

LEARNING TO READ MIDRASH

By Simi Peters

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Reviewed by Moshe Simon-Shoshan



In recent years, the study of midrash has enjoyed a surge in popularity throughout the American Jewish community. While largely a positive development, this popularization has, in many instances, served to confuse, rather than to enlighten, the public as to the nature of rabbinic midrash. On one hand, midrash is often portrayed as a single, authoritative recounting of Biblical and rabbinic history that records “what really happened,” and displaces any plain-sense reading of the Biblical text. In other circles, however, the term is often expanded to include any creative interpretation of the Biblical text, even those that stand in opposition to, or in ignorance of, the teachings and methods of *Chazal*, the sages of the Talmud and midrash.

Simi Peters’ new book, *Learning to Read Midrash*, has the potential to help correct these common misunderstandings and replace them with a sophisticated and nuanced approach to midrashic texts and methods. Peters, a master teacher of midrash who teaches in several of Jerusalem’s leading educational institutions, has produced an excellent introduction to the study of midrashic texts. Though rooted in traditional commentaries and approaches, Peters is deeply influenced by contemporary academic and literary approaches to midrash, including

Dr. Simon-Shoshan recently completed his PhD in rabbinic literature at the University of Pennsylvania. He is currently a postdoctoral fellow at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

those generally categorized under the rubric of “deconstructionism” or “postmodernism.” Her book thus serves as an object lesson in how ideas and approaches that are generally considered to be foreign or even antithetical to Torah can, in fact, be instrumental in helping us understand the texts and concepts in our tradition.

Despite her academic influences, Peters does not assault the reader with unfamiliar jargon. After acknowledging her debt to the academic world in her introduction, Peters largely relegates that world to the background, adopting a clear and engaging writing style. In most cases, only the reader who is already well versed in literary criticism will be able to discern the influence of academic scholarship on the book.¹

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The book consists of two parts. The first deals with the *mashal*, or parable, and the second, longer section with the “narrative expansion,” Peters’ term for *Chazal*’s elaborations of Biblical stories. The sections are made up of a series of short chapters, each of which focuses on a single midrashic text. In these chapters, Peters

invites the reader into her classroom, challenging him to engage the text, just as she challenges her students in Jerusalem.

Peters’ understanding of the *mashal* is based on the insight that there are often significant gaps between the *mashal* and the *nimshal* (the text that follows the *mashal* and seeks to clarify the link between the *mashal* and the Biblical text). As she writes in the book:

The message of a mashal is thus often found in the discrepancies between mashal and nimshal and Biblical text or the mashal element and other parts of the same midrash (pp. 25-26).

For Peters, the discrepancy between the *mashal* and the *nimshal* often calls attention to the issue that the *darshan* (interpreter) seeks to introduce or emphasize in the Biblical text. For example, in chapter 3, Peters discusses the famous *mashal* about Avraham, in *Bereishit Rabbah* 39:1, in which a wandering man comes upon an illuminated tower and declares that the tower must have a master. The *nimshal* never explains in what way Avraham is similar to the wanderer. Peters argues that this element suggests not only Avraham’s later travels, but also his spiritual quest. It is precisely in the merit of yearning for spiritual truth that Avraham receives Divine revelation.

On the basis of this insight, Peters suggests the following six-stage method for analyzing *meshalim*: 1. Dividing the paragraph into its constituent parts,

2. Examining the *mashal* as a story in its own right, 3. Isolating the important elements of the *mashal*, 4. Matching the elements of the *mashal* and the *nimshal*, 5. Drawing conclusions and 6. Re-reading the Biblical text in light of the midrash (p. 30). Peters systematically applies this method to each of the six *meshalim* she presents. Upon completing these chapters, the reader will be well equipped to apply Peters’ method to other *meshalim* that he may encounter.

Peters’ approach to narrative expansions is not nearly so systematic. As she notes, the narrative expansion is a far more diverse genre than the *mashal*, and hence, does not easily submit to a programmatic methodology. In her readings of narrative expansions, Peters stresses careful analysis of both the Biblical and midrashic texts, with a particular emphasis on determining the structure of the text. Peters argues that these accounts do not necessarily represent authoritative traditions about actual events. She identifies two primary motivations behind the narrative expansions. The first is exegetical. These stories represent attempts to resolve problems in the Biblical text. As interpretations, these readings are open to criticism and debate no less than the commentaries of medieval authorities such as Rashi or Ibn Ezra. Furthermore, rabbis often have a didactic agenda in telling their stories. Drawing on Rambam, Peters argues that these stories are more focused on conveying moral and spiritual truths than historical facts. Hence, to focus on the question, “Did this midrash really happen?” is to miss the point of the midrash.

