Is Midrash Exegesis?

Joseph Dan

I
Midrash is second only to the halakhah as a central pillar on which Jewish culture is based. The library of midrashic literature, partly included in the talmud and mostly presented in independent collections, is the main treasury of Jewish thought, ethics, world views, history and historiosophy, which Judaism received from Antiquity. Midrashic creativity never stopped throughout the Middle Ages, modern times and contemporary Jewish cultures in all countries. Hasidim and Mitnagdim, Reformed and Orthodox - all the various streams of Jewish religious thought use the midrash extensively.¹ Tens of thousands of volumes of midrashic speculations have been printed, and countless manuscripts of such works can be found in libraries. Classical midrashic literature was studied intensively by scholars; several such studies will be discussed in this paper. Medieval and modern midrashic creativity, however, is still a marginal discipline in Jewish studies, despite the centrality of this mode of expression in these periods.² It is the purpose of this essay to raise some basic problems concerning the nature of midrash and its place in characterizing Jewish religious thought.

There are no preliminary requirements for a Jew to present a midrash.

---

1 The term midrash can be used in several ways and convey different meanings. In this essay I use it to denote the presentation of an idea or concept as being derived from one or several biblical verses. Often this midrash includes another source of authority - the name of one or more Sages who endow the concept presented with an aura of traditional lore.

2 See J. Dan, Sifrut ha-Musar ve-ha-Derush, Jerusalem 1974. The most prominent contemporary scholar who made medieval midrash the main subject of his studies is Marc Saperstein. See his books: Jewish Preaching, 1200-1400: An Anthology, New Haven 1989; Your Voice Like a Ram's Horn: Themes and Texts in Traditional Jewish Preaching, Cincinnati 1995. Jacob Elbaum has recently published a collection of rabbinic discussions about the nature of the midrash, mainly in the Middle Ages, Lehavin Divrei Ḥakhamim, Jerusalem 2000.
Halakhic work requires intensive study of halakhic methodology and traditional sources over a long period of time. Midrashic creativity is completely open; everybody, young and old, erudite or ignorant, can preach a midrashic sermon or write a midrashic treatise on a portion of the Torah or a traditional text. The midrash is wide open to every ideology. It was used by Aristotelian philosophers as well as by kabbalists from all schools of that tradition. Hasidim and Mitnagdim may disagree on almost every aspect of Jewish thought and practice, but both camps used midrash as the main literary genre to express their worldviews. Furthermore, midrash, unlike the halakhah, is not bound by tradition or precedent. A biblical verse is eternally open to more and more midrashic treatments. The fact that there are hundreds of traditional treatments to a verse, some of them by the most respected and highly revered ancient Sages, is no hindrance for a contemporary preacher to introduce a new, different one, without offering any apology to his predecessors. This is an intensely democratic mode of expression; one may even say that it borders on anarchy.

Halakhic discussion demands a definite conclusion, a pronouncement that in such and such a case the correct way is this or that. There is nothing definite or conclusive about a midrash. The darshan who presents it, and the reader or listener who accepts it, are equally aware that many different midrashic treatments of the same verse have been presented in the past, and they know that more and more will be said or written in the future. No midrash is the 'last word', the final conclusion. It is only a davar aher, one more suggestion in an infinite chain of expounding the never-exhausted treasure of divine wisdom incorporated in the divinely-inspired scriptures and ancient texts. The darshan is not required to express loyalty to any past or present structure or ideology. He may be aware that some statements will be better received than others by the people he is addressing, but the genre itself does not pose any boundaries or pre-conditions that limit his freedom of expression.

II

The term 'midrash' has never been successfully translated into another language, or received a definition in an encyclopedia or dictionary.
Is Midrash Exegesis?

Translations usually include terms such as exegesis, commentary, interpretation and/or hermeneutics. These designations are misleading, because the concept of exegesis or any other similar term indicates an attempt to approach the original meaning of the interpreted text, and thus convey the idea that text has a 'true' meaning that the writer is engaged in discovering. The midrash is the opposite of this: the very use of the midrashic method indicates that this verse or text has infinite meanings, none of which is more 'true' or closer to the 'original' meaning. Exegesis represents the quest for the final, unchangeable message of the interpreted text, while the midrash postulates that no such final elucidation is possible. The exegete wishes to drive directly, like an arrow, to the heart of the verse. The darshanim walk eternally in circles around the verse, presenting more and more glimpses of its meaning, but never get to its core. There is no midrash which cannot be followed by a davar aher - another midrash. There is no such concept, as far as I know, in any other religion in the treatment of its sacred texts. Small wonder, therefore, that no satisfactory translation of the term has been achieved: there is no counterpart to this phenomenon in other cultures and languages from which such a term can be derived.

