LEHRHAUS
Over Shabbat

Emor

Vol. 9, Issue 30 • 18 Iyar 5785 / May 16, 2025

CONTENTS: Smith (Page 1); Isaacson (Page 9); Killip (Page 16)

Reclaiming Shepherd Leadership—For Our Leaders, For Ourselves

Yiscah Smith is a thought leader and spiritual activist who addresses the spiritual practice of encountering the Divine spark within and beyond.

Its Beginning

Shortly prior to Moses' passing, after the forty-year sojourn in the wilderness, the Eternal invites Moses to ascend a nearby mountain to view from afar the Promised Land that the Children of Israel will soon inhabit. After forty years of leading his flock to the Promised Land, Moses is not allowed to enter because he mistakenly behaved in a way that undermined God's sovereign will. In Num. 20:7-12, we witness the tragic incident when he "hit" the rock to bring forth water for the Israelites, (as he did forty years earlier), instead of "speaking" to the rock, as God had commanded him to do—which would have produced the same desired result with water miraculously pouring forth.

Moses has attempted several times to convince the Eternal to annul the edict, but when he finally accepts his fate, he asks something else of God. In Num. 27:15-17, we read, "Moses spoke to the Eternal, saying: 'Let the Eternal, Source of the breath of all flesh, appoint someone over the community, who shall go out before them and come in before them, and who shall take them out and bring them in, so that the Eternal's community may not be like sheep that have no shepherd for

them.'"[1]

When Moses first encountered the Eternal at the burning bush forty years prior, he was shepherding his father-in-law Jethro's flock (Exod. 3:1). God called Moses to move from shepherding sheep to shepherding the Israelites. Now Moses beseeches the Divine to appoint a new leader that will continue his tradition of shepherd leadership. He petitions God to choose a successor who likewise will lead by being in service to their followers—what Robert K. Greenleaf (twentieth c., United States) refers to as "servant leadership."[2] And God approvingly accepts Moses' request!

Acknowledging that Moses' appeal comes across as considerably less than humble (a point several commentators raise), the *Or Ha-Hayyim* (Hayyim ibn Attar, eighteenth c., Morocco and Jerusalem) holds that, through the lens of the shepherd about to bid farewell to his flock, Moses' concern is fitting: "It seems inappropriate for Moses to have addressed God in such a forward way . . . [but in truth] Moses' entire speech reflected only his love and compassion for his people."[3] Because Moses sees his role as being in service, he feels required to advocate on behalf of his people, regardless of what may seem as an affront to others—including, here, even God.

Rashi (Shlomo Yitzhaki, eleventh c., France) explores an additional requirement of the Torah's understanding of servant leadership by commenting on the phrase "source of the breath" in the verse, "Source of the breath of all flesh." Quoting a midrashic teaching, Rashi suggests: "Moses said to God: 'Master of the Universe, the personality of each person is revealed to you, and no two are alike. Appoint over them a leader who will bear each person according to their individual character.'"[4] It appears that Rashi understands the word in the verse *ruhot,* literally "spirits," as in "the spirits of all flesh," to connect with the word for soul, *neshamah,* sharing the same Hebrew root as breath—*neshimah.* Hence, the "source of the breath/soul of all flesh" teaches that while our bodies may appear similar to each other, how we express our souls remains unique to each individual person—just as no two people breathe the same. We can now understand why Rashi concludes that this phrase expresses Moses' leadership as calibrated to support each of the individual people he leads.

Addressing a third component of servant leadership that Moses embodies, Rabbeinu Bahya (Bahya ben Asher ibn Halawa, thirteenth-fourteenth c., Spain) comments on the need for a leader "who shall go out before them and come in before them" (Num. 27:17) as meaning that the

[1] All Tanakh translations are from the JPS 2023 edition, with minor modifications.

[2] Robert K. Greenleaf, "What Is Servant Leadership?," 2021, Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, www.greenleaf.org/what-is-servant-leadership.

[3] *Or Ha-Hayyim* to Num. 27:15, s.v. "va-yedabber Moshe." Writer's translation.

[4] Rashi to Num. 27:16, s.v. "Elohei ha-ruhot," pulling from *Midrash Tanhuma, Pinhas* 10. Writer's translation.

leader personally, and not anyone else, must always be in the front, "and not as the way of the kings of the nations who remain at home and send their armies to battle."[5] Moses exemplifies this by leading the Israelite armies during the battles along their journey to the Promised Land. More broadly, as a shepherd leader, he models to the people the behavior that the Eternal expects of them.

To summarize, these commentators, considered together, suggest that in the Torah's conception, "shepherd leadership" calls for a leader 1) that unconditionally advocates steadfastly on behalf of their followers, 2) that honors each person's unique personality, and 3) that leads by example.

