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What Is Midrash?

Take a deep dive into the world of Midrash, as we ask some tough questions and probe the breadth of Jewish scholarship for answers.

By Tzvi Freeman and Yehuda Shurpin



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Shavuot With **Chabad.ORG**

What Is Midrash?

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Is Midrash for Real?

Once again, Rabbi Schneur Zalman rested his head on his arms. Finally he lifted his head, opened his eyes and asked me, "How do you explain to your students the verse, 'And Isaac trembled a very great trembling?'"

"I explain according to Rashi's first explanation," I replied, "that Isaac was perplexed."

"And why," he asked me, "do you not explain to your students what Rashi says in the name of the Midrash, that Isaac saw hell opened wide beneath him?"

"My opinion," I answered, "is that we should not confuse the weak minds of young children with stories of aggadah in general, and certainly not with frightening matters such as hell and the like. Especially when the child might find this quite problematic: How is it possible that the great, wide hell that is a constantly flaming, burning fire for more than 5,550 years should enter Isaac's room, while Esau with his father should remain alive, without even their clothes being singed?"

"So how, then," he asked, "does the Midrash assert that he saw hell opened beneath him?"

I was silent and answered nothing. Obviously, I could not reply. Was this the first bit of nonsense to be found in the Midrash and Talmud?

When he saw that I had nothing to reply, he said, "Esau entered to see Isaac, and Isaac asked him who he is. Esau answered, 'I am your son, your firstborn, Esau.' This was a lie, because he had already sold his firstborn rights to Jacob as a complete sale, and Isaac knew of this. At this point, 'Isaac trembled a great trembling' over the lie that Esau had told in order to annul the laws of Torah. And since Esau was a liar, hell was truly open before him."

Once he had concluded speaking, he leaned once again on his arms as at first. Then he lifted his head again, opened his eyes and grasped one of the two lamps that was standing on the table . . . He lifted the lamp, stared at me and said, “When a man is a resident of Vilna and says he is from Zamut; when he passes children before the fire of Molech of the ‘enlightenment’ and says he is a teacher—then hell is opened beneath him.

“How many souls have you destroyed? And you still continue in your rebellion! Yes, you have been caught in your heresy, and all who reach this point shall never return!”

(From the report of Shimon ha-Kofer, as told by Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn 1

The Four Departments of Torah

You can’t study literature the same way you study biology, and the same applies to Torah departments.

Torah, like any wisdom, has departments. That’s important to know. You can’t study literature the same way you study biology, and you can’t critique poetry as you would journalism. So too, you can’t study one department of Torah the same as you study another.

There’s more than one way of dividing up those departments. One way is to talk about approaches to the text.²

In one Torah department, we determine the literal meaning of the text of the Five Books of Moses and the rest of the Hebrew Bible. Here, basic commentators such as Rashi, Ramban, Rashbam and Ibn Ezra are busy smoothing out the bumps as much as possible. We call that peshat—which means making things as straightforward, smooth and simple as possible.

But not so simple. Some texts will never surrender their bumps. They’re virtually screaming that they have more to say aside from their simple meaning.³ And really, every text of the Torah has infinitely more to say than its simple meaning.

So, another department looks at deeper meanings that these texts may be pointing to. Even those commentators that work their hardest to keep things as simple as possible can’t avoid stepping into this department from time to time.

Here we might discover some treasures to which the text is pointing by using similar wording in two key phrases, an extra word, peculiar phrasing or other nuances. Often, such allusions allow the Talmudic sage to determine an application of those words in practice, known as a *halachah*—⁴ or some other meaning that supplements the literal interpretation of the text. Sometimes a hint is provided

by *gematria*, the numerical value of words. This approach of interpreting allusions and nuances is called *remez*.

Finding deeper meaning and lessons in life is yet another department, which we call *derush* or *midrash*—and our basic commentators will again be found in these halls as well. Midrash often includes stories, called *aggadah*, some allegorical, some anecdotal, some reaching far beyond what we understand to be possible in our world. Midrash can be found strewn throughout the Talmud, and in many anthologies compiled contemporaneously with the Talmud or later. The largest, best-known collection is called Midrash Rabbah.

The text bubbles with meaning, frequently defying the steamroller of the strict literalist, demanding deeper interpretation at every turn.

Many of the juiciest midrashim are collected in the classic commentary of Rashi.⁵ This despite Rashi's repeated insistence that "I come only to explain the simple meaning of the text." Because the text bubbles with meaning, frequently defying the steamroller of the strict literalist, demanding deeper interpretation at every turn.

Then there's the secret meaning, the interpretation you would never know unless it were revealed to you. We call that *sod*, also known as Kabbalah.

Here, too, you'll find those same masters of simplicity. Ramban was probably the first to reveal such secrets to the general reader in his commentary. The Ohr ha-Chaim commentary of Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar reveals much more, yet still in a language accessible to the general reader. In the commentary of Rashi you'll also find such secrets—only that you'll have to look hard to unearth them there.⁶ Indeed, very few of the classic commentaries are without frequent reference to "the hidden wisdom," whether openly or between the lines.