The same may be said about definitions of the term midrash in text-books, dictionaries and encyclopedias. There is hardly a description or definition of midrash which does not include one or another of the terms indicating exegesis. The Kna‘ani Hebrew Dictionary, for instance, defines a midrashic collection as 'books of aggadah and parables that deal with exegesis of biblical verses', that is, midrash is exegesis that employs parables. Two generations earlier, the Ben-Yehuda Dictionary

---

3 Exegesis does not mean that a text has only one true meaning or message. Various systems have been presented, especially in Christianity, of several layers of meaning, indicating that a verse has several true messages, on the allegorical, anagogical etc. layers. Yet this is a claim that a verse has a finite number of meanings, and one can discover the definite, final meaning. Similar formulations are found in Jewish exegetical literature. This is completely different from the midrash, which is open to infinite different treatments.

4 My thanks are due to Ms. Naama Ben Shahar, my research assistant in the Shalem Institute in Jerusalem, who assisted me in this and numerous other aspects of the preparation of this work. Many of her remarks and observations are incorporated in this article.
stated: 'Midrash is commentary of any book or matter', and gives the European counterparts: interpretation, *Auslegung*. In a most illuminating manner, the Even-Shoshan Dictionary explains: 'A part of the Oral Torah, which explains the words of the Torah not in the literal way (*peshat*), but in the way of *derashah*, aggadah and parable'. This tautological presentation is repeated in dozens of other examples: Midrash is exegesis, but not *peshat*, in the form of midrash.⁵ Daniel Boyarin defines midrash as a type of Jewish exegesis, essentially saying that midrash is the exegesis found in the books of midrash.⁶ All these and scores of other writers are aware of the basic problem: There is nothing in any language (including modern Hebrew) which can explain midrash, except by the use of the term 'interpretation', or one of its numerous equivalents; yet the midrash, they are aware, is not a commentary. What then is it? The only thing which can be said is that it is not literal interpretation, *peshat* - a negative statement. What is it in positive terms? Well, it is a unique Jewish phenomenon.

In the last two decades of the twentieth century there has been a surge of interest in the midrash and its meaning, which is characterized by scholars who dared present and discuss fundamental questions concerning texts and hermeneutics in the context of new schools of thought in Europe and the United States. Among the many scholars who took part in this discussion, a prominent place belongs to Susan Handelman for her book, *The Slayers of Moses*.⁷ Handelman analyzed on the one hand modern methodologies of literary criticism, and on

---

⁵ Compare the attempt by Joseph Heinemann to avoid the pitfalls in the opening of his Hebrew work, *Ha-Derashot be-Zibbur bi-Tequfat ha-Talmud*, Jerusalem 1971. His definition emphasized drawing new meanings from the infinite treasury of scriptures in order to respond to the demands of new realities and needs. Yet even he did not present an alternative to the description of interpretation that is not *peshat*.


Is Midrash Exegesis?

the other, traditional Christian methods of exegesis. She found the midrash much closer to the former than to the latter. In the same year in which Handelman's book was published, a conference took place at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, in cooperation with Yale University, dedicated to the study of the relationship between midrash and literary criticism; the proceedings of this conference serve as an important milestone in the development of this discussion. At the background of this renewed interest in the midrash, especially at Yale, was the impact of Derrida's deconstructionist approach on the study of literary and philosophical texts. It was recognized that this school of thought represented a phenomenon which shares some common characteristics with the traditional Jewish midrash.