A Missed Opportunity

R. Jonathan Sacks, (twentieth–twenty-first c., U.K.) builds on this original understanding of shepherd leadership when he writes,

> Each age produces its leaders, and each leader is a function of an age. There may be—indeed there are—certain timeless truths about leadership. 1) A leader must have courage and integrity and 2) He or she must be able to relate to each individual according to their distinctive needs. But these are necessary, not sufficient, conditions. A leader must be sensitive to the call of the hour—this hour, this generation, this chapter in the long story of a people. And because he or she is of a specific generation, even the greatest leader cannot meet the challenges of a different generation. That is not a failing. It is the existential condition of humanity.[6]

While sharing common ideas with the above classical commentaries, R. Sacks opines that leadership also needs to be "**sensitive to the call of the hour**—this hour, this generation, this chapter in the long story of a people." This innovative idea may have touched on what I would argue much of contemporary leadership lacks the most — relevancy, both in its methodology and content. The lack of leadership rising to the occasion results in an unfortunate missed opportunity.

Let us be careful, though, not to judge this missed opportunity as ill-intended or malicious behavior. When commenting on the tragic incident in Numbers 20:7-12, when Moses hit the rock rather than spoke to it as he was commanded, R. Sacks comments

[5] Rabbeinu Bahya on Num. 27:17, s.v. "asher yeitzei lifneihem."

[6] Sacks, "Why Was Moses Not Destined to Enter the Land", in *Covenant and Conversation, Chukkat 5773 (2013)*, https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/chukat/why-was-moses-not-destined-to-enter-the-land/.

> Moses' inability to hear this distinction was not a failing, still less was it a sin. It was an inescapable consequence of the fact that he was mortal. The fact that at a moment of crisis Moses reverted to an act that had been appropriate forty years before showed that time had come for the leadership to be handed on to a new generation. It is a sign of his greatness that Moses, too, recognized this fact and took the initiative in asking God to appoint a successor… The fact that Moses was not destined to enter the promised land was not a punishment but the very condition of his (and our) mortality.[7]

I suspect that much of contemporary Jewish leadership finds itself in a similar situation. This beckons us to consider what it is we seek in our leaders to alleviate much of our growing despair, frustration, and disappointment. In fact, many people, and increasingly so, do feel leaderless. Moses himself worried that his own flock would experience a similar feeling, so much so that he implored the Eternal, when choosing his replacement, to do so in such a way "so that God's community may not be like sheep that have no shepherd for them" (Num. 27:17).

How can we address this modern dilemma: that a growing number of Jews relate neither to most of our leaders' style of leadership— 'hitting' the rock rather than 'speaking' to it — nor to its message. I am concerned that, at one end of the contemporary leadership spectrum, I witness excessive emphasis on external observance of the *halakhah*—Jewish Law—and, equally so, at the other end, I see excessive emphasis on rejecting its legitimacy or relevancy. The all-too-common style in which leaders view their role as convincing their disciples to "fall in line" in one way or another, to the degree that they robotically adopt their ideas, succinctly expresses the reason for leaders' increasing ineffectiveness.

The Call of the Hour

R. Moshe Rothenberg, (twentieth c., Warsaw and New York) suggests that "the leader, the *rebbe,* must know the **souls** of each and every one, and know the service that pertains to that soul, and draw them near and connect them to their root-source. This is what it means when Rashi comments: 'appoint a leader who can bear each person according to their individual character', i.e., their soul, to draw them near and connect them to their root-source, each and every one

[7] Ibid.

according to their soul.”[8]

Adding to what may appear as an innovative, even radical, understanding of the call to leadership, contemporary Israeli scholar Michael Rosen describes the approach of Reb Simhah Bunim (eighteenth-nineteenth c., Poland) in these terms:

> …the *zaddik* as teacher was essentially a living paradigm… who endeavored to help the student fulfill his own potential. Under no circumstance was the disciple under any obligation to abrogate his own personality or responsibility to the *zaddik.* On the contrary, the role of the teacher was to help the disciple develop his own sense of judgment and discrimination, to develop his own sense of autonomy.[9]

When we weave all these ideas together, might we identify a common denominator shared by all? I would argue yes—they all address different shades of a type of leadership that currently is sorely missing and urgently necessary. What I ask of leadership today may appear as a new and even foreign approach. I would argue to the contrary. In fact, the call for a different leadership style today requires us to reclaim what has already been historically documented as having existed before— but for too long has been ignored.

In contemporary times, a leader’s role demands dedicated service to someone else’s life journey and recognition of each person’s unique spiritual self. This compassionate type of “shepherd leadership” focuses less on flexing power and more on inspiring and being in service. Shepherding a disciple to their own internal awareness of their soul and unique purpose in life must now take priority over emphasizing the expectation to conform to a common external behavior. Might it be that guiding a person to encounter the inner Divine spark of their soul dwelling within demonstrates the most important aspect of reclaiming shepherd leadership?