The Orchard of Torah

Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, the Ari, constructs an acronym from these four departments, disciplines, or levels of *peshat*, *remez*, *derush* and *sod*: ***pardes***, meaning "an orchard." He taught that every soul must delve into all four layers of the Torah, and must continue to return to this world until having done so.⁷

Department	Hebrew	Reveals...	Belongs to...
Peshat	פֶּשֶׁט	Simplest meanings	World of Action
Remez	רִמָּז	Hinted meanings	World of Formation
Derush	דְּרוּשׁ	Deeper meanings	World of Creation
Sod	סוּד	Secret meanings	World of Emanation

The Ari explained just how vital is this obligation:

Know that the entirety of all the souls is 600,000 and no more. [The Ari is speaking of general souls, which include within them many more souls.]⁸ Now, the Torah is the root of all Jewish souls, for from there they are hewn and within it they are rooted. Therefore, in the Torah there are 600,000 explanations—all of them according to *peshat*. There are also 600,000 explanations in *remez*, 600,000 in *derush* and 600,000 in *sod*. So, we find that for every explanation of the 600,000 explanations, one Jewish soul comes into being.

In the time to come, every Jewish person will grasp the entire Torah according to the explanation that matches the root of his soul—as we said, it was from this explanation that this soul was created and brought into being.⁹

It's rare that Kabbalah has a direct impact on *halachah*, but the Ari was also an expert authority in Jewish law, and is often the exception in this regard. This is one instance. In his *Laws of the Study of Torah*, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi codified as law this obligation to delve into all four levels of Torah. After delineating what exactly is included in the obligation upon every Jew to learn and to teach his child "the entire Torah," he concludes:

The sages of the Truth [Kabbalah] say further that every soul, for its *tikkun*, must delve into all of Pardes according to whatever it is capable of comprehending. Anyone who is capable of comprehending and knowing much, but through his own laziness grasps but a little, must return through the cycle of reincarnation until he grasps and knows all that is possible for his soul to grasp of the knowledge of the Torah, whether in the simple meaning of the laws, or whether in the allusions, *derush* and secrets.

This is because all that your soul is capable of comprehending and knowing of the knowledge of Torah is a *tikkun* for its wholeness. Without this knowledge, it is not possible for it to repair itself and perfect itself in its bond of life with Gd, at the very origin from which it was hewn.

That is why the sages said about the world to come, "Fortunate is he who comes here and his learning is in his hand"—for then he will not need to return again through the cycle of life into this world.

The Wholesome Torah Diet

You can't satisfy your requirements in one department alone. You need a well-rounded curriculum.

The Ari's message is not as esoteric as it may seem: Just as our bodies do not live by carbs alone, so our souls require a mixed diet. To be a complete Jew embracing a complete, wholesome Torah, you can't satisfy your requirements studying in one department alone. You need a well-rounded curriculum at all four levels.

Your firm foundation is your knowledge of the basic text of the Jewish people with the traditional commentaries of Rashi, Ramban, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra and others who explain their simplest meaning. You keep your daily life connected to that foundation with a good grasp of the dos and don'ts of *halachah*—not just what they are, but where their roots lie.

And the midrashic tales and the secrets of the Torah are just as vital. Why? Because as much as Torah is about what you know and what you do, it's also about how you think and what you feel. As magnificent a structure as you may have built for yourself, without light and warmth nobody is going to live there too long. That's the way life goes: without the sparks firing, the engine just stops turning.

Midrash is your gateway to connect with the Author of the Torah. "If you want to know the One who formed the universe," the Talmudic sages advise, "learn *aggadah*."¹⁰ *Aggadah*, the midrashic tales scattered throughout Torah literature, are said to contain "most of the secrets of the Torah."¹¹

But the secrets are veiled, as Maimonides writes (we'll get to that soon), so that only those who are fit to receive them will discover them there. The Zohar provides a parable to explain why the Torah must speak in parables:

She was beautiful in appearance, beautiful in form, and she hid herself within the secrets of her palace.

She had but one lover. No one knew of their love. No one but she, secreted away in her hiding place.

Driven by his love, her lover would be drawn to the door of her house, his eyes scanning the building as he passed, examining every corner, searching for her there, for just a glimpse of her.

And she knew he was there. But what could she do so that only he would find her, and no one else?

So she opened a small window to that secret place where she hid within her palace, and—just for a brief moment—she revealed her face to him. And then she returned and hid again.

None of those who were there with her lover saw her. None cared to look. Only her lover saw. And his innards, his heart and his soul were pulled after her. For he knew that it was out of her love for him that she had revealed herself to him for a moment, to arouse him to love.

So far, it seems these secrets are only for the committed lover who has the wisdom to get the first hint. But in the subsequent passage, the Zohar speaks of those who have love, but must take a few more steps to acquire wisdom.

... Come and see! This is the way of Torah: At first she permits herself to reveal herself to people, hinting to them in the flash of a moment. The one who knows, knows. The one who does not—she turns her back to him, and she calls him a fool.

And then the Torah says to this person to whom her back is turned, “Tell that fool that came here that I will speak with him.”

This is what is meant by the verse (Proverbs 9:4), “Who is the fool who turns here, lacking a heart? She speaks to him.”