In the following decade, several book-length studies and numerous articles were published in the United States dealing with the basic characteristics of the midrash. Daniel Boyarin raised much interest and polemics when he published his collected articles, *Intertextuality and the Reading of the Midrash*. A particular, yet important, aspect of the problem was studied by David Stern in his *Parables in Midrash*. James Kugel authored several books and articles dealing with the theoretical problems, as well as with the analysis of details in the midrashic tradition. Michael Fishbane contributed to this debate a

---

9 As far as I know, this wave of discourse around the midrash did not evoke similar interest neither in Israel nor in Europe, where the study of the midrash continued in the traditional manner, oblivious of the new concepts and questions presented by the American scholars. Thus, for instance, the major encyclopedic work on the midrash by Yonah Frenkel, *Darkhei ha-Aggadah veha-Midrash*, which was intended to raise public interest in the midrashic tradition in the ambitious Yad le-Talmud project, published in two large volumes in Givatayim 1991, includes a detailed bibliography that does not mention even one of the studies published in the United States in the 1980's.
10 See above, note 6.
12 In *Midrash and Literature* (above, note 8), Kugel published 'Two Introductions to the Midrash' (pp. 77-103), which touched off a debate during the following years. He put his theories into practice in his *Potiphar's House: the Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts*, New York 1990, dealing with the midrashic narratives concerning the life of Joseph in Egypt (compare M. Niehoff, *The Figure of
Joseph Dan

wide view of the development of the midrash within the biblical literature, as well as a profound analysis of talmudic-midrashic creativity. Several monographs on midrashic texts also contributed to this discourse, such as Steven Fraade's study of the midrash on Deutronomy. In addition to these studies, it seems that the translation into English (and later into Hebrew) of Emmanuel Levinas's work on talmudic analysis gave this discourse another philosophical dimension.

III

The main achievement of this decade-long upsurge in the theoretical study of the midrashic phenomenon was the very problematization of the subject. This is not the place to review the particular arguments, theses and theories which were presented; a detailed study of this issue would be most helpful and instructive. These works differ from classical study of the midrash in that they did not treat the subject as if it were well-known and well-understood. It seems that in the last few years interest in this subject, by the scholars mentioned here and by others, has lost some of its sense of urgency, and the rate of publications in this field has slowed down. While basic problems in the midrash

---

14 S. D. Fraade, From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and Its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifre to Deutronomy, Albany 1991.
15 Levinas was one of Derrida's teachers; therefore his works were incorporated into the post modernism movement. See his Nine Talmudic Readings, A. Aronowitz trans., Bloomington 1990.
16 A collection of studies published near the end of this surge of scholarly activity indicates that this may be the case. See M. L. Raphael ed., Agendas for the Study of Midrash in the Twenty-first Century, Williamsburg 1999. This collection includes an important article by Steven Fraade on the exegetical works discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls and their relationship to the midrash, and one by Marc Bregman on the visual elements in the midrash. There is also a study by David Halperin on Origenes and the midrash Seder Eliyahu. The other articles deal with scattered problems. If this is the agenda for the new millennium, it is
Is Midrash Exegesis?

were reviewed with a fresh critical approach, some others, mainly those of the conception of language in the midrash and its relationship to the Christian notion of exegesis, have not been sufficiently addressed.

The classical study of the midrash has been characterized either by deep ideological motivation, or, alternatively, by a matter-of-fact approach which did not postulate any profound problems involved in its study. To the first group belong first and foremost the monumental works by Zunz on the one hand and by Isaac Heinemann on the other. The second approach is represented by the studies of E. E. Urbach and Jacob Neusner. These works serve as relevant and meaningful background to contemporary discourse.

Zunz’s detailed study of the history of the midrash made no secret whatsoever of its contemporary political purpose. Zunz viewed the study of Judaism as a vehicle in the struggle of German Jewry for the achievement of political emancipation. In his Introduction to this book he states clearly that demonstrating the richness and depth of Jewish traditional culture and the positive human values it upholds are necessary for earning the respect of the non-Jewish European world towards the Jews residing in its midst. His work, which is most remarkable in its erudition and keen perception of the history, development and inter-relationship of the various collections of the midrash, is not presented as contributing directly to contemporary spiritual needs. In a letter discussed by Yonah Frenkel, Zunz seems to apologize indirectly for the midrash, stating that every religious culture has in its history antiquated, nonsensical works. Yet he insists that scholarly research is necessary for the achievement of emancipation, and that the struggle should be carried out also in the realm of scientific inquiry.