Furthermore, I would suggest that it behooves our leaders today to recognize, welcome, and honor that they are called upon by our Creator to compassionately speak, listen to, and connect with their followers with more of an intimate and customized soul-to-soul connection. This call to action requires a robust, courageous, and keenly sensitive type of leadership—a mindful and deeply spiritual “shepherd leadership.” This approach can then effectively help reveal each individual’s unique Godly purpose.

While, at the end of his life, Moses’ understanding

---

[8] Rabbi Moshe Rothenberg, *Sefer Bikkurei Aviv, Pinhas* (St. Louis, 1942) (emphasis added). Translation from Rabbi David Ackerman, "Chukkat: Each According to their Soul," in *Torah Without End: Neo-Hasidic Teachings and Practices in Honor of Rabbi Jonathan Slater*, ed. Rabbi Michael Strassfeld (Ben Yehuda Press, 2022), 78-79.

[9] Michael Rosen, *The Quest for Authenticity: The Thought of Reb Simhah Bunim* (Urim Publications, 2008), 40.

of his flock may have displayed a lack of "sensitivity to the call of the hour," his commitment to serving as a faithful shepherd to his people never wavered nor weakened. Our contemporary leaders would benefit in no small way—as would we as their followers—by seriously considering adopting this type of traditional leadership. How refreshing and welcoming it would be if our leaders took a more personalized approach when engaging with their congregants, students, and followers. This may take the form of spiritual mentoring and guidance, providing classes that address specific issues attracting smaller focus groups, and leading by example how to view the political arena through a spiritual lens. Specifically, in the realm of education, I call on all educators, regardless of their students' ages, to begin demonstrating a sensitivity to the "call of the hour," whereby the students themselves feel heard and respected, allowing them to be inspired by their learning experiences. These represent just a few ideas of the paradigm shift necessary to reclaim shepherd leadership. I would argue that posturing an openness to create and innovate is the fundamental building block for this.

Or, equally so, seriously considering the possibility that the time has arrived for current leadership, recognizing its own human limitations, to hand over the baton to a new generation, or to contemporaries with a different worldview.

As I delve deeper into the idea of reclaiming "shepherd leadership," I invite the reader to consider the possibility that each of us possesses our own personal inner shepherd—the internal still, small voice that leads and shepherds us along our life path.

The Personal Spiritual Practice

In the *Zohar*, the Rabbis usually do not refer to Moses by the customary honorific *Moshe Rabbeinu* ("Moses our Rabbi") but as *Ra'aya Meheimena* ("the faithful shepherd"). A flock of sheep needs a shepherd to direct them to pasture, and we human beings need our own shepherds to guide and inspire us.

The Piaseczner Rebbe (Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, twentieth c., Poland) opens the window of awareness of our inner shepherd by first directing our attention to a more nuanced understanding of *lifneihem* ("before them," or alternatively "within them") in our verse, "who shall go out before them and come in before them":

> This is the meaning of Moses' plea for a leader who can clearly set out *before them* what they need to internally understand in order to actualize their potential awareness from *within them* of what they need to know at any given moment. . . . [a leader] who will lead them by modeling for them how best to use their individual intelligence wisely. The extra emphasis placed on the phrase "for them" [at the end of the verse] means ensuring that each person inside of themselves possesses

> their own internal shepherd. The [outer] shepherd must enter inside, into the depths of each person, strengthening their faith in the Eternal.[10]

By translating the word *la-hem* at the end of the verse as "for/to them," the Piaseczner captures the enigmatic quality inherent in shepherd leadership. One who shepherds one's followers to discover their own inner shepherd has mastered the calling of servant leadership. The leader leads the follower to the follower's own internal leadership!

Developing this idea, I would suggest that the Piaseczner believes we all possess the capacity to discover and encounter our unique internal "shepherd leadership." The leader within us gently, yet clearly, indicates to us how to move along our life journey, with an inner, ephemeral tugging. Some of us may experience our internal shepherd as intuition, a sort of sixth sense by which we immediately and mysteriously understand or know something without conscious reasoning.

Rav Kook (Avraham Yitzhak Ha-Kohen Kook, twentieth c., Jerusalem) considers "the unique sense of intuition, which derives from the depths of one's personality" as "the spiritual sense . . . through which it is possible to sense God."[11]

Like Moses, our internal shepherd—if we develop it—can lead us in the three ways discussed earlier: 1) to honor our unique personality, rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach to living our lives; 2) to advocate on our own behalf regardless of undesirable consequences; and 3) to mindfully model what we sense the Divine Presence is asking specifically of us in all our uniqueness.