He comes close to her. She permits herself to speak with him, but from behind a curtain. She speaks words according to his understanding, until he sees little by little.

This is midrash.

Next, she speaks with him from behind a thin veil. She speaks in riddles.

This is aggadah.

The Zohar sees midrash as the portal to the secrets of the Torah. The Zohar sees midrash as the portal to the secrets of the Torah. Those who do not love the Torah are not fit to receive its secrets, so the Torah must speak in riddles and hints. Those with love and wisdom in their hearts grasp the secret immediately. Those with love, but lacking wisdom, work their way to the truth step by step. But those with neither love nor wisdom simply haven't a clue what's going on.

But the Zohar's parable does not end there. Eventually, this lover of Torah becomes a “master of the house,” in consummate marriage with the Torah:

Eventually he becomes familiar with her, and she reveals herself to him face to face. She speaks all her hidden secrets with him, revealing all the hidden pathways that were in her heart, hidden from the earliest days.

This person who has attained wholeness, who has become the husband of the Torah, is now certainly a master of the house. For all her secrets are revealed to him. She does not distance herself, or hide from him anything at all.

She says to him, “See the mysterious words that I hinted to you at first? See how many secrets were there? Now I will tell you what was meant.”¹²

The Empress' Clothing

Note those last lines: Even once the lover of the Torah has mastered all of her secrets, she still reminds him of the “mysterious words” of the Midrash and its aggadah. But why is that? If he already grasps the secrets those stories hide, why can't he discard the packaging in which they came?

Apparently, the stories and mysterious words are more than packaging. After all, as the parable of the Zohar tells, from within the cloak of these parables the inner soul of the Torah speaks. Perhaps we should think of these stories as haute couture for Gd's wisdom. They are the fine clothing and jewelry that allow expression for Torah's most inner wisdom, as a tasteful wardrobe betrays beauty that would otherwise elude the senses.

So fitting, so magnificent is this wardrobe that it carries the secrets of Torah even to the small child. In a way, it transmits to the simple child much more than to the sophisticated adult. To the adult, the clothing is distinct from the meaning it contains; the analogy and its analogue live in two different worlds. The child, when he grasps the clothing, grasps the warm body and soul breathing within. They are all one and the same. In his simple understanding of the tale, he touches Gd.

To better understand how that is so, we'll have to examine midrash a little deeper. We need to ask, are the stories of the Midrash truth or fiction? If they are truth, how is it that they so often conflict with one another? And how do we know when the Talmud is telling us a historical anecdote and when it is speaking in parables?

To answer those questions, we'll look at some of the controversy that surrounded midrashic tales historically, and how the most brilliant of the rabbis dealt with those controversies. All in the coming installments.

Footnotes

- 1.** Translated from *Sefer ha-Toldot Admor ha-Zaken*, vol. 2, pp. 546ff.
- 2.** Another way is: *Mikra*—the ability to read and understand the text of the Hebrew Bible; *Mishnah*—knowing and comprehending the laws of Torah; *Gemara*—analysis, critical thinking and evaluation of various opinions. These are useful when determining the stages of the curriculum: At five years of age, the child starts *Mikra*; at ten, *Mishnah*; and at fifteen, *Gemara* (*Pirkei Avot* 5:22). In this article we are speaking about the diversity of relationships every person must have with the text at every stage in life.
- 3.** The very first verse of the Torah provides an example: Rashi, the principal *peshat* commentator, notes that both the grammar and context of this verse demands a *midrashic* interpretation. The first word is not “In the beginning,” but “In the beginning of . . .” What’s the “of” doing there? It simply can’t be read simply. Besides, how could heaven and earth be the first creations—how did the materials for creating them get there? So Rashi provides a *midrashic* interpretation, a deeper meaning that the text intends with its very first line.
- 4.** *Halachah* can be determined in many ways, following many protocols. One method is through the use of certain formalized allusions. Many of these are known through tradition; others were discovered by the Talmudic sages. After the close of the Talmud, it became extremely rare for a *halachah* to be derived by such means.
- 5.** See *HaYom Yom*, 18 Adar I.
- 6.** See Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz, *Shnei Luchot ha-Brit*, *Masechet Shavuot*, *Ner Mitzvah* 54. Rabbi Chaim David Azulai, *Shem ha-Gedolim*, *Shin* 35 cites evidence that Rashi wrote his commentary according to *sod*. See also *HaYom Yom*, 28 *Shevat*. In many of his discussions of Rashi, the Rebbe, Rabbi M. M. Schneerson, unveiled such secrets—but only after determining and clarifying as much as possible the simple intent of Rashi. The hidden meaning, the Rebbe insisted, must parallel—and be discovered within—the simple meaning.
- 7.** *Shaar ha-Gilgulim*, *hakdamah* 11.
- 8.** See *Mishnat Chassidim*, *Masechet Havayot ha-Neshamot*, chapter 2; Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, *Tanya*, chapter 37.
- 9.** *Shaar ha-Gilgulim*, *hakdamah* 17.
- 10.** *Sifrei*, *Parshat Eikev*.
- 11.** *Iggeret ha-Kodesh* 23, in the name of the Ari.
- 12.** *Zohar II*:99a.

