimonides says in his introduction to the Mishna (Chapter Chelek of Sanhedrin) they are not to be dismissed as rubbish, but neither are they to be understood at face value or always taken literally. This is why there are so many different opinions and attitudes on such issues as luck, or dream interpretation, or historical events. And then one has to confront parable used both by Prophets and rabbis. Sometimes the parables are obvious. Sometimes not. Rashi (Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac 1040-1105), in his commentary on the Talmud, says that rabbis often exaggerated to make a point or to appeal to the uneducated masses (Shabbat 30b).

The third category, Midrash, is devoted to the interpretation of Biblical texts. In fact Midrash is the medium for discussing theology in Judaism rather than using rational philosophy. Here you have an immense and highly stimulating range of opinions on almost everyone and everything in the Bible. And there are different schools of thought. Rav and Shmuel, two Talmudic giants, are always disagreeing with each other. (Was Ahasuerus a good king or a stupid king? Perhaps he was both.) Or Rebbi Nechemia and Rebbi Zecharia argue over a mystical or a rational approach. In medieval times Rashi in his great commentary, made selections of those Midrashim he felt most apposite. Sometimes even he quotes contradictory ones. Others (notably his grandson, the Rashbam) felt his selections were too distracting from the literal meaning. The whole corpus of traditional Biblical commentary has added layers of different approaches, selections, and ideas to this very day. If in the Midrashic texts, many of which are post-Talmudic, there are such varieties, do we have to agree on one as definitive? Is Esau all bad, or is Jacob all good?

It is possible to say that some ideas or interpretations are simply beyond the spirit of rabbinic opinion. Midrash is not a free-for-all in which anything goes. Some ideas cannot be kosher. But this is where the intangible definition of "spirit" comes in. The trouble is its intangibility. A few years ago there was a furor when an Orthodox rabbi wrote a book, popular in yeshiva circles, in which he brought Midrashic sources to show that the world might be older than 5,000 years and geology might have something valid to say. He was attacked so vehemently that one can only assume that those who did so were worried more about their own authority than about the idea. When you are battling for control, anything that might undermine it is suspect. That's why books get burned. It is short-sighted and rarely works. But it's tempting. So here you have an example of some rabbis saying some Midrashim are unacceptable or must only be understood the way they say so.

The issue is a delicate one as ultra-Orthodoxy fights to position itself in opposition to secularism. Given that is the agenda, must we all fall into line? I do not think so, any more than Maimonides did. But I agree that Torah does have a spirit that delimits what is within the range of authenticity. The interpretation I gave of Esau is overwhelmingly untraditional and controversial, but that does not mean it cannot make a contribution to the debate.

Take the idea of "Turn the Other Cheek". It is commonly thought that such an idea is Christian and not Jewish. But look at the Talmud Rosh Hashana 17a, Yoma 23a, et al, all statements in favor of not responding. Or this repeated quote: "Those who are insulted but do not insult back, who keep their hurt to themselves and do not react but accept their pain in joy and silence, of them it is said they are like the sun in all its glory" (Shabbat 88b).

Now it is true there is a contradictory tradition of fighting back and defending oneself. Two traditions can coexist, rather like when Jacob's sons destroy the city and men of Shechem. Jacob recoils at the violence and protests. His sons say they cannot let people get away with things (Genesis 34). Clearly, there is room for differences and I should hope so.

It doesn't help that there is so much wild and inappropriate nonsense written about Biblical texts and characters. Perhaps it is a defense mechanism that the Guardians of the Faith feel a need to draw a line. But it is one thing to defend, it is another to censor or claim there can be no variety. It is essential both for freedom of thought and for creativity that we should have other points of view in our exegetical armory.