The third aspect in particular renders this as a spiritual practice, with Moses again as our model. When Moses encounters God at the burning bush (Exod. 3:1–10), the Divine appoints him as the shepherd who will lead his flock out of Egyptian slavery—essentially transforming Moses' responsibility for literal sheep into the sacred act of shepherding the Jewish people. Before this divine encounter, Moses could honor, and advocate for, himself (the first two of the three components). However, this third element requires him, and, by extension, us as well, to realize and then act upon the realization that our inner shepherd *is* in fact the Divine shepherding us to sacred action.

Yet to uncover and actualize our inner shepherd seems to require an impetus toward self-agency that is not necessarily familiar to all of us. The Piaseczner observes that many of his own

---

[10] Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, *Derashot Mi-Shenot Ha-Za'am* [Heb.], ed. Daniel Reiser (Herzog Academic College and Yad VaShem, 2017), 148 (writer's translation) (emphasis added).

[11] *Shemoneh Kevatzim*, 3:81. The writer's translation takes liberties for this interpretation.

disciples (Warsaw Jews during the interwar period) lack this quality: "People are always bemoaning, sighing, 'Where is my freedom of choice? I feel so imprisoned . . . that it is almost impossible to control myself, to choose between what to want and what to deem as loathsome'."[12]

He then suggests the root cause of these symptoms:

> For every choice that emerges from an individual's will, rather than reflecting someone else's will [making the choice], there first must be a person who is choosing for themselves [rather than relying on another's choice]. There must be an individuated person—a distinguishable self—who can decide what they want for themselves. But if there is no individuated person—a distinguishable self—just one among the species, there can be no free choice or personal will. Because who will choose, if, besides the herd mentality, there is nothing there at all?[13]

The Piaseczner now writes his prescription:

> So, gaze into your soul. Are you bringing forth your true real self? Are you an individuated person . . . ? Or are you just a member of the species, the human species? . . . A person must distinguish themselves with the qualitative essence of who they really are: not only must they not remain imprisoned by social rules, cultural customs, or accepted thought without the ability to see beyond them, but they must also have a mind of their own. . . . This means revealing one's own personality and unique sense of self that is within you—that which depicts your very self.[14]

With this understanding, all three phases of internal shepherd leadership may now be seen as both a realistic and yet uplifting spiritual practice. To "distinguish [ourselves] with the qualitative essence of who [we] really are," the Piaseczner's prescription directs us to encounter our soul, the Divine Presence within each of us—and, as Rav Kook mentions, to experience this intuitively, meaning to sense this as Godly awareness.

Similarly, when we advocate on our own behalf, we can introduce our Godly selves into the world 'at all costs'—in our own vulnerability and transparency. Like Moses commanding in the name of the Eternal, as if the Eternal is moving resoundingly through him, "Let My people go!"

[12] *Tzav Ve-Zeiruz* 10.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

(Exod. 5:1), we might imagine ourselves advocating for a vital objective with nearly commensurate clarity, power, and sense of purpose. When we infuse our intuitive awareness into our actions, led by our internal shepherd, we hallow the moment as Godly.

In all, by being faithful to our inner shepherd's leadership, we may model to ourselves and others how to help bring the world to a more redeemed place. Expressing our unique selves and advocating for what we believe the Divine is asking of us, we step forward and try to model it to all. The shepherd within seems to be calling us to spiritual activism, to become agents of sacred change. Part of this spiritual paradigm shift includes recognizing that each of us possesses shepherd leadership, even if this awareness is buried. The shepherd in me hopes to encourage and activate the shepherd in you, as I hope the shepherd in you will do the same for me.

A Twice Told Tale: Uncovering the Intertextuality of Historical Aggadot

Moshe Isaacson is a marketing executive who is passionate about Tanach.

Background

Are there frameworks within which *Hazal* operate when engaging in storytelling, and, if so, can patterns within the rubrics of their tales be identified? Since at least the Geonic period,[1] readers of *midrashim* and talmudic *aggadot* (singular *aggadah*, a tale or lore), broadly and loosely defined as the non-legal material[2] produced by the sages from the first century CE through the close of the Talmud in roughly the sixth century, have answered in the affirmative, noting topoi, rules, and techniques common to many rabbinic *aggadot*.[3]

[1] See *Introduction to the Talmud* attributed to Shmuel ibn Nargillah; Cf. R. Hai Ga'on; *Otzar Ha'Ge'onim*, *Hagigah* p.59; and the *Letter Concerning Aggadot* by R. Avraham ben Rambam.

