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David Metzger

Old Dominion University, dmetzger@odu.edu

Steven B. Katz

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Author(s): David Metzger and Steven B. Katz

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# The “Place” of Rhetoric in Aggadic Midrash

David Metzger and Steven B. Katz

**I**n Rabbinic Judaism, the interpretation of the Torah is a central activity because the Torah is the primordial blueprint for the universe (Kugel 5). The rabbis who made this assertion even translated the first two words of Genesis, *Bereishith Bara*, traditionally, “In the beginning,” as “With this first thing [the Torah] G/d created the heavens and [ . . . ]” To be sure, the TaNaKh<sup>1</sup> prompted questions, but—for the rabbinic community—the TaNaKh also was the resource—and as we will see, literally a *place*, and on several levels—from which they would draw the answers to those questions. In rabbinic hermeneutics, the act of forming and responding to these questions is called *midrash*, from a biblical Hebrew word *darash*, which means “to seek” or “to ask” (Strack and Stemberger 234; Holtz 178). The term *midrash* is also used to identify the “texts” (whether oral or written) and the collections of texts by which these rabbinical acts of interpretation are preserved and transmitted. What is more, as the rabbinic canon (known as the Oral Torah to distinguish it from the TaNaKh, the Written Torah that preceded it) developed to include texts other than the TaNaKh, the interpretation of those texts (the Mishnah and Talmud,<sup>2</sup> for example) also came to be called midrash.

It is customary to identify two general categories of midrash. There is *halakhic* midrash, which concerns behavioral codes and laws (both civil and religious). And

**David Metzger** is professor of English and dean of the Honors College at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia. He is the author of *The Lost Cause of Rhetoric* (1995), editor of *Medievalism and the Academy II: Cultural Studies* (2000), and co-editor of *Chasing Esther: Jewish Expressions of Cultural Difference* (2005). **Steven B. Katz** is the R. Roy and Marnie Pearce Professor of Professional Communication at Clemson University in South Carolina. He has published on classical Hebrew rhetoric in *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, *Journal of Communication and Religion*, and several edited volumes of scholarly essays and proceedings. He is the author of *The Epistemic Music of Rhetoric* (1996) and (with Ann Penrose) of *Writing in the Sciences: Exploring Conventions of Scientific Discourse*, now in its third edition (2010). His 1992 *College English* article, “The Ethic of Expediency: Classical Rhetoric, Technology, and the Holocaust,” won NCTE’s Award for Excellence in Technical and Scientific Communication in the category of Best Article on Philosophy or Theory.

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there is *aggadic* midrash, a general category that subsumes rabbinic narratives, aphorisms, and parables. As one would expect, there is some overlap between these two categories, because nothing would prevent a narrative or parable from addressing a legal subject, as it sometimes does in Talmud. But the distinction between halakhic and aggadic midrash has been useful—in part because it perhaps suggests that midrash as a literary activity, as distinct from Jewish halakhic or legal concerns, is worthy of study both inside and outside Judaism.

This essay is restricted to an examination of aggadic midrash as a particular mode of Jewish rhetoric. Retelling and interpreting these narratives, aphorisms, and parables are central rhetorical activities in Jewish religion, thought, literature, and culture. But these rhetorical activities and their relation and potential contribution to mainstream rhetoric and writing are not widely known or understood beyond Jewish circles. In fact, even within Jewish circles, midrash is not necessarily regarded as a rhetorical activity. Indeed, the very idea that there is something that we could or should identify as “Jewish rhetoric(s)” is itself a recent phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> However, because early proponents of aggadah used parables and narratives to communicate the utility and merit of aggadah, the study of midrash affords the opportunity to observe how *aggadah developed as a discursive space* and flourished within what Moshe Halbertal called the text-centered communities of the Jewish world. The results of this general discussion will then be focused and, in some measure, tested by a reading of particular midrashim (in this case, two stories preserved in the midrashic collection *Lamentations Rabbah*). And finally, this investigation itself will take a midrashic and aggadic turn in order to address the difficult question, “what is the place of Jewish rhetoric(s)?” This final section is not meant as a simple flight of fancy, but as an additional test for what we will soon identify as one of the aggadah’s principal activities: crossing the gaps between conceptual categories—even those between Jewish studies and rhetoric.

#### AGGADAH’S UTILITY AND MERIT

Due to its thematic organization, Hayyim Bialik and Yehoshua Ravnitsky’s extensive collection of rabbinic “lore,” *Sefer Ha-Aggadah* [*The Book of Legends*], provides a helpful sampling of rabbinic literary activity. Published before their immigration to Palestine (1908–11), *The Book of Legends* was later reprinted several times in Israel and translated into English in 1992. The editors intended the collection to provide its readers with touchstones (as Eliot uses the term in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”) to harness the creative energies of a Jewish tradition for the development of a modern Jewish identity, literature, culture, and nation (Stern, “Introduction” xix). For Bialik and Ravnitsky, the historical “gap” between early Judaism and modern

Judaism was traversed by the *aggadot* (plural of *aggadah*) inasmuch as the *aggadot* showed how the early rabbis developed and created a Judaism resilient enough to survive the destruction of the Temple, the trials of diaspora and persecution, and the challenges facing those who return to their homeland (Stern, “Introduction” xx).