Midrash is for Lovers

A Jewish soul does not live on literalisms alone. All of us need a healthy serving of allusions, parables and mysteries in our lives. That pretty much sums up our first installment of this series—the value of a mixed diet.

To explain the value of allusions, parables and riddles, we told a parable of the Zohar, a story of a beautiful woman who peeks out to her beloved through a small window. Those who love her, find her. Those who don't, remain clueless. They don't even notice she was there. So, too, those who love Torah will find the meaning they are meant to find.

For those of us somewhere in between—those who have some of the love to seek, but lack much of the wisdom to decipher the code—the Torah still has patience. We can work our way up through midrash and aggadah to eventually fathom Torah's most hidden treasures. And we also have guidance from the wisest teachers, those who have recorded for us at least a small part of the code.

Does the Biblical Text Mean What It Says?

Let's start with laying down some boundaries. When are we to take something literally, and when is it open to interpretation?

Maybe pork is really okay, because that's a metaphor too. Where do we stop?

Once you realize the depth of meaning that lies within each verse, you might begin to read the entire Hebrew Bible as a set of metaphors. Perhaps Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Mount Sinai and Gd too are all just metaphor. Maybe pork is really okay, because that's a metaphor too. Where do we stop?

Historically, we've been there. Before Maimonides' time and after, preachers flourished who expounded the entire written Torah exclusively as metaphor. Cain and Abel were representative of the struggle between matter and form. Moses and Pharaoh were really the good inclination versus the evil inclination. All the mitzvahs were interpreted similarly. *Tefillin* became passé for many, because that too was a metaphor. Jewish men saw nothing wrong with taking a non-Jewish wife, because the prohibition against such was also a metaphor. **1**

That's something like applying psychology to a problem in mathematics, or attempting a biopsy on quarks. You're mixing up your departments. **2**

The Talmud provides us a simple principle: "A biblical text does not depart from its simple meaning." The Talmud provides us a simple principle: "A biblical text does not depart from its simple meaning." Learn your midrash; find the secret meaning—but leave the simple meaning intact. Adam, Eve, Abraham and Sarah are all real people; Moses really did split the Sea of Reeds; and we all heard the voice of Gd at Mount Sinai. Pork is off limits. Because that's what it says. The first department, with any text of the Hebrew Bible, is the simple meaning.

That the text literally means what it says should be eminently clear from both the context and content of the text. The context of most of the Hebrew Bible is unmistakable: Real-life narrative with a lesson.

That it's about real life is blindingly apparent from its concern with questions that only a nudnik would ask about a parable or a legend: Just how many people were there? Exactly how many died in the plague, and how many were left after? What were their names and parents' names? What was the name of the place where it happened? What were the sizes, shapes and weights of the things they made?

There are no anachronisms. As the granddaddy of Egyptian chronology, K. A. Kitchen, points out,³ Joseph is sold for 20 silver pieces. A review of ancient Near Eastern documents demonstrates that this was just the price for which slaves were sold in those days. By the times of Moses, slaves were already selling at an average of 30 silver pieces, and by the times of the kings of Israel the price had reached 50 silver pieces. The narrative here is clearly concerned with providing true-to-life details.

Moses's mother was his father's aunt—a marriage that became forbidden in his own time. Certainly, a legend-narrative would modify that information. But the Hebrew Bible is concerned with the details, however inconvenient they may be.

The Tabernacle is a structure that could have been built only in the particular era in which it was built. Every detail is provided and counted. It's difficult to imagine why a myth-teller would iterate such detail. There's nothing grandiose or particularly wondrous about the structure—far larger structures were built by the nations surrounding the Israelites. Again, the concern here is to tell the story right, as it happened.

And it's a very linear story, which relies heavily on the sequence of events. The sale of Joseph, for example, can be understood only within the context of Gd's covenant to Abraham, in which he was foretold the descent of his children to a foreign land and their subsequent oppression there. The Exodus must be understood in the context of the stories of both Joseph and Abraham. And so it continues with every story until Ezra and Nehemiah, each building accumulatively upon the events that have unfolded thus far. It may not be a history as we understood such today—it is still principally concerned with the lessons and morals to be learned. But it certainly does not have the flavor of parable in any sense or form. It's screaming loud and clear, "First get the story straight; then you can look deeper."

In a much-acclaimed lecture and essay,⁴ Yosef Yerushalmi pointed out that the Hebrew Bible is the very first history of a people, as opposed to a collection of legends. It is the oldest story we have that was written in a linear, phonetic alphabet, as opposed to nonlinear, representational glyphs—and so, the first that represents a linear, sequence-oriented mind. It is literature in the truest sense of the word: concerned with everything that oratory and pictographs are permitted to ignore, sticking to details, and getting the facts straight.

For almost thirty years, the Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, performed frequent public surgery on Rashi's commentary to the Five Books of Moses. He revealed a wealth of profound meaning, hidden secrets and practical lessons ripe for the picking if you would look between the lines. But all this only after first laying out as simply as possible what exactly Rashi meant to the five-year-old who just wants to know what the text is saying. And that usually took up most of the lecture—sometimes almost the whole thing.