[2] There is of course much material in the *talmudim*, which while not necessarily halachic in nature, may fall outside the bounds of what is normally considered *aggadah*, such as medical or scientific information. That the Tana'im themselves identified a difference between aggadic and legal material in their discussions can be seen from statements such as in Hagigah 14a:

> Come and hear [the following teaching of a different *baraita*]: One throne is for judgment and one is for righteousness; this is the statement of Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya said to him: Akiva, what are you doing occupying yourself with the study of *aggadah*? [This is not your field of expertise.] Take your words to the topics of plagues and tents. [Meaning, it is preferable that you teach the *halakhot* of the impurity of leprosy and the impurity of the dead, which are within your field of expertise.]

[3] Perhaps the beginnings of a systematic approach to such rules of *aggadah* can be see in *the Beraita of The 32 Midot of Aggadah*, where, for instance, the use of *mashal* (parable) is limited for aggadic purposes to Nevi'im and Ketuvim, with certain explicit exceptions. R. Avraham ben Rambam offers a psychological approach to select *aggadot*, such as seeing dream remediation as arguing for self reflection and repentance. Rabbi Judah Loew (known as Maharal), in his work on *aggadah*, *Be'er Ha-Golah*, argues that supernatural or fantastical tales are to be read metaphorically rather than literally, and are encoding deep spiritual truths. Like others, he notes that many numbers used in *aggadot* are

One such example of a common pattern found in many rabbinic stories can be referred to colloquially as "The good guys are **really** good and the bad guys are **really** bad." While Tanakh often chooses to present characters as nuanced and multi-dimensional, portraying heroes with flaws and villains with some redeeming qualities, in rabbinic discussion those shades of gray are often erased in favor of a stress on seeing heroes in as positive a light as possible, while finding fault in villains over and above what is presented in the text. One such example is the rabbis' expounding villainous Yishmael's "sporting" behavior as being particularly sinful,[4] while exonerating heroic David's tryst with Batsheva and subsequent assassination of Uriah by positing various legal loopholes.[5]

Modern scholarly analysis of *aggadot* was pioneered in Eretz Yisrael in the early twentieth century by scholars such as Joseph Heinemann[6] and Yonah Frankel,[7] who approached *aggadot* through the lens of literature. By applying this aperçu, talmudic tales could be classified by genre (epic, lyric, drama, etc.) and dissected to note commonly employed story structures, such as the "envelope" structure, in which a story begins and ends with similar thematic motifs. The baton for this scholarly work has since been carried by Professor Ofra Meir,[8] Rabbi Dr. Yonatan Feintuch,[9] and Dr. Jeffrey Rubenstein.[10] These scholars have sought to read and contextualize *aggadot* in their cultural milieu, note differences in how the two *Talmudim* approach the same story, and work to uncover historical layers embedded in the text.

A modern approach to aggadic analysis could begin by probing to understand the goal of the pericope. The reader may seek to evaluate if the story is pedagogical in nature; is it telling the audience a life lesson or truism? Is it exegetical? Does it seek to explain a perceived difficulty or lacuna in the Biblical text? Perhaps it is historical, serving to report on an event which occurred in

---

topological, such as the number 60 representing fullness or completion.

[4] *Genesis Rabbah* 53:11, commenting on Genesis 25:9.

[5] *Shabbat* 56a. Cf. Z. H. Chajes, trans. R. Jacob J. Schachter, *The Student's Guide Through the Talmud* (Yashar Books, 2009), 162-171, for copious additional examples.

Another curious pattern to note is how often *aggadot* about certain characters are introduced by a rabbinic figure with the same name as the character, e.g., in *y. Sukkot* 5:1 we find a story about Jonah as stated by "Rabbi Jonah."

[6] See his *The Aggadah and its Development, Hebrew* (Keter 1974).

[7] Yonah Fraenkel, *Iyyunim be-Olamo shel Sippur ha-Aggadah* (Ha-Kibbuz Ha-Meuhad, 1992), *Midrash Ve-Aggadah* (The Open University, 1996), among others.

[8] *Pericopes in the Poetics of Rabbinic Stories*, Hebrew (Sifriat Poalim, 1993).

[9] *Face to Face, Hebrew* (Maggid Books, 2018).

[10] *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition and Culture* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), *Rabbinic Stories* (Paulist Press, 2002), *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), and *The Land of Truth: Talmud Tales, Timeless Teachings* (Jewish Publication Society, 2018).

the life of someone living in the post-biblical period.[11] Once a broad categorization of goals is established, subsequent exploratory questions can be asked. If the *aggadah* is historical, is this history realistic, or does it contain fantastical elements?[12] With a particular *aggadah* being well classified, comparative questions are able to be asked. For example, do all 'truism' *aggadot* contain a tripartite structure? and so on. For our purposes, it is to the domain of realistic, historical *aggadot* that we will seek to apply the tools of intertextual study.