Bialik and Ravnitsky’s association of *aggadot* with Jewish creativity, and the association of creativity with the traversal of space, time, history, and culture, are common in studies of aggadic midrash—even outside of Jewish studies. For example, in the introduction to the 1982 collection of essays *Midrash and Literature*, Geoffrey Hartman suggests that there is a pressing need for the study of midrash because the exigencies prompting its creation and reception are similar to the exigencies prompting the emergence of theory in literary and rhetorical studies. Hartman evokes Matthew Arnold’s distinction between Hellenism and Hebraism to suggest that Hebraism also can be associated with that responsiveness to the world and others that Arnold calls “spontaneity” (qtd. in Hartman and Budick ix–x). Daniel Boyarin’s influential 1992 study, *Intertextuality and Midrash*, further develops the argument for studying midrash by offering what he calls a new theory of midrash, one that acknowledges, among other things, that “midrash is literature, but all serious literature is revision and interpretation of a canon and a tradition and is a dialogue with the past and with authority which determines the shape of human lives in the present and future” (19).

Many more examples could be provided to illustrate how the themes of creativity and the traversal of differences and distances inform the study of *aggadot*. Indeed, this investigation and this special issue of *College English* may be motivated by the desire to work the tradition (go back to the future) in order to (1) bring together Judaism and rhetoric, and (2) begin to identify the place, if not the uniqueness, of something called Jewish rhetoric(s).

The place of Jewish rhetoric(s) is not an explicit concern of the *aggadot*. The *aggadot*, however, do concern themselves with their place in the study of Torah and its relation to Jewish law (*halakhab*); and the general pattern for identifying the discursive space for *aggadah* is similar to that evidenced in the earlier brief review of previous scholarship. Bialik and Ravnitsky’s work provides us with selections that suggest, “If you wish to know Him by whose word the world came into being, study *Aggadah*; you will thereby come to know the Holy One, blessed be He, and hold fast to His ways.” In these midrashim, *aggadah* is likened to a coil of reeds, which when uncoiled (like Ariadne’s thread in the labyrinth), orients a visitor in a grand palace (the Torah<sup>4</sup>); *aggadah* is like a handle on a pot of boiling water (the Torah), making the pot portable; *aggadah* is like rope that, when it is attached to other ropes and a bucket, allows one to bring up the sweet water (the Torah) from a well. *Aggadah* is like the wick of a candle that a king uses to find a gold coin that he has lost. And *aggadah* gives “delight to Scripture”; “like manna [which drew the heart of a hungry

person], Aggadah draws a person's heart [to Torah], even as water [draws the heart of a thirsty man]" (3).

A thorough discussion of the utility and merit of aggadah within rabbinic literature would require a cluster analysis of a larger corpus of imagery to identify the dominant themes. Within the selection provided by Bialik and Ravnitsky, a pattern does start to emerge. Both the aggadah's utility and merit assume that one's engagement with the world, with scripture, and with *mitzvot* (the commandments, "his ways" in the previous example; there are 613 commandments in the Torah) cannot be taken for granted. The aggadah's value, too, is a measure of how much it assists a person in her or his attempt to bridge the distance between herself or himself, the world, and scripture. The Torah is a pot of boiling water; direct contact is inconvenient if not dangerous; some mediating instrument is required. Likewise, midrash helps the studier traverse distances. The Torah is the water at the bottom of a well; it exists in the world, but one cannot benefit from it unless the distance between one's bucket and the water can be traversed. The Torah, and perhaps even the world, is like a grand palace, so grand in fact that one needs an aid to orient oneself in its expanse. Yet the aggadah is not only a tool; it gives "delight to Scripture," and it draws (or *moshechet*, pulls) a person's heart.

What does this brief discussion of aggadic imagery indicate regarding the discursive space of either aggadah or rabbinic rhetoric in general? This question will be dealt with more specifically in the subsequent reading of two stories from *Lamentations Rabbah*. For now, an interesting similarity appears to have emerged between aggadah and biblical rhetoric. The statement that aggadah draws on the heart resonates with work on biblical rhetoric that suggests biblical rhetoric might also be understood in terms of engaging the heart (Zulick; Metzger). The *heart* is not usually a focus in recent rhetorical or literary study, but in aggadah, the heart is figuratively and literally a *place* of rhetorical activity. In the work of both Margaret Zulick and David Metzger, the development of a discursive space for (biblical) rhetoric runs parallel to the biblical development of an internal landscape, an inner world or space in which an internal agent acts or accedes to being persuaded. Although the midrashim introduced earlier do not present a synopsis of rabbinic psychology, they may provide images that assume such an internal space, even require an internal space where people are engaged by the world, by scripture, and by others. The place for aggadah and for Jewish rhetoric(s) may be the result of two rabbinic contributions to Jewish thought: the development of an internal dimension to human experience; and more distinctively, a textualization of what is seen to populate that internal dimension. In the next section of our essay, we will use a reading of two stories from *Lamentations Rabbah* to develop the concepts of *internalization* and *textualization*, and to test these particular suppositions.