One of the few views which unite old and new students of the midrash in every country, a view which I wholeheartedly share, is the admiration for Isaac Heinemann’s study, *Darkhei ha-Aggadah*, published in 1950, and which for half a century has served scholars

---


Joseph Dan

and students as a guide to the nature and meaning of the midrash. This is undoubtedly a most profound, inspired and inspiring work, which introduced key conceptions and provided innovative terminology to the understanding of this field. Heinemann dedicated much of his work to the discussion of the relationship between the midrash and ancient Hellenistic culture as well as other religious contexts. In the beginning of the first chapter, entitled 'The Problem and the Ways of Its Solution', he identified three layers in talmudic-midrashic literature: the first is the interpretation of Scriptures on the literal level (peshat), a reasonable, sensible commentary which he equates with the work of modern scholarly commentators. The second layer is the 'completely free aggadah', the expression of literary creativity which is completely free, and does not differ, from a methodological point of view, from other expressions of popular art, that is, folktales; it should be understood in the same way art is analyzed all over the world. To these two layers a third one is added, which, according to Heinemann, is the one that characterizes this literature and gave it its name, that is, midrash proper. This layer is not 'free' because it is deeply connected with and related to the biblical verse. It is not philological exegesis because it departs from the literal meaning of the verses, and therefore also from scholarly-scientific study. It is different, Heinemann states, both in detail and in its character and purpose from all the methodologies we are familiar with. It is a non-philological philology. Therefore, he says, we should regard the 'facts' presented by the midrash as 'non-historical history' because in spite of its assuming the attire of factual description, it strays away from the descriptions found in scholarly documents.

In essence, Heinemann accepts the basic dictionary definition of the midrash presented above: it is an exegesis, but a particular kind of exegesis, that is, midrashic exegesis. The philology of the midrash is non-philological, history in the midrash is non-historical. In the detailed chapters which follow he describes, using numerous examples, the creative midrashic philology and creative midrashic history. He argues that midrashic history nevertheless should be described as history even though it is not historical, and midrashic philology should be regarded

---

Is Midrash Exegesis?

as philology even though it is not philological. Throughout the work Heinemann insists on the use of the European terminology of exegesis, despite his awareness of the deep differences between the Jewish and the non-Jewish phenomena designated by this terminology. He insists on the legitimacy of the midrash as a European exegetical phenomenon, even though it has specific characteristics in which it is radically different from parallels in other cultures. His ambition, clearly, is to integrate the midrash into the general conception of exegesis, history and philology, without surrendering its distinct characteristics. One may say that Heinemann seeks legitimacy for the midrash in European methodological conceptions without giving up its uniqueness. One suspects that the conclusion that the midrash is a unique Jewish concept which cannot be grouped among European exegetical phenomena would be dismissed by Heinemann because legitimacy is derived from the integration of Jewish phenomena into the general European culture. To this end he dedicated the intricate, profound discussions and innovative terminology which make up his work.

Jacob Neusner is a bitter critic of the Jerusalem school of Talmud studies, and especially of its central figure, Ephraim Elimelech Urbach. The latter's classic work, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, was a target of several of Neusner's critical remarks. Neusner's studies, to put it mildly, were not welcomed by Urbach and other Jerusalem scholars. Their works on the midrash differ from each other in almost every aspect. Yet in one respect they seem to be very close; both of them realized the difficulties in defining and presenting the midrash in non-Hebrew terms, though they did not doubt that they understood the phenomenon, even when they did not find it very easy to explain. It may be said that they, unlike the American scholars of the 1980's and 1990's, did not face any basic problems in the understanding of the

---

20 Jerusalem 1960.
21 Neusner once described Urbach's great work as 'an anthology masquerading as scholarship'.
22 Neusner's main works on the midrash include *The Midrash: An Introduction*, Northvale, N.J. 1990; *What is Midrash*, Philadelphia 1987. He has also published numerous volumes of translations and analyses.
midrash. This attitude also prevails in Yonah Frenkel's monumental work.  

IV

A definition of a phenomenon demands that a boundary be established which separates what is inside that definition and what is outside it. Concerning the midrash, if we postulate the requirement of attachment to a portion of the text and exclude literal commentary ('philology', according to Heinemann, peshat in traditional terminology), we have some clear boundaries, but nothing is being said about the nature of midrash itself. Pursuing further clarification, we face the obvious question: What is not a midrash? What is a bad, erroneous, heretical midrash? What is an exaggerated, unacceptable midrash? How can a darshan step out of the traditional, legitimate confines of the midrash? If midrash is conceived of as some kind of exegesis or commentary, there must be boundaries of 'right' and 'wrong', because exegesis demands a differentiation between correct, true exegesis (that which brings us closer to the original meaning of the text) and incorrect one (which draws us away from the original message). Has one ever seen a wrong, illegitimate, heretical midrash?