Repeated Tropes

A method of literary analysis which is frequently applied to the study of Tanakh is identifying parallel material[13] – for example, many of the elements in the life of the prophet Samuel have thematic parallels to the life of Moshe.[14] This is known as intertextuality. By attempting to apply this same methodology to stories in the Talmud, we can uncover what seems to be another principle of *aggadah* – that many 'historical *aggadot*' in the Babylonian Talmud intentionally mine or pattern story elements after episodes in Tanakh, often in surprising and subtle ways.[15]

To demonstrate how this would work, consider the following abstraction of a story:

> Traveling on the road together are two people. The first is someone who is admittedly not in God's good graces, and the second is that first person's devoted follower. For convenience, we'll call the first person "Shunned" and the second "Follower." Shunned tells Follower that the latter must desist from following and turn back. Follower insists that the two should go together. Shunned demurs and explains to Follower that his own (Shunned's) situation is hopeless. Shunned offers other reasons to dissuade Follower, pointing out that following is not in Follower's best interest. At some point,

[11] It is possible to further subdivide this category into the realistic tales that the authors present as facts which definitely transpired, and those which contain more fantastical elements, such as the legends of Rabbah bar Bar Hannah. Our current focus will be on the former.

[12] Such as the legends of Rabbah bar Bar Hannah.

[13] On the application of literary analytical techniques to Tanakh, see Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative (Basic Books, 2011);* Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (T & T Clark, 2004); Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* Eisenbraun's, 1994); Yairah Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives* (Fortress Press, 2001); and the epochal work by Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Indiana University Press, 1987), among many others.

[14] See *Midrash Shohar Tov* 1:3; *Yalkut Shimoni*, Yirmiyahu 292. For additional parallels see Yehuda Kil, *Da'at Mikra*, I Samuel, introduction. For more on the idea of stories in Nakh as patterned after those in the Humash see Judy Klitsner, *Subversive Sequels in the Bible* (Maggid, 2019). The Christian bible is of course replete with examples of stories and motifs based on the Pentateuch.

[15] While this phenomenon is known as intertextuality, this particular application has, to my knowledge, not been identified previously. Cf. Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash,* (Indiana Press, 1990).

> Shunned assumes a new name. As our story progresses, we discover that Follower ensures that hope for Shunned is not completely lost.

What story is this?

If your answer is the story of Ruth following her mother-in-law Naomi who is returning from Moab to Israel, you would be correct. If your answer is the story of Rabbi Meir following his wayward teacher Elisha ben Abuya,[16] better known as Aheir, you would also be correct.

> The Sages taught: There was once an incident involving Aheir, who was riding on a horse on Shabbat, and Rabbi Meir was walking behind him to learn Torah from him. [Aheir] said to him: Meir, turn back, for I have already estimated according to the steps of my horse that the Shabbat boundary ends here. [Rabbi Meir] said to him: You, too, return back [i.e., to the correct path]. He said to him: But have I not already told you that I have already heard from behind the curtain: "'Return, rebellious children,' apart from Aheir?"[17]

When *Hazal* describe an assumed historical event, such as the tête-à-tête between Aheir and his student Rabbi Meir, it seems that they are choosing to utilize thematic elements from the story of Naomi and Ruth, without overtly gesturing towards the Biblical source material.[18]

Similar examples of stories in the Talmud containing thematic elements that are directly parallel to stories in Tanakh abound. Perhaps the most straightforward of these is the story of the gates of Nikanor as containing elements 'borrowed' from the tale of the prophet Jonah in *Terei Asar*. In his eponymous book, the prophet Jonah is traveling on a ship which is hit by a storm. It becomes clear that, to survive the storm, something needs to be cast overboard. In desperation to calm the storm, Jonah volunteers to be thrown into the sea. After the prophet is tossed to the waters, a creature swallows him, and the boat, with its passengers, is able to make it to safety. Eventually the ocean creature regurgitates the castaway. who is then able to arrive at the

[16] Y. *Hagigah* 2:1, b. *Hagigah* 15a-b.

[17] Ibid. The Gemara there discusses how Elisha ben Abuya's name was changed to Aheir. Cf. Devora Steinmetz, "Interpretation and Enactment: The Yerushalmi Story of Elisha ben Abuyah and the Book of Ruth," *AJS Review* Vol. 40, No. 2 (November 2016).

[18] It is true that further on in the Yerushalmi (ibid.) there is an aggadic *derash* on Ruth 3:13; however, there Rabbi Meir seems to equate himself with Boaz, not Ruth.

intended destination.

When contrasting this account with the tale in *Yoma* 38aof a man named Nikanor, many of the same thematic elements are discernable.