INTERNALIZATION AND TEXTUALIZATION IN *LAMENTATIONS RABBAH*

In a collection of midrashim on the *Book of Lamentations* [*Eicha Rabbah*], there are two interconnected stories of G/d's withdrawal at a catastrophic time in Jewish history: the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans. The stories appear in Peticha 24 of the thirty-four *petichot* ("openings" or "prologues") to the collection of midrashim on the *Book of Lamentations*. In the first story, the angels are so distressed at seeing and hearing G/d's mourning for the Temple's destruction and the fate of the Jewish people that they seek to comfort the deity and then to dissuade it from this unseemly behavior. The deity responds by telling the angels that if it is not allowed to mourn in heaven, then it will retire to a place where it can mourn and the angels are not allowed to enter. In the second story, G/d is not disturbed at all by the destruction of the Temple; rather, the deity is disturbed that the ministering angels are composing dirges in response to the destruction of the Temple and the fate of the Jewish people. G/d informs the angels that the Jews are suffering for their transgressions. A trial follows, in which the patriarchs and matriarchs are called to witness the testimony of the Torah and even the letters of the aleph-bet themselves, which are called to testify against the Jewish people. At the end of the story and trial, the matriarch Rachel speaks and teaches the deity a lesson in compassion (for other readings of this drash, see Fishbane; Stern, *Midrash and Theory*).

Peticha 24 thus pairs<sup>5</sup> two apparently contradictory visions of the deity, both ultimately concerned with place. On the one hand, G/d is either distant (in heaven) or G/d is close (in the Temple or on earth); on the other hand, G/d administers the law's harsh decree or G/d is merciful and sympathetic to humanity's suffering. And in this pairing, the typical theodicean expectation that all would be explained if we could only imagine what G/d's perspective "from on high" might be like, is disrupted. The distant G/d of the first midrash is the one who mourns with Israel, while the close G/d who visits the earth in the second midrash is the one who asserts the harsh decree.

The distant G/d of the first midrash, the deity who removes itself (its *Shechinah*, or presence on earth) from the Temple, the G/d who converses with angels, the G/d who the midrash surprisingly says "sought to destroy Israel"—this is the one who mourns with Israel. In fact, this midrash goes on to identify the distant G/d as the quintessential mourner, an *onen* (from *oni*, "misery" [Jastrow, Vol. III 1055]), one for whom the memory of a loss is acutely fresh. This story of G/d's mourning in the first midrash does *not* suggest that the deity's perspective provides a vision of order or even a historical pattern. In this midrash, there is only the perspective of the *onen*, the one whose life is caught and collapsed in the moment of loss. It is as if this midrash asserts that the *onen's* perspective is the only perspective, so this must be G/d's perspective as well, even though it is limited. G/d does not need to

become human or take on human attributes in order to suffer. One might say, the deity must take on the burden of its being, or at the very least, must rationalize its own, separate existence. The first story operationalizes this rather mystifying statement in the following way: it tells us that G/d does midrash. Even for the deity, conceptual difficulties exist that need to be resolved through drash: how and why would the distant G/d of judgment mourn or call others to mourn? But rather than simply answer this question, the midrash indicates that G/d too has difficulty responding to this question.

In this first midrash, where G/d threatens to withdraw from heaven, G/d explains its actions by using a traditional midrashic form called a *mashal* (literally, a “comparison” or analogy) to identify its circumstances: G/d likens itself to a king who builds a wedding chamber for his son and his son’s new bride, only to find that his son dies in the wedding chamber.<sup>6</sup> On this occasion, the simple analogy of “G/d is like a king who [ . . . ]” evokes both the theme of creation (the king built a bridal chamber—a place) and the theme of revelation (the *ketubah*, or marriage contract, is commonly associated in midrash with the covenant at Sinai). This *mashal* allows us to visualize, if not thematize, the deity’s encounter with a loss as a physical, spatial phenomenon that derails both the reason for creation and the promise of revelation. (Here and elsewhere, the term *thematize* is used to denote the process by which something that exists becomes a *topos*, a place, about and from which we can speak.<sup>7</sup>) Even from an omniscient place of mourning (and perhaps because of it), the deity experiences a world without the hope of redemption. In Judaism, G/d is not only the author of creation and destruction; G/d also needs to fill in—by way of interpretation—the *gaps* between the promise of creation and revelation and their ongoing actualization. But in this first midrash, G/d is not attempting to resolve a difficulty in a text; instead, the deity is providing itself with an explanation of loss. And there is no such explanation—even for G/d—except in the form of a midrash.