Simple Rules for Simple Meaning

And yet, there's a crucial caveat: *Simple meaning* is not synonymous with *literal meaning*.

If I tell you I'm going to take a bath, that doesn't mean I'll be ripping out the plumbing and carrying the tub somewhere.

This is true with all human language. If I tell you I'm going to take a bath, that doesn't mean I'll be ripping out the plumbing and carrying the tub somewhere. If I tell you, "We gave the other team a

beating!” don’t expect to find them bruised and bloody in the emergency ward. A dictionary does not a language make. There are idioms of speech.

So too, “an eye for an eye” is not talking about eyeballs—that’s an idiom of speech that refers to equitable monetary compensation.⁵ Gd is real, but His hand is not a hand like your hand.

How do we know? What are the factors that determine what is literal and what is figurative? The first, simplest and best answer to that question was provided by Rabbi Saadia Gaon of 10th-century Baghdad.

Rabbi Saadia was a great believer in the power of reason, but also a strong traditionalist. He wrote what is generally considered the first systematic guide to Jewish beliefs, *The Book of Doctrines and Beliefs*.

In his time there were those who disputed the traditional literal interpretation of [Ezekiel 37:5](#), a passage that describes the resurrection of the dead souls of Israel in a time to come. When the Mishnah lists those who have forfeited their share in the world to come, it includes those who deny the literalness of this prophecy. But these people argued that a literal reading is irrational and unnecessary, and read it as a metaphor for the resurrection of the spirit of the nation.

R. Saadia first countered that once you’ve accepted that the Creator created everything to begin with, resurrection is a perfectly rational belief. Why can’t the Creator recreate that which He has already created? But then he also argues that in this case the literal interpretation of the text is the most elegant.

To make that last point, R. Saadia found it necessary to provide some ground rules for literal interpretation. When do we read a text literally, and when does it demand a figurative interpretation? After all, there are plenty of instances where the traditional interpretation veers from the literal meaning of the words.

Ingeniously, R. Saadia does this with only four simple principles. Here is a loose translation of that passage:

It is a well-known first principle that anything found in scripture is to be understood according to its simple meaning, with the exception of those cases where such is impossible, due to one of four possible causes:

1. Our perceived reality dismisses it.

An example would be the verse, “And Adam called his wife Chavah, because she was the mother of all life.”

Now, we see that the ox and the lion are not born from a human woman. So we know that these words refer not to all living beings, but only to human life.

2. Our sense of reason dismisses it.

For example, the verse, “For Gd, your Gd, is a consuming fire, a Gd of vengeance.”

Now, fire is a creation, and it requires some sort of material to burn. At times it is extinguished. Our sense of reason cannot accept that Gd could be such. So, we are forced to say that there is some idea hidden within the usage of fire to describe Gd’s vengeance. Indeed, there is a verse, “For in the fire of My vengeance the entire earth will be consumed.”

3. Another verse explicitly negates it. In such a case, we must provide a resolution that is not explicitly stated.

For example, one verse says, “Do not test Gd your Gd, as you tested Him at Massah.” Yet another verse says, “Please test me in this, says Gd, the Gd of Hosts: If I will not open for you the portals of heaven . . .”

The resolution that arises from between the two verses is that we should not test Gd to determine whether He is capable or not, like those about whom it was said, “They tested Gd in their hearts, asking food for themselves, and they spoke about Gd, saying, ‘Is Gd capable of setting a table in the desert?’” It is in reference to those people that it is said, “as you tested Him at Massah.”

But when a person tests his own worth to Gd, to know whether he is fit for a wondrous sign or not, as Gideon asked, “I will test just this time with the fleece.” or as Hezekiah asked, or others like them—this is permissible.

4. We have a tradition that compromises the text in some way. In this case, we must reinterpret the text to fit the authentic tradition.

For example, we have been told that corporal punishment consists of no more than thirty-nine lashes. Yet the verse says, “You shall strike him forty lashes.”

In this case, we understand that the verse really means thirty-nine, only that it has rounded off the number—just as it has done in another verse: “As the number of days that you toured the land, which were forty days, so you will wander one year for each day, forty years . . .”—even though there were only thirty-nine, since the first year was not included in that punishment.

Following this, R. Saadia goes on to demonstrate that none of these conditions apply to the verses describing the resurrection of the dead, which therefore must be taken literally.

The Book Maimonides Never Wrote

Midrash, in many ways, is the opposite of *peshat*. Midrash screams out, “I am not what I appear to be!” Midrash purposely sets the foreground fuzzy so that the wise person will focus on the background—where the secrets lie.

Midrash screams out, “I am not what I appear to be!”

Yet midrash, too, must have its boundaries. Yes, the sages speak in riddles. But they also often speak in normal, everyday language, telling you anecdotes that mean just what they mean. To complicate matters, sometimes they do both at once—telling you an anecdote through riddles. How are we supposed to know? And once we do know, how do we unlock the code?

When it comes to code, Maimonides was the great codifier. Not only did he codify Jewish law, he provided keys to decode midrash. But not before he first categorized three groups of those who read midrashic tales: Fools, bigger fools, and a handful of intelligent people.