Ancient tradition has established lists of the 'ways by which the Torah is expounded' (nidreshet); the number of these ways, or methods, extends from thirteen to thirty-two, and they are often used, sometimes strictly, in connecting the halakhah to biblical verses. The question is, do we find examples in the vast treasure of midrashic statements in which a midrash is criticized for not following these 'ways', and thus declared wrong and illegitimate? This question has been almost completely ignored by scholarship on the midrash, probably because

---

23 See above, note 9.
24 Talmudic tradition names thirteen such middot, and the later work, Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer, presents thirty-two. The subject has been studied extensively and one meaningful example should be mentioned here. I. F. Baer attempted in his book Yisrael ba-Amim (Jerusalem 1955; see especially p. 101), to identify these middot with Greek philosophical conceptions of logic. It was part of an extensive series of studies which tried to discover basic elements of Jewish thought in Greek philosophy.
there are hardly any examples of a midrash being designated erroneous. I found only one brief treatment of this problem in recent scholarly discussions, in a study by Michael Fishbane. The author discusses the question whether there are boundaries to what is permitted in a midrashic statement. He adduces three examples of such limits. One is the limitation of the understanding of the reader, which Fishbane finds in Rabbi Akiba's response to Rabbi Ishmael's question concerning the meaning of the article 'et' (and) in the first verse of Genesis. In his response, Rabbi Akibah expounds the verse in Deut. 32:47, *For this [the Torah] is not an empty thing for you*, to mean that if it is 'empty' - it is empty for you, not in itself. This does not set limits to the midrash. The possibilities are infinite, but some of them cannot be ascertained by people. The preacher and his listeners may have boundaries though the verse itself contains limitless possibilities. In a similar manner, the third example mentioned by Fishbane relates to the recipients rather than to the source. The presence of sin and sinners makes the midrash impossible to accept, like the stone Tablets which became heavy in the presence of sin and fell from Moses's hands.

The second example offered by Fishbane is the reprimand voiced by Rabbi Akibah, who said 'it is enough' when Rabbi Papaias presented a radical (according to Fishbane, Gnostic) interpretation. There are several parallel statements, which, I believe, are most instructive for this subject. 'That's enough' is not a methodological or theological criticism. It is an expression by one great *darshan* to another, indicating in an intuitive way that a line has been crossed and what has been said is not legitimate. Yet even a master like Rabbi Akibah cannot formulate this in systematic terms. He does not castigate Rabbi Papaias for being in error, or for proffering a wrong idea, or for upholding a heretical

26 Bereshit Rabba 1: 14, and see the notes by Theodore a.l.
view. He also does not criticize his methodology by pointing out that such an understanding of the verse is impossible or illegitimate. He just says: 'That's enough'. This means that not only contemporary scholars fail to point out the boundaries of the midrash; even the great founding father of the discipline could not do so. There are intuitive limitations, which are dependent on the particular cultural circumstances of the time and place the midrash is formulated.28

It seems that we are faced with the inevitable conclusion that Jewish tradition did not create any criteria to distinguish between various midrashim as far as veracity and legitimacy is concerned. Some may be more inspired, more instructive, more aesthetically appealing than others, but the concepts of 'right' and 'wrong', 'true' and 'false' cannot be applied to them. If so, what, indeed is not a midrash?