Earlier in this essay, we suggested that the place of aggadah and perhaps even the notion of Jewish rhetoric(s) were affected by the textualization of an internal landscape. The deity’s use of the traditional *mashal* form to thematize its emotional state by creating places to mourn exemplifies this dynamic process of textualization. Is there more to this process than simply the expression of feelings—even the representation of the internal state of the deity? After all, it is also a matter of debate whether the deity could or should experience loss and mourn. The angels’ response to the deity’s mourning is one indication of this debate; the verse from Isaiah, which prompts and anchors this midrash, is another: “The L/rd G/d of hosts summoned on that day to weeping and lamenting” (22:12). The first midrash also explicitly indicates that the rabbis couldn’t believe this statement from Isaiah (that the event of G/d’s mourning happened), unless it was written in scripture (“veilmale mikra shecatuv i efshar leamro,” *Eicha Rabbah* 33). So, what could be called a textual gap warranting



interpretation (did it happen or didn't it?) is transformed into something else: a sense of loss that the deity's *mashal* (analogy) yanks into the realm of text. This midrash encounters the world and G/d's psychology as if it had already been textualized ("the L/d G/d of hosts summoned on that day to weeping and lamenting"), then shows us the referent for that text in a scene where the deity reveals its inner thoughts to the angels (the narrative of G/d as *onen*) by way of another text (the deity's likening itself to a king who built a bridal chamber).

Previously in this essay, we suggested that the divine perspective (G/d as mourner) is not the perspective that orders or rationalizes suffering or loss. Reflecting on the discussion concerning the first midrash of Peticha 24, we now see why: midrash interprets without closing off or negating other possibilities, including those suggested in the text itself. It is also interesting to observe how the rabbinic midrash constructs the divine perspective. From the standpoint of Rabbinic Judaism, scripture undoubtedly points the reader to what the deity might have seen. But, as a prompt for rabbinic interpretation, scripture does not provide the reader with the opportunity to see from the deity's perspective. The reader (through midrash) may be privy to the heavenly scene, but the reader or writer of midrash does not have access to the site from which the deity sees. This particular story underscores this point regarding the divine perspective by alluding to a place where the deity may go but even the angels may not follow, thereby locating uncertainty regarding G/d's motives or actions in heaven.

The second story from Peticha 24 also attempts to identify the perspective from which G/d can mourn or call others to mourn. However, it reframes the discussion by presenting the deity as confident in its harsh judgment of the Jewish people. This midrash is of particular interest from a rhetorical standpoint, because it crosses heaven and earth, space and time, living and dead, to provide a narrative of several unsuccessful attempts to sway the deity from its harsh judgment, followed by the matriarch Rachel's successful appeal. That Rachel also makes her appeal by way of a *mashal* affords the opportunity to continue the discussion of midrashic thematization and textualization as an internal activity and place.

At the beginning of this second story, the deity is not in mourning. G/d has let the Temple be destroyed, and from its place in heaven is watching the Jewish people being slaughtered or taken captive by their enemies. G/d views the destruction with Metatron (formerly Enoch, now an angel and often an advocate for Israel in midrash and Jewish mysticism), who raises the question of the appropriateness of G/d's action. G/d tells Jeremiah to go down and wake up the patriarchs and Moses, who weep and tear their clothes and pluck their beards and pour ashes on their heads when they hear of the destruction of the Temple and of the people they founded and guided. The ministering angels take pity on the patriarchs and try to sway the Almighty to be merciful: "Sovereign of the Universe, broken is the covenant made with their

patriarch Abraham through which the world is peopled and through which men acknowledged Thee in the world that Thou art G/d, Most High, Maker of heaven and earth” (*Lamentations Rabbah* XXIV).

Abraham then speaks to G/d directly, asking why the Temple and Jewish people have been exiled and destroyed. G/d replies: “Thy children sinned and transgressed the whole of the Torah and the twenty-two letters in which it is composed” (*Lamentations Rabbah* XXIV). When Abraham asks who testifies against Israel, G/d, in what suddenly becomes a divine court in which texts speak, commands the Torah to come forth and give testimony *against* the Jews. The Torah appears, and Abraham, playing the part of the defense attorney, reminds the Torah that of all the people on the earth, it was the Jews who accepted the Torah, its commandments, and G/d’s covenant when G/d was shopping it around for a People. The Torah steps aside and does not testify. G/d then calls each of the twenty-two letters, out of which the Torah is made, to give testimony against the Jewish people. As each of the letters, starting with aleph, steps forward, Abraham reminds it of its “place” (its origin and meaning) in Torah and for the Jewish people; each letter in turn steps aside and does not testify.