As you might expect, the fools comprise the largest group. They are those who accept the teachings of the sages in their simple literal sense, and do not think that these teachings contain any hidden meaning at all. They believe that all sorts of impossible things must be.

Maimonides characterizes the members of this group as people “poor in knowledge.” He doesn’t show much sympathy for this form of poverty:

In their very effort to honor and to exalt the sages, they sin in accordance with their own meager understanding, and actually humiliate themselves. Gd says, “This nation is a wise and understanding people.” But this group expounds the teachings of the sages in a way that, when the other peoples hear them, they say that this little people is foolish and ignoble.

The second group is also quite large, and they also take these stories literally. But they earn yet greater disapproval from Maimonides, because

they believe that the sages intended nothing else than what may be learned from their literal interpretation. Inevitably, they ultimately declare the sages to be fools, hold them up to contempt, and slander what does not deserve to be slandered. They imagine that their own intelligence is of a higher order than that of the sages, and that the sages were simpletons who suffered from inferior intelligence.

Maimonides refers to this group as even more boorish and foolish than the first group. He goes so far as to call them accursed, since they attempt to “refute men of established wisdom and greatness.”

Then there's the third group, which Maimonides says is small in number. It consists of people who ponder the words of the sages and detect that there is something deep going on here:

They realize that the sages did not speak nonsense, and it is clear to them that the words of the sages contain both an obvious and a hidden meaning. Thus, whenever the sages spoke of things that seem impossible, they were employing the style of riddle and parable, which is the method of truly great thinkers. Why do they do this? Because they are dealing with supernal matters which can be expressed only in riddles and analogies.

Maimonides obviously approves of this. Some things become apparent only when hidden, because then the wise person must dig deeper, and the toil itself makes him fit to receive these truths. third group. The wisdom the sages are intending to transmit can be transmitted only through concealment. Some things become apparent only when hidden, because then the wise person must dig deeper, and the toil itself makes him fit to receive these truths.

Maimonides even embarked on an ambitious project to explain the allegorical meanings behind all these midrashic stories.⁶ Yet he had to abandon the project, as he found himself in an irresolvable bind.

The work, he later wrote, placed before him one of two choices: Reveal in simple language that which was never meant for the simple people, and which they will certainly misunderstand and abuse. Or, stick to the path of the sages and clothe the wisdom inherent in these stories in other clothing and parables—which would not solve anything, only “replacing one parable with another.”⁷

His son, Rabbi Avraham, himself began such a project, providing a framework for the study of aggadah within his father's approach. But, as he admits, it was not commensurate to the breadth and depth his father had originally intended.

Nevertheless, Maimonides did provide many keys and clues for those bright enough to do their own decoding. In his *Guide For the Perplexed* he provided a kind of “manual for abstraction,” listing the broader import of many key words, and taking us on a tour of his incisive approach to abstract ideas from their concrete metaphor.

Many of the interpretations and much of the philosophy of the *Guide* met with fierce controversy and opposition, but the approach that Maimonides taught to us has proven invaluable—not only in the aggadah and philosophy departments, but in the legal department of Torah as well. Yet it would wait four hundred years for Rabbi Yehudah Loewe, “the Maharal of Prague,” to pick up the ball and run with it. And, when he did, he went much further than Maimonides may have imagined.

Which is what we will be dealing with in the next installment.

Footnotes

- 1.** See Israel Zinberg, *A History of Jewish Literature*, translated and edited by Bernard Martin (Case Western Reserve University, 1972), vol. 2, p. 110. This was one of the principal reasons given by Rabbi Shlomo ben Aderet (Rashba) and his cosignatories for their famous ban on studying philosophy before the age of 25. See *Teshuvot ha-Rashba* 147.
- 2.** Philosophers have a name for this (very common) error: They call it “confusing levels of abstraction.”
- 3.** K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003).
- 4.** Yosef Haim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (University of Washington Press, 1982).
- 5.** Talmud, *Bava Kamma* 83b–84a.
- 6.** He mentions this project in his *Commentary to the Mishnah, Sanhedrin*, introduction to *Perek Chelek*, chapter 4.
- 7.** *Guide for the Perplexed*, introduction to the first part.

Midrash and Reality

In the last installment we heard from R. Saadia Gaon in the Department of Simple Meanings (*peshat*) and from Maimonides in the Department of Deeper Meanings (*derush*)—and the folly of confusing the two. We left off with a promise to hear from Maharal of Prague, who would apply Maimonides' principles to Midrash in a way that would open up a whole new understanding of Torah and reality.

The Limits of Midrash

But before we get to Prague, we need to discuss some of the wrong turns and dead ends that were taken post-Maimonides—mainly so that we don't take those routes again.

After Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed* was translated from Arabic into Hebrew, many more students of Torah began applying Aristotelian philosophy to their studies. Sometimes the marriage was quite elegant. Often, it was the ugliest form of syncretism. Any suggestion of a miracle had always irked the classical philosopher, but now he felt he had the permission of the great Maimonides to reinterpret these allegorically. Anecdotes of historical significance were also reinterpreted, thereby dismissing any historicity of the Talmudic sages.