> When Nikanor went to bring doors [for the *Beit ha-Mikdash*] from Alexandria in Egypt, on his return trip a wave arose from the sea to sink his ship. They took one door and threw it into the sea, but the sea did not rest from its storm. They wanted to throw in the other, but Nikanor stood and embraced it, saying, 'Throw me in with it!' The sea immediately calmed, but Nikanor was pained by the loss of the other [door]. When he reached the port in Akko,[19] the door was floating and emerging from beneath the walls of the boat. Some say a creature swallowed it and spat it out onto land.[20]

Shared elements include the storm-tossed ship, throwing someone overboard to enable those who remain on the ship to survive, the calming of the waters once something is thrown into them, and the swallowing and disgorging by a sea creature of that which was cast overboard, allowing the ship to reach its intended destination.

In this aggadic tale, absent an overt reference to Jonah, the same principle of mining and embedding material from Tanakh into historical *aggadot* appears to be at work.

Ubiquitous Intertextuality

From a limited survey of the Bavli, this literary pattern can be detected in dozens of *aggadot*.

For example, the historical *aggadah* in *Sanhedrin* 39a appears to be an amalgam of the story of Shechem, Hamor, and Dina's brothers (Genesis 34:8-18), along with the story of Daniel, the king's advisors, and the lions (Daniel 6:12-25). In Genesis, Hamor proposes uniting his people with the Jewish clan. He is met with a requirement that all of his males be circumcised. In Daniel, the king directs Daniel the Jew to be thrown to the lions, where he is miraculously spared. In turn, his enemies are cast into the den and devoured by those same lions. All of these elements are found in the Bavli's story.

> The emperor said to Rabbi Tanḥum: Come, let us all be one people.[21] Rabbi Tanḥum said: Very well. But we, who are circumcised, cannot become uncircumcised as you are; you all circumcise yourselves and become like us.[22] The emperor said to Rabbi Tanḥum: In terms of the logic of your statement, you are

[19] According to some *girsa'ot* the port was Yaffo.

[20] All translations from Sefaria.org.

[21] Cf. Genesis 34:16 states, "Let us all be one people."

[22] Ibid. 15-16.

> saying well, but anyone who bests the king in a debate is thrown to the enclosure of wild animals.[23] They threw him [in]to the enclosure but the animals did not eat him [as God protected him].[24] A certain heretic said to the emperor: This incident, that they did not eat him, happened because they are not hungry. They then threw the heretic into the enclosure, and the animals ate him.[25]

Another story, found in *Bava Kamma* 117a, details an incident wherein Rav Kahana kills someone who is threatening a Jew. This puts him at risk of being killed by the government, so that he must flee the land. The ensuing story contains ample symbolism around the number seven – including seven years, seven rows, and seven pillows. Many aspects of this tale are reminiscent of Exodus 2:11-16, where Moshe, who kills an Egyptian acting threateningly towards a Jew, must, at the risk of his life, flee Egypt to the land of Midian. There Moshe meets Yitro – a man who has seven names[26] and seven daughters.[27]

Finally, the story of Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38) contains aspects which seem to be integrated into the famous incident of Rabbi Hiyya and his wife (*Kiddushin* 81b). In the Humash, Tamar tricks Judah into believing she is a prostitute; he offers her collateral in lieu of payment and they sleep together. Later, when she is found to be with child, she is in danger of being burned alive, and uses the collateral to prove her innocence.

Like the biblical Tamar, Rabbi Hiyya's wife, perhaps for righteous reasons, such as to rekindle their relationship or receive the conjugal rights she is due, tricks her husband into believing she is a prostitute. He offers her a payment, and they sleep together. Thinking he is guilty of sin, Rabbi Hiyya seeks to place himself in a fiery oven. In order for his wife to prove the ruse was innocent, she produces signs:

> Rabbi Hiyya bar Ashi was accustomed to say, whenever he would fall on his face in prayer: May the Merciful One save us from the evil inclination. One day his wife heard him. She said: After all, it has been several years since he has withdrawn from me. For what reason does he say this?
>
> One day, while he was studying in his garden, she adorned herself and repeatedly walked past him.

[23] Cf. Daniel 6:13.

[24] Ibid. 23.

[25] Ibid. 25.

[26] *Exodus Rabbah* 27:7; *Mekhilta,* Yitro, Amalek 1; *Tanhuma*, Shemot 11. Rashi (Exodus 18:1) lists them as Re'u'el, Yeter, Yitro, Hovav, Hever, Keini, and Puti'el.

[27] Exodus 2:16.

> He said: Who are you? She said: I am Haruta, a well-known prostitute, returning from my day at work. He propositioned her. She said to him: Give me that pomegranate from the top of the tree as payment. He leapt up, went, and brought it to her, [and they engaged in intercourse].
>
> When he came home, his wife was lighting a fire in the oven. He went and sat inside it. She said to him: What is this? He said to her: Such and such an incident occurred. She said to him: It was I. He paid no attention to her, until she gave him signs. He said to her: I, in any event, intended to transgress. [The Gemara relates:] All the days of that righteous man he would fast for the transgression he intended to commit, until he died by that death.