G/d responds by sending Moses down to tell the Jews that G/d will not save them. Jeremiah, who states that he is not supposed to go to places where corpses lie, accompanies Moses to the battlefield and ruins anyway. Moses speaks to the remaining people there, telling them—without divine sanction—that they won’t be saved immediately, but soon. At this news, the survivors break into wailing.

The patriarchs continue their attempts to persuasively bridge the widening abyss between G/d and the Jewish people. Abraham reminds G/d of his willingness to sacrifice Isaac; Isaac reminds G/d of his willingness to be sacrificed. Jacob reminds G/d of the twenty years he spent in Laban’s house, and how Esau tried to kill his children; Moses reminds G/d of his forty years wandering in the wilderness, where his bones now lie. G/d is unpersuaded. In desperation, Moses even accuses the sun of complicity in the destruction (Why did you not depart from the heavens so that the Romans could not find the Temple?). Yet G/d remains unpersuaded.

Finally, the matriarchs step forward, and Rachel reminds G/d of how she allowed Jacob to sleep with Leah, even slipping under the bed and doing a *voice-over* for Leah so that Jacob would not discover he was in bed with Leah. The deity is moved by Rachel’s appeal, quoted in full here:

He [Moses] further spake before Him: “Sovereign of the Universe, Thou hast written in Thy Torah, Whether it be a cow or ewe, ye shall not kill it and its young both in one day (Lev. XXII, 28); but have they not killed many, many mothers and sons, and Thou art silent!” At that moment, the matriarch Rachel broke forth into speech before the Holy One, blessed be He, and said, “Sovereign of the Universe, it is revealed before Thee that Thy servant Jacob loved me exceedingly and toiled for my father on

my behalf seven years. When those seven years were completed and the time arrived for my marriage with my husband, my father planned to substitute another for me to wed my husband for the sake of my sister. It was very hard for me, because the plot was known to me and I disclosed it to my husband; and I gave him a sign whereby he could distinguish between me and my sister, so that my father should not be able to make the substitution. After that I relented, suppressed my desire, and had pity upon my sister that she should not be exposed to shame. In the evening they substituted my sister for me with my husband, and I delivered over to my sister all the signs which I had arranged with my husband so that he should think that she was Rachel. More than that, I went beneath the bed upon which he lay with my sister; and when he spoke to her she remained silent and I made all the replies in order that he should not recognise my sister's voice. I did her a kindness, was not jealous of her, and did not expose her to shame. And if I, a creature of flesh and blood, formed of dust and ashes, was not envious of my rival and did not expose her to shame and contempt, why shouldst Thou, a King Who liveth eternally and art merciful, be jealous of idolatry in which there is no reality, and exile my children and let them be slain by the sword, and their enemies have done with them as they wished!" Forthwith the mercy of the Holy One, blessed be He, was stirred, and He said, "I; for thy sake, Rachel, I will restore Israel to their place." And so it is written, Thus saith the Lord: "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children; she refuseth to be comforted for her children, because they are not" (Jer. XXXI, 15). This is followed by, "Thus saith the Lord: Refrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears; for thy work shall be rewarded . . . and there is hope for thy future, saith the Lord; and thy children shall return to their own border." (*Lamentations Rabbah*, Jeremiah XXXI, 16)

The use of Rachel's biblical voice, no doubt, normalizes the fact that her argument was persuasive.<sup>8</sup> In the rabbinic imagination, women—starting with Hannah in 1 Samuel—provide exemplary models of successful supplicatory prayers: "Now Hannah, she spoke in her heart [*al libab*]; only her lips moved, but her voice could not be heard" (1 Sam. 1:13; see also *Babylonian Talmud*, Berakhot 31a). And the citation from the prophet Jeremiah—used as the conclusion to this midrash—clearly anchors the story of Rachel's argument in biblical reality. In fact, this midrash may be a suggestion of what Rachel might have said in Jeremiah 31, even though Rachel's speech goes unreported in Jeremiah.

The ease with which Rachel's persuasive act can be normalized in this midrash is interesting to note.<sup>9</sup> If the fact that the deity is persuaded is not so much at issue, what purpose can be assigned to the detailed description of the means by which she persuades G/d?<sup>10</sup> The text does put into play many of the topics raised in the discussion of the previous midrash: divine perspective, *mashal*, textualization, and internalization. Let's investigate these, each in turn, not merely as topics, but as *topoi*—as *places* of argument in midrashic rhetoric.

*The Divine Perspective.* Rachel's story underscores the contradictions inherent in a "divine perspective." A divine perspective cannot be equally shared. To be effective, a divine perspective requires that someone be in the dark: the success of Laban's

plan requires that Jacob and Rachel do not know about it; the success of Jacob and Rachel's plan requires that Leah and Laban do not know about it; the success of Leah and Rachel's plan requires that Jacob does not know about it. Share with Leah after you've shared with Jacob, and Jacob is in the dark. So where is the position (place) of knowledge in this story? It is not G/d's. Rather, it is in Rachel's use of the classic midrashic *mashal*: G/d is like a king.