By the end of the 13th century Rashba attempted to ban the study of philosophy and natural sciences until the age of 25., many of the leading rabbis in Provence and Spain were fed up enough with these teachers and preachers that they felt drastic action was needed. At the urging of a respected Provençal sage, many of the leading rabbis of the time, led by Rabbi Shlomo ben Aderet of Barcelona (known

as Rashba), instituted a ban prohibiting anyone from studying philosophy and natural sciences until the age of 25 (with the exception of one who was studying medicine for a profession).

Many of the Jews of Provence were outraged. They deeply respected Rashba as an outstanding scholar and leader to whom they would address the most difficult questions both in Jewish practice and in theology. But they could not imagine abandoning their study of the Greek-Arabic philosophy that had become a regular part of their curriculum.

Rabbi Yedayah Bedersi was one such Jew. Bedersi was fluent not only in all areas of Torah scholarship but, like many of his era, in Aristotle and Avicenna as well. He was also a master of letters, having published his first poem at age fifteen. He composed several commentaries on Midrash. His ethical work *Examination of the World* is oft-quoted. He is also known for his long poem-parable in defense of women.

But, most of all, R. Yedayah Bedersi is known for his respectful but forceful retort to Rashba concerning his ban. He denies the accusations that the schools in Provence had been twisting the meaning of scripture and midrashim through their Aristotelian contortions. In the process, he lays down more clearly than anyone before, exactly what the rules of Midrashic interpretation must be—using brilliant yet simple rules of reason.

To begin, he writes, simply because a story clashes with the natural order is not sufficient reason to reject it. An absurdity must be interpreted allegorically, but there is nothing absurd about the Creator of the natural order breaking that order with a miracle.

An absurdity, Bedersi writes, must be interpreted allegorically, but there is nothing absurd about the Creator of the natural order making a miracle.

He then divides the midrashic stories into four categories, explaining how we must deal with each one:

1. Unlikely stories told by the sages.

Although a story is extremely unlikely, and although it neither strengthens nor weakens our faith, we nevertheless accept it, since it comes to us from a reliable source. **1**

2. Miraculous stories.

We do not reject a story simply because it includes a miracle. The Creator of the world has no problem performing miracles. But if a miraculous story clashes with a general principle, we must reinterpret. We can imagine loaves of bread and fine clothing miraculously growing on trees, but we have a

general principle told to us that clashes with this: “There is no difference between this world and the world to come other than the subjection to foreign rule.”²

Similarly, we can imagine *tzaddikim* after their passing reinvested in fine new bodies, enjoying another world, as described by Rabbi Benaah, etc. But this clashes with a general principle that in that world “there is no sitting or standing . . .”

3. Apparent exaggerations.

If the story describes a world where miracles abound, and these miracles are not of the sort that strengthen our faith or provide any other apparent benefit, we must reinterpret—for three reasons:

- a. It’s not honorable to the Torah and its sages to believe this.
- b. This diminishes the significance of those miracles mentioned in the Torah, which the Torah itself treats as rare instances.
- c. Gd does not make miracles without necessity, and neither do His prophets.

The Talmudic tales of Rabbah bar bar Chanah are a good example. In them you’ll hear of an antelope the size of Mount Tabor whose dung dammed up the Jordan River; a frog the size of sixty houses swallowed by a yet more monstrous sea creature—which was then plucked out of the ocean by a giant raven. Then there was the fish so big that when it was cast ashore it destroyed 60 towns and fed another 60. A year later, people were cutting rafters from the fishes’ ribs for the homes of the towns they had rebuilt to replace those that had been destroyed. Another fish was so large that it took three days and nights for Rabbah bar bar Chanah’s ship to sail from one end to the other—and it was a ship so fast that if you shot an arrow, the ship would pass it.

There was even one fish that had sand and grass growing on its back. The sailors innocently set ashore on what they presumed was an island, and set up a barbecue—only to have to rush back to ship in the nick of time as the annoyed fish began to turn over. The sailors innocently set ashore on what they presumed was an island, and set up a barbecue—only to have to rush back to ship in the nick of time as the annoyed fish began to turn over. **3**

The consensus among all Talmudic scholars is that these tales of Rabbah bar bar Chanah are not all necessarily meant to be taken at face value. **4** Within the phantasmagorical imagery of these tales whispers a story from a world beyond ours, tightly encoded within complex metaphor. Indeed, from the Zohar⁵ it appears that the sea of which he is talking is the sea of Torah, the birds and fish are allusions to particular angelic beings and souls—every detail with layers of meaning, but certainly not for the sports-fishing buff.

4. Absurdities.

If the story presents an absurdity, we must reinterpret. Bedersi here seems principally concerned with cases of anthropomorphism. That the Creator of Heaven and Earth could have physical form he considers irresolutely absurd.

As we said, Bedersi wrote all this in a letter to Rashba. Rashba himself discussed the interpretation of fantastic midrashic tales, also taking the approach of Maimonides. He provides several reasons why the sages might conceal their wisdom within enigma and fantasy. One very revealing episode:

Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi was sermonizing, and the assembly was dozing off. He wanted to wake them up. So he said, "There was one woman in Egypt who gave birth to six hundred thousand at once!"