The answer I suggest to this question is: Everything which is exegetical - any commentary, interpretation, explanation or hermeneutical analysis - is not a midrash. A quest for the 'true', 'original', 'correct', 'authentic' meaning of a verse cannot be a midrash, because it demands employing the critical yardsticks of right and wrong, true and false. All the terms relating to the concept of exegesis necessarily postulate the existence, even if in a hidden form, of a core meaning that is more correct, more truthful than other meanings. This is impossible in the context of the midrash because hundreds of different midrashim cannot be structured hierarchically as 'closer' or 'farther' from the 'truth'. The Jewish concept of Scripture, which postulates the presence of an infinite number of divine truths inherent in divinely inspired linguistic statements, renders it impossible to designate one interpretation as truer than another. The Torah is an expression of infinite divine wisdom, and its various aspects cannot be judged by humans as being superior or inferior to the others.29

28 Thus we have collections of midreshei peliah, 'strange midrashim', which are regarded as mysterious and somewhat suspect of illegitimacy, but no ideological or methodological reason is given for their marginalization.
29 An important result of this authentic Jewish attitude is the fate of kabbalistic ideas in Judaism. Many kabbalistic concepts can be regarded as heretical from a
Is Midrash Exegesis?

A few notes about the nature of Christian exegesis may be helpful in understanding the vast difference between exegesis and midrash. Early Christianity was faced with two paramount problems that demanded intensive exegetical effort. One was the unacceptable fact that the Hebrew Bible, given to humanity by God, does not mention in any literal way the enormous events of the emergence of Christianity - the miraculous birth of God's only son, his message and his crucifixion and resurrection. How can it be that the Old Testament, three times the length of the New Testament, does not deal with God's son, the Virgin Birth, the Passion, the Trinity and Redemption? It is inconceivable for God to write or inspire twenty-four books without relating about his Son. Obviously, it is not the holy text which is deficient but the readers. 

A way must be found to read the early Scriptures and discover in them the true divine message, the one relating to the mission of Christ and all the events that surround his life, death and resurrection. An extended effort of exegesis followed, continued for nearly two millennia, in which it was demonstrated that every tiny detail in the story and doctrine of Christianity is presented numerous times in the Old Testament. The correct way to read the Old Testament was thus established: almost every verse in the Hebrew Bible contains a hidden Christological message. In time, this layer of meaning was no longer regarded as the covert but as the overt, almost literal meaning of the

---

30 The process is already present in the Gospels themselves, where words and deeds of Jesus are often linked to biblical verses. Thus Christ himself is the first exegete, who revealed the one true meaning of the ancient verses by his behavior and his message.
verse, which is deliberately and stubbornly denied by the blind Synagoga.

In this context exegesis is inescapably connected with the concepts of right and wrong, true and false. Any interpretation of a biblical text that establishes a Christian narrative or doctrine is profoundly true, while one which ignores it is manifestly false and heretical. Exegesis is integrally related to the core of religious faith. Exegesis is the quest for the great, eternal truth, and every exegetical statement is either closer or further from divine truth. The variety and multiplicity of meanings that characterize the midrash cannot be accepted in this context.

A second major exegetical problem confronted the early (and modern) Christians: The relationship between the four Gospels, the four similar yet different narratives that relate the basic story of Christianity. There are numerous contradictions and differences between the texts (especially the three synoptic gospels), which may lead a skeptic to question the veracity of these testimonies traced to Jesus. The Christian exegetes were faced with the enormous task of upholding the accuracy of every detail in the gospels, which were written by saints and were divinely inspired; at the same time they had to mold the contradicting facts and differences of language into a coherent unified narrative. They were very successful, and the Christian reader of these texts feels that he has a proper explanation for every conflicting detail. This great endeavor too posited an integral connection between exegesis and the discovery of divine truth. In such a context no freedom can be allowed for a variety of possibilities and hypotheses. What happened to Jesus and the text of his epigrams and sermons must be conveyed precisely and unambiguously. The exegetical endeavor is one of distinguishing between right and wrong, concepts which uphold the unified true narrative being victorious over the multiplicity of other possibilities. Nothing can be farther from the world of midrash.

Ancient Sages, as well as medieval and modern preachers, did not

---

31 A minor Jewish example is that of the versions zakhor and shamor concerning the Sabbath in the text of the Ten Commandments. Jewish tradition solved the problem by stating that both were said in the same utterance. See B. Rosh ha-Shanah 27a.
Is Midrash Exegesis?

hesitate to re-tell the stories about the patriachs, for instance, in different and contradictory ways. The Jewish preacher was not seeking the one ultimate truth, but enjoyed the anarchic variety which the world of midrash allowed him.

The Christian concept of exegesis, which is the source of all European terminology concerning the treatment of texts, is thus deeply connected with the endeavor to differentiate between right and wrong, and to seek the original, completely true text expressing the one supreme divine meaning. The midrash cannot be a expression of such a quest, because the divine word, which represents infinite divine wisdom, contains infinite possible meanings. Because of this I find it appropriate to suggest that when midrash is discussed, the terminology of exegesis should be excluded.