*Mashal*. In using the classical midrashic *mashal*, Rachel is doing nothing less than combating one figurative use of language with another, and in doing so, she creates new discursive spaces from and in which to argue with the deity. How does she do this? She uses a classic midrashic formula to make *visible* an unexpressed figure from which the divine perspective and its harsh judgment had drawn its substance. What is that figure? Behind G/d's judgment lurks another comparison (one popularized by the prophet Isaiah, for example, Isa. 54:5): G/d is like a husband; Israel is like an adulterous wife. In response to that *mashal* from Isaiah and the stable set of meanings to which it had been attached, Rachel—a compassionate sister and a favored wife—tells the deity what it's *like* to be both a sister and a wife. And G/d, who is like a jealous husband, might learn a thing or two from such a person. So, the "jealous wife" speaks to a deity who is like a jealous husband. Rachel also suggests that, if as a mere creature of flesh and blood, she is capable of being compassionate, how much more so should the deity (a king!) be capable of such compassion.

Rachel's conclusion has the added obligatory force of being expressed in a form quite common in halakhic midrash: the *kal v'homer* (literally, "the light and the weighty": if x is the case in the "light," *how much more so* in the "weighty" [Strack and Stemberger 21]).<sup>11</sup> The appearance of this standard *a fortiori* argument is particularly interesting given Moses's similar attempts to persuade the deity by citing laws provided in Leviticus, laws that the deity itself seems to have transgressed (for example, "Whether it be a cow or ewe, ye shall not kill it and its young both in one day" [Lev. 22:28]). If the deity could be moved by an appeal to the authority of scripture or the authority of law, then Moses's argumentative appeal would have been sufficient. It was not. But Rachel's was. Aside from G/d's omnipotence, the reason that G/d isn't persuaded by Moses, but is by Rachel, brings us to the heart of the matter regarding midrashic rhetoric: textualization/internalization.

*Textualization/Internalization*. The intricacy with which Rachel describes her means of communicating to her sister and Jacob may say a good deal about the dynamic relationship between, on the one hand, textualization and internalization in midrash, and on the other hand, the physical nature of persuasion and knowledge itself in midrashic rhetoric. Notice how the second story in Peticha 24 focuses the reader's attention on what is voiced and what is silenced. Moses chastises the deity for its silence (that is, the deity does not respond to the unspoken question regarding the murder of many mothers and sons). Rachel and Jacob then develop a "sign"

(presumably a silent one) by which Jacob will be able to discern whether he is marrying Leah or Rachel. Rachel then shares “all these signs” (now plural) with her sister, Leah. Leah is silent when she and Jacob are in their marriage bed. There is also a silence regarding Leah and Rachel’s plan. The description of this plan, while known to both Leah and Rachel, does not include any of their interactions with each other; it is described with all the vocal resonance and auditory appeal of a chess problem. The substitutions (Leah for Rachel; Rachel for Leah) are so clear cut, so caught up in the image of the vocal and unseen Rachel in her place beneath the bed—above which Jacob and Leah are communicating up a storm by way of sign(s)—that neither reader nor narrator need add a sound track to it, even imaginarily. Add to this the fact that the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, which G/d called to testify against Israel, were silenced by Abraham, and there seems to be a division between the realm of silent signs or letters “above the mattress,” and the realm of voices below.

With its foregrounding of the vocal and the silent as the seen and unseen, Rachel’s story provides all the materials necessary for an allegorical reading, but it simply doesn’t go there. The term *allegory* denotes a mode of interpretation that relies on the one-to-one correspondence of the visible to the invisible, the material to the immaterial. Rather than provide an allegorical correspondence between G/d as G/d and G/d as king, Rachel concludes by asserting the literal reality that G/d is a king (rather than something *like* a king)—giving Rachel’s speech the physical material necessary to connect it with its conclusion, the verse from Jeremiah. “Why should’st Thou,” Rachel asks, “a King Who liveth eternally and art merciful, be jealous of idolatry in which there is no reality, and exile my children and let them be slain by the sword, and their enemies have done with them as they wished!” The second midrash does share with us something of Rachel’s inner life: “I relented, suppressed my desire, and had pity upon my sister that she should not be exposed to shame”; “And if I, a creature of flesh and blood, formed of dust and ashes, was not envious of my rival and did not expose her to shame and contempt.” But this inner world is not a secret; in the process of textualization, the second story in Peticha 24 moves us from a verse in Isaiah in which the deity calls Israel to mourn, to a verse in Jeremiah in which the deity comforts its people. That is, Rachel’s inner world is revealed not by allegorical correspondences with an outer world, but by making it the same world, one that locates disparate times and distant spaces all in one physical *place*: the world as text. Nor is Rachel’s inner world invisible. But as with an unknown continent, the fact that this inner world has gone unseen results from the reality that it is as yet undiscovered, not that it is impossible to see it, or that it doesn’t exist.