Again, salient and critical elements of this historical tale, including the ruse of a righteous woman posing as a prostitute and her revelation of this through personal objects, seem to replicate or draw upon many key story points from the biblical story of Tamar and Judah.

Once this framework is established, variations on the theme can be employed in a number of creative ways, such as inverting the outcome of the talmudic story in contrast to the biblical story, or positioning the trope within the rabbinic tale as exceeding the source material.

A brief example of the "exceed" story-type assumes an awareness that, in Tanakh, non-Jewish kings expect their wise court Jews to be able to interpret dreams. This is true of both Joseph and Daniel.[28] This biblical pattern is exceeded, though nowhere mentioned, when King Shapur seeks to have the first generation Amora, Shmuel, not simply interpret a previous dream, but foretell what dream the king will have in the future.

> King Shapur of Persia said to Shmuel: You Jews say that you are extremely wise. If that is so, tell me what I will see in my dream. Shmuel said to him: You will see the Romans come and take you into captivity and force you to grind date pits in mills of gold. He thought the entire day about the

[28] The many thematic shared elements of the Joseph story which resurface in the story of Daniel have long been noted by *midrashim* and scholars alike. See the introduction to *Da'at Mikra* on Esther (Mosad HaRav Kook, 1990), as well as Rav Yo'el Kahn, *Tzafnat Mordechai* (Targum, 1995)..
Cf. *Esther Rabbah* 7:7; *Midrash Abba Gurion* 11b; *Midrash Panim Aheirot* B, 64; *Yalkut Shimoni,* remazim 1053-59.

Cf. Sandra Berg, *The Book of Esther* (Scholars Press, 1979), 124-137, and Aaron Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 79-82, with footnotes, supra note 13.

> images described to him by Shmuel, and that night he saw it in his dream.[29]

In such an example, the talmudic authors play with a trope found in Tanakh; but rather than merely utilizing the material, the *aggadah* assumes a familiarity with the original story such that the new story can be implicitly contrasted by either taking the conclusion in the opposite direction from the original or, as in this case, positing an outcome that is greater than, or exceeds in some way, its antecedent biblical referent.

In Continuation

It is my hope that this essay has identified an area ripe for investigation. There do indeed appear to be storytelling frameworks which can be identified in several of the Bavli's historical *aggadot*. *Hazal* plumbed the rich tapestry of Tanakh, and uncovered timeless patterns which they refashioned and wove into their talmudic tales in subtle and surprising ways. I look forward to detailing in the future more of the several dozen intertextual examples I have been able to uncover. More research is required to understand the extent of this approach, such as when, and perhaps why, it is employed, what differences there may be between tanna'itic *midrashim*, [30] stories found in the Mishnah, those in the Talmud of the Land of Israel, the Bavli, and much more. My hope is that this sketch of the basic framework will pique the interest of others, and I welcome further dialog on this topic.[31]

God in the Cave

Avi Killip is the Executive Vice President at Hadar and a graduate of Hebrew College Rabbinical School.

Rashbi found God
in the lonely dark
by speaking words of Torah
in his sanctuary cave.

Hiding from the Romans
like a refugee pilgrim
while his wife mourned
absent husband and son

who'd fled for their lives
and found spaciousness
for study without bounds,
endless echoes bouncing

[29] *Berakhot* 56a

[30] I note, as more of a curiosity than anything else, that the story of Rabbi Akiva's impoverished wife selling the locks of her hair (*Nedarim* 50a, *Ketubot* 62b) seems to have a parallel in the non-canonical (Christian?) Testament of Job, wherein the eponymous Job's wife sells her hair to the Satan to avoid starvation. This parallel was noted by Rabbi Levi (Louis) Ginzberg in his *Legends of the Jews*, Book V, 387, n. 29.

[31] With thanks to Rabbi Aryeh Klapper and Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Zuckier for their helpful feedback, and to Rabbanit Dr. Tamar Ron Marvin for improving this essay immeasurably.

off walls while the miraculous
carob tree and spring
nourished forsaken bodies
buried to their necks

(except in prayer
when they'd don their shirts
and bow their heads
to a divine protector).

Twelve years safe
in their cocoon of learning
severed from the mess
of the outside world.

Like hungry birds
they open wide for wisdom
and spirit and grasp it
sparks, flying between

electric insights, glow
with divine radiant splendor.
Hidden secrets revealed
only to these, only here.

Of course, they hallucinate
divine chariot of Elijah
come to set them free
and so they leave with

fire-eyes that burn.
Farmer, tractor, plow
go up in smoke, ash,
until God can't abide

so much destruction
and pain. In fanatic chase
of the world to come
he has lost this one.

And now he must
return to the cave
this time not for his
safety but for ours.