VI

It is possible to go even further and use the disparity between midrash and exegesis as a vehicle for the elucidation of the more profound and far-reaching difference between the Jewish-midrashic concept of language and the Christian one, which has a meaningful impact on our treatment of texts. One of the most unique and important characteristics of Christianity, which sets it apart from every other faith, is its reliance on Scriptures in translation. The New Testament contains only six words as uttered by Christ, which are presented in the Gospels in a transliterated form. All the rest - the epigrams, the stories, and even the Sermon on the Mount - originated in a human rendering into Greek. A translation, as we all know, can convey only part of the

32 The often quoted example is that of Abraham's daughter, whose name was Bakol, as derived from the verse in Genesis 24:1. The verse states that God blessed Abraham 'in everything' (bakol); how can that be if he did not have a daughter? He must have had a daughter, and her name was 'in everything'. But if the verse relates the existence of Abraham's daughter, then God did not bless Abraham 'in everything', and then there is no need for him to have a daughter. But if he did not have a daughter, then God did bless him 'in everything', so how is it possible that he did not have a daughter? See B. Baba Batra 16b, 141a. It is very difficult to imagine such a humorous Christian exegetical treatment of any detail in the Gospels.

33 'Eli Eli lamah shevakani' and 'talita kum'.
original text, and that part is purely semantic. At best, the translator can achieve a presentation of one possible meaning of the original. All other alternatives, as well as the non-semantic layers, are completely lost. A concept of language established on the basis of translated texts is therefore an almost exclusively semantic one. Indeed, European culture to this very day has been built on the view that language is primarily the way by which a semantic message is transmitted from one person to the other.

The Jewish concept of language is not based on the semantic, communicative layer as being the most important one. It is first and foremost the instrument by which the universe was created. Genesis 1,\(^\text{34}\) as well as Mishnah Avot 5:1, describe the Creation as the result of ten divine utterances. Language, therefore, is not a human phenomenon, and its first purpose was not communication. It was used by God when he was alone, and the result of its use was creation. Language thus contains within itself the origin of all that is. The names of creatures preceded their physical existence. This is expressed in the famous Bereshit Rabba statement that God looked at the Torah and created the world using the language of the Torah as a blueprint.\(^\text{35}\) Rabbinic Judaism described Creation not only as the result of words, but as being derived from the non-communicative building-blocks of language, the letters of the alphabet.\(^\text{36}\) Language is conceived as an aspect of the infinite divine wisdom, which was used primarily, as far as this world is concerned, for the purpose of creation. The ancient Sefer Yeśira, which was most influential in molding the concept of language in medieval Jewish culture, states this most emphatically, ascribing every section of existence to particular letters or groups of letters.\(^\text{37}\) These concepts

\(^{34}\) As well as numerous other biblical verses, like Psalms 33:6: 'By the word of the Lord the heavens were made and all the hosts in them by the breath of his mouth'. And verse 9: 'For he spoke and it was'.

\(^{35}\) Bereshit Rabba 1:1, and see the detailed discussion in my 5Al ha-Kedushah, Jerusalem 1997, pp. 108-130.

\(^{36}\) Thus when the tabernacle in the desert was built, the job was given to Bezalel, who was 'knowledgeable in the letters by which the heaven and earth were created'. The tabernacle, like the subsequent temple in Jerusalem, reflected the structure of the universe. See B. Berakhot 55a.

\(^{37}\) See the recent textual study of this work: A. P. Hayman, Sefer Yeśira: Edition,
I am Midrash Exegesis?

became central to the kabbalistic world-view as it developed from the end of the twelfth century, yet it is not an innovation of the mystics. It is inherent in the classical midrashic conceptions, which explain, for instance, the opening of the Torah with the letter bet, the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet, as relating to the creation of two worlds, this one and the next. When Moses ascended to meet God, he found him tying crowns to the letters of the alphabet.