What is more, when—in the first story of Peticha 24—the deity introduces the idea that there is a place where the angels may not go, the biblical warrant for the existence of such a curious place is the following verse from Jeremiah: “But if ye will not hear it, My soul shall weep in secret for pride” (13:17). The midrashic

imagination transforms the prophetic expression of a soul weeping in secret, into a place to which some may enter and some may not. In drash, the world of the mind, the soul, and intention, might not be apparent, but that world exists. A weeping soul is a place. The heart is a place. Torah is a place. Insight, understanding, wisdom, are places. Even the letters of the text are "orthographically ontological" (Katz, "Letter" 136, 142). But there are limits, even in the divine perspective. Accept the goal of the midrashic project, and rabbinic textualization does not set out to find some hidden or "inner," stable meaning in the text, but rather to retextualize the text as a place to explore various paths of meaning. Or, using one of the metaphors introduced in our discussion of the utility and merit of aggadah, the so-called inner world is part of a chain of texts carefully constructed as the drash refreshes itself with waters drawn from the Torah.

#### MIDRASH AND THE PLACE OF JEWISH RHETORIC(S)

Peticha 24's two aggadot from the collection of midrashim on the *Book of Lamentations* [*Eicha Rabbah*] may help us to orient ourselves in some places associated with a formulation of Jewish rhetoric(s). At minimum, the aggadah provides a vision of rhetoric as the creation and recreation of discursive spaces. The first aggadah shows us that the position of ultimate or divine authority must, from time to time, at least threaten to retreat into or engage interpretation in order to connect with the world. The second aggadah builds on this insight by having Rachel retreat from herself (suppress her goals, her jealousy, that part of her produced in opposition to her sister) in order to create a new relationship with herself, her sister, and Jacob. Once that is accomplished, Rachel's rhetorical materials—her hand signals, her voice, her body, her selective silence, and even the scene of the wedding night—are repurposed, becoming the space in which Rachel finds another place for her sister. It is not surprising that rhetoric should find its place in heaven, on earth, or in one sister's concern for another—or even that it would provide a location from which to successfully argue with G/d. What is surprising, perhaps, is that we would have thought that Jewish rhetorics(s) could be found anywhere else.

So what does Rachel's ability to successfully persuade the deity teach us? There is one way in which rhetoric makes room for others in the world: both the Other (G/d) and the self must retire some distance from themselves, to make room for the others who rush, like the waters of Torah, into the spaces that the world leaves behind. Where do these waters come from? They are all around us and in us. The Torah abhors a vacuum. If the object or person or Other steps aside, its place does not disappear, but becomes a vessel for the Torah. In these terms, Rachel's persuasive act involves delineating the location of her act of mercy ("See what I'm like! See how I positioned myself"), so that she can step aside, allowing G/d to take her place if the

deity so chooses. And what prompts the deity to make its choice? In Rachel's story, the expression of *kal v'homeh* (if this is true for a creature of flesh and blood, *how much more so* for . . .) literally and figuratively connects the space between Rachel's place in her story and the place from which the deity—the author of both creation and destruction—can be persuaded to move and be merciful. This is how, conceived spatially, the rhetoric of at least these two midrashim works.

In the rabbinic midrash, there are many spaces like this, often the result of strong disagreements. But if the spaces that distance us are internalized and can be made habitable by the texts that flow into them,

[a] person might think, "Since the House of Shammai declare unclean and the House of Hillel clean, this one prohibits and that one permits, why should I henceforward learn Torah?" Scripture says, "Words . . . the words . . . These are the words. . . ." All the words have been given by a single Shepherd, blessed be He, has spoken them. So you build many chambers in your hearts and bring into it the words of the House of Shammai and the words of the House of Hillel, the words of those who declare unclean. (*Babylonian Talmud*, Hagigah 3b)

This example from the *Babylonian Talmud* suggests that some of the discursive practices identified in our previous discussion (textualization, internalization, normalization) were, in fact, rhetorical strategies inasmuch as they could be used and reused, if not conceptualized or systematized in a body of work called "rhetoric." In fact, the text above from the *Babylonian Talmud* is often cited in contemporary discussions of rabbinic hermeneutics to support or counter arguments regarding a rabbinic understanding of the rhetorical univocity or polysemy of the texts that they elucidated (Stern, *Midrash and Theory*; Handelman, *Slayers*; Fraade). But the focus of this essay has not been so much on what aggadic midrash says about rhetoric as it has been on what aggadic midrash does as a rhetoric.