In the process of reading individual texts, Peters raises many general issues in the reading of midrash. For example, she repeatedly emphasizes the need to read midrashim on two levels. First, each *mashal*, expansion or comment must be read as an individual work authored by the rabbi to whom it is attributed. Once this has been accomplished, we must consider how the editor of the given midrashic collection organized and utilized these sources for his own purposes. Often, the message of the editor is quite different from those of his sources. Also worthy of note is Peters’ stimulating discussion in chapter 14

of *Chazal*’s understanding of the role of chronology and sequence in fictional and non-fictional works.

Peters’ interpretations do, at times, suffer from “over-reading.” She imbues details and gaps in the text with meanings that go beyond what the text will bear. She has a particular tendency to see a psychological element in midrashim that is not always warranted. One example of this is found in the chapter entitled, “Portrait of a Biblical Personality: Exploring David’s Heart in the Aftermath of Sin.” Peters argues that the lengthy passage in *Bavli Sanhedrin* 107a-b, which deals with David’s sin with Batsheva, presents an elaborate psycho-spiritual portrait of David. It seems that this passage is more concerned with dealing with certain exegetical and theological issues than with psychoanalyzing David. Particularly prob-

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lematic are her comments on the following narrative expansion:

Batsheva was washing her hair under a chalta. Satan came and [made himself] appear to [David] as a bird. [David] shot an arrow at [Satan, but] hit the chalta [broke it open], uncovered [Batsheva] and saw her. Immediately, “and David sent, and inquired about the woman...” (Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 107a).

Peters interprets the word *chalta* as “beehive” on the strength of Rashi’s use of the word *kaveret* in his gloss on the term. She then proceeds to interpret this narrative allegorically. She terms this passage “a psychological portrait in symbolic language” (p. 219). Peters sees the various elements of the story as representing aspects of David’s inner psychosexual state. The beehive, with its combination of sweet honey and danger, represents the perils and the potentials of David’s relationship with Batsheva.

Unfortunately, it is not at all clear that there is any beehive in our text. Rashi’s use of the term *kaveret* most likely means a “basket” or a “receptacle,” which is the

meaning of the Aramaic word *chalta*.² Furthermore, despite Peters’ claims to the contrary, it seems to me that this passage, first and foremost, comes to answer a literary and theological issue. The simple reading of the Biblical text in Samuel suggests that Batsheva was an exhibitionist, bathing on her roof, and David, a Peeping Tom! How can we imagine such things about the progenitors of the Messianic line? Rather, the midrash explains that Batsheva was washing in a most modest manner and that David came to view, by accident, only her head, after having been tricked by the Satan.

Peters’ turn to allegory is indicative of another weakness in her method. In addition to her literary tools, Peters is guided by a didactic and theological agenda. Her chapters generally end with a lesson that the author argues is the “moral” that the students are meant to take from the text. These lessons are often informed by a fairly rationalistic approach towards God and our relationship with Him. While these lessons are often quite appropriate to contemporary readers, they do not always accurately reflect the complex and often (to us) troubling nature of the midrashim in question.

These are, however, relatively minor criticisms, ones that the author would likely view not as reflecting oversights, rather as integral parts of her method. Though I disagree with some of her readings, I found all of Peters’ interpretations to be stimulating encounters with the text, which emerge from her careful blend of critical inquiry and reverence for Torah. Peters presents a sophisticated, yet accessible, method for the study of midrash, which allows the reader to appreciate both the spiritual authority and the dynamic creativity of rabbinic texts. This book will enlighten and challenge students of midrash of all levels and perspectives. JA

Notes

1. Indeed, I believe that Peters goes too far in suppressing academic references. Aside from the salvational value of such attributions, the reader would benefit from references for further reading.

2. See Jastrow’s entry for *kaveret* in his dictionary and Michael Sokloff’s entry for *chalta* in his *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic* (Maryland, 2003).