According to this world view the semantic layer of language is just one of several aspects. The place of *gimatriyya* (numerical value), *notariqon* (acronyms) and *temurah* (systematic substitution of each letter for another) is well-known. The expounding of the biblical proper names of God is an integral part of midrashic activity. The shapes of the letters, the crowns that adorn them, the presence of large and small letters in the biblical text and numerous other non-semantic characteristics of the language of the Scriptures (and later, the signs of music, the "nequdot") served the midrash in a prominent way. Needless to say, all these elements of language are absolutely lost in translation.

Christian culture, built upon the classical Greek concepts of language and the fact that the word of God, both in the Old and New Testament, was transmitted in translation, inevitably made the semantic, communicative character of language the central, and often the only

---

38 Another version has it that this world was created by the letter hey and the next world by the letter yod, indicating that the letters of the Tetragrammaton were prominent in the process of Creation. See B. Menahot 29b and many parallels.

39 B. Menahot 29b.

40 As is well known, the translators of the Bible into Greek, the Septuagint Sages, did not transliterate the biblical divine names and instead used abstractions, like Theos and Kyrios (the Lord). In this they paralleled the talmudic sages, who used their own abstractions in their discourses, such as 'the Place' (*ha-Mago*), 'the Residence' (*ha-Shekhinah*), 'The Holy One Blessed Be He', etc. Yet in the midrash, the proper names of God remained a subject for expounding, whereas they were lost to the readers of the Septuagint and other Greek translations.

41 In this sense it is proper to say that it is not true that the people of Israel gave the Bible to the world. The world never received and never accepted the Hebrew Bible. From Judaism it received the Greek Bible, mainly the Septuagint, which, while having several meaningful similarities to the Hebrew Bible, is a different work in many critical respects.
one in its philosophy of language. Christian exegesis, therefore, centers upon the elucidation of the communicative message of biblical verses. The result is a culture which is far removed from the midrash; indeed, it is very difficult for people who are integrated in such a culture to conceive of the existence of a different one. Modern Hebrew, for instance, which completely conforms to the European, semantic concept of language, makes it easy for Hebrew-speaking intellectuals to understand the traditional Christian approach to exegesis and very difficult to relate to the traditional Jewish midrashic one.42

From a historical point of view, these differences concerning the concept of language led to a lack of communication between traditional Judaism and Christianity; the medieval debates in which Jewish scholars were compelled to face Christian theologians constitute an example. The Christian exegetes presented what they regarded as the semantic message of Old Testament verses, indicating the veracity of the Christian narrative. The Jews had to reject these interpretations as wrong, and uphold a 'true' meaning that contradicts the claims of the Christians, thus implicitly accepting the notion that the verses have one, true meaning.43 A different phenomenon characterizes the emergence of the Christian kabbalah in the late fifteenth century. The Renaissance Christian scholars in Italy, Germany and France who were fascinated by Hebrew post-biblical culture were most impressed by the discovery of the non-semantic aspects of the midrashic discourse, which they identified with the kabbalah rather than with the midrash.44 It is no
Is Midrash Exegesis?

wonder that neither the word midrash nor the attitude towards the text it represents have found a proper translation into modern languages, which derive their conception of language from Christian tradition.

The main message of Derrida's deconstructionist approach was the denial of the possibility of presenting the one, original 'intention' of the author, and the definite meaning of any text. In this Derrida followed ideas which had been developed by linguists and philosophers since the late nineteenth century. It is evident that the midrash originating in Antiquity, embraces this concept from its very beginnings. Modern deconstruction is presented as the result of despair to attain the 'real' meaning of the text. The midrash is an expression of religious exuberance when exposed to the infinite wealth of meanings incorporated in the portion of divine wisdom which was revealed to humanity in the Scriptures. The midrashic Sage does not deplore his inability to fathom divine wisdom; rather, he rejoices in the unlimited possibilities opened up before him when he enters the treasury of language that has no semantic boundaries. The numinous feelings that divine revelation evoked in the biblical period were replaced after 'the end of prophecy' by the exaltation of adding more and more meanings to the profound verses of ancient revelation. Christian exegesis stifled this numinous exuberance in two millennia of quest for the original, normative meaning of the translated texts that constitute its scriptures. While doing so, it shaped the concepts of interpretation and hermeneutics that still dominate Western culture. The conclusion suggested in this brief analysis is that understanding of the phenomenon of midrash can be enhanced by completely divorcing it from the concept of exegesis. Whatever midrash is, exegesis it is not.45