One of the implications of our discussion of midrash as rhetoric is that, rather than close arguments down, the rabbinic imagination continually creates new discursive spaces where none could have existed before (or discovers and opens new spaces in old places). As we have seen, some of these discourses are quite fantastical yet still grounded in the reality of scripture. Although granted by rabbinic authority or guided by hermeneutic principles, aggadic midrashic rhetoric does not shut down avenues of exploration. In both aggadic and halakhic midrash, interpretations and opinions are often left to coexist in a delicately and eloquently balanced text, although the last opinion is always the preferred option (see Neusner). This is a rhetoric that therefore acknowledges, accepts, and tends to retain multiple perspectives. Midrashic rhetoric accepts the multiplicities of truth, the partiality and limitations of perspective (even G/d's in these midrashim), and the necessity of privileging one version of truth over another (or deception over truth). Just because Rachel puts her sister's honor above her own desire does not mean that her own desire somehow goes away. Just because

we privilege some aspects of reality or text in one perspective or instance doesn't mean we negate the value of other aspects forever.

Previously, we had used the term *textualization* to denote the activity of locating a problem or question in a text. In the two midrashim studied in this essay, we have noted how textualization is treated as steps in the establishment of discursive spaces. Textualization, as indicated in the passage from the *Babylonian Talmud*, is thus not only related to the process of internalization but also to the process of canonization, inasmuch as the texts that have the ability to come into our hearts may be limited by scripture, tradition, or the authority of the rabbis themselves. If this is the case, we must end with a proposal to continue the discussion of the Jewish rhetoric(s) to account for the role that these limitations on interpretation also play in defining "the place" of Jewish texts, as well as the process by which some texts and not others are allowed to create discursive spaces in our hearts.

## NOTES

1. The TaNaKh (pronounced Tanaach) is the Hebrew Bible (also known as the Pentateuch, or Old Testament). The TaNaKh consists of the Torah (Law), Nevi'im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings)—in this order, rather than that of subsequent Christian Bibles. For one interpretation of the rhetorical significance of this, and even TaNaKh as Hebrew anagram, see Katz, "The Hebrew Bible."

2. The Mishnah, redacted by Judah HaNasi in approximately 200 CE, is the codifications of *Oral Law*; the Mishnah, together with the commentary on it, the Gemara composed by rabbis over the next few centuries, constitute the Talmud.

3. The study of "Jewish rhetoric" has found a place in the work of rhetoric and composition scholars who are turning their attention to the subject of non-Western or alternative rhetorics (for example, Lipson and Binkley, *Rhetoric Before and Ancient Non-Greek*). Likewise, rhetoric and culture theorists have found in Jewish literature and discourse both an ancient precursor and a positive alternative to rhetorics of war and colonialism (Jonathan Boyarin; Levinas; Handelman, *Slayers and Fragments*). And the Jewish identity of prominent thinkers and writers, such as Jacques Derrida and Chaim Perelman, has become increasingly important in the understanding of their work (Ofrat; Caputo; Frank).

4. In Jewish liturgy and mystical literature, the Torah is often conceived of as a place: a palace, an orchard, or a garden, and translated as PaRDeS, which is a Hebrew anagram for four levels of interpretation (see Katz, "Letter")—and an *Eitz Chaim*, a Tree of Life itself. *Makom*, "the place," is also a term used to denote the deity in rabbinic literature.

5. For discussion of the peticha form itself as prologue, including those that pull distant and seemingly unrelated verses into the exposition as a way of beginning exegesis of another verse, see Heinemann; Neusner.

6. For extended discussion of mashal in the critical vocabulary of rabbinic hermeneutics, see Stern, *Parables*; Daniel Boyarin, *Sparks* 89–113.

7. For a detailed discussion of thematization, see Levinas 46, 88–90.

8. The term *normalize* is used here to denote the activity of making "beliefs natural and self-evident—to identify them with the 'common sense' of a society so that nobody could imagine how they might ever be different" (Eagleton 58).

9. It also at least should be considered that the suasive force of Rachel's argument is, in part, due to the fact that in this midrash, she practices a rabbinically approved form of interpretation that can join disparate texts in one place—that is, it is not Ogenic or Philonic allegory (Daniel Boyarin, *Sparks* 20).



10. The biblical corpus provides other examples of the deity being persuaded. Abraham, for example, convinces the deity to alter the conditions under which Sodom and Gomorah might not be destroyed (Gen. 20:21). In his commentary on Genesis, Rashi—the medieval Torah commentator par excellence—will even cite a rabbinic tradition wherein Noah is criticized for passively accepting the deity's decision to destroy all life.

11. Kal v'homeh is one of thirty-two hermeneutic "rules" that were developed and used by the rabbis as a set of topoi to interpret scripture and other Jewish texts. There is not time and space to explore these here, but for a full discussion of these rules, see Strack and Stemberger; for a discussion of these rules in relation to text as physical place, see Handelman, *Slayers*, especially chapters 2 and 3.

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