There was one student there—Rabbi Yishmael ben Yosei was his name—who asked, "Who was that?"

So he told him, "It was Yocheved, who gave birth to Moses! He was balanced against the entire nation of six hundred thousand—as we see in the text: **6** 'Then sang Moses and the children of Israel.'" **7**

How more explicit a demonstration do you need, writes Rashba, that the words of the sages are not always to be taken literally? He then proceeds to interpret the meaning of a ten-cubit Moses taking a ten-cubit axe and jumping ten cubits into the air to whack the giant Og on the ankle—just as Og was attempting to throw a mountain on the Israelite camp. All of it has meaning, but none of it at face value.

The Wrong Way to Learn Midrash

Bedersi set down clear boundaries, but the rules of interpretation were still unclear. There was still no clear definition for Midrash. That left room for some to believe that midrash and *aggadah* are not really true—they are just parables or fables to make a point. They said, "The simple meaning of the text is true. The *halachah* is an obligation—so it's certainly true. But these tales are just homiletics." **8**

Fundamentally, these people understood the tales of the rabbis much as we understand good fiction: stories to make a point. Fiction is not a lie—the author has a real point to make, and that point may be true. It's only that he uses the medium of a story to make his point, and the story—the packaging for the point—is not true. So, too, these people understood the stories of the Talmud and Midrash to be making true points—but dressed in packaging that was very distant from reality.

Rabbi Yehuda Loewe of Prague (known as the "Maharal of Prague") was adamant: Torah is not fiction. Maharal was adamant: Torah is not fiction. Anything the Creator of the universe tells is real. Jews consider the words of their sages that have been recorded in the Talmud and Midrash to be Torah, no less divine than the Five Books of Moses. Once they were accepted by the general community of

observant Jews as works to be studied and revered as Torah, they attain a status of Gd's own thoughts, arguments He has with Himself and stories He tells Himself. And if the Creator of the universe is telling it, it's real. 9

A case in point is the following story of Titus, after he had destroyed the Temple and laid waste to Jerusalem:

When Titus was traveling back to Rome on a ship with the Jewish captives and the vessels of the Holy Temple, a storm at sea threatened to drown him. He said: "It seems that the Gd of these people has power only over water. When Pharaoh came, He drowned him in water. When Sisera came, He drowned him in water. Now, He is about to drown me in water. If He wants to show His strength, let Him come onto dry land and fight with me there!"

A divine voice came forth and said to him: "Wicked one, the son of a wicked one, descendant of Esau the wicked! I have an insignificant creature in My world called a gnat. Come ashore and do battle with it!"

Titus went ashore, and a gnat came and entered his nostril. It pecked at his brain for seven years.

One day, Titus was walking past a blacksmith's shop. The gnat heard the noise of the sledgehammer and became silent. Titus said: "There is a remedy!"

Every day they brought a blacksmith, and he hammered in Titus's presence. To a gentile blacksmith he would give a handsome stipend, but to a Jew he would say: "It is sufficient that you see your enemy suffering!"

For thirty days they brought smiths to hammer in Titus's presence. Then the gnat adjusted to the noise of the hammer, and continued pecking at Titus's brain even when the hammers were struck.

Rabbi Pinchas ben Arova said: "I was with the great men of Rome at the time when Titus died. They examined his brain, and what they found in it was the size of a small bird!"

In the Mishnah we learned: It was like a year-old pigeon, weighing two liters.

Said Abaye, "We have a tradition that its mouth was of bronze and its claws of iron."

As Titus lay dying, he instructed his servants: "Burn me and scatter my ashes over the seven seas, so that the Gd of the Jews cannot find me and bring me to judgment."

Now, reading the chronicles of Roman historians, you won't find anything about this gnat. Titus, they tell you, died of a fever. At any rate, metal claws on a big bug is a tad outrageous.

So, one scholarly Italian Jew named Azariah dei Rossi explained, “This is just aggadah.” It didn’t really happen. It’s just that the sages wanted to impress on people that Gd can always find a way to punish the wicked, so they told this story.

The same Azariah dei Rossi approached other teachings in a similar vein. Rabbi Eliezer taught that the northern side of the world was never completed. Gd says, “Whoever believes he is a god, let him come and complete the northern side.” From this and other similar statements, dei Rossi derived that the Talmudic sages believed the world was flat.

This was just the sort of thing that ruffled Maharal’s feathers much too much. This man, he said, has no idea what the sages are talking about.

Truth Is Stranger than Non-Fiction

So, Maharal of Prague further defined the ways of Midrash, with two signposts on two sides of the road:

1. On the one hand, you have to know that every story told and recorded by the rabbis of the Talmud is true. They are Torah, just as much as a verse from scripture or a *halachah* kept by all Jews is Torah.**10**
2. On the other hand, you must know that these stories are not concerned with physical reality at all. Rather, they are speaking of the essential reality.

What’s the “essential reality”? Here’s a classic treatment of the essential reality of midrash from Maharal:

The Talmud tells us that Moses was ten cubits tall. **11** A cubit is the distance from your outstretched big finger to your elbow—averaging about one and a half feet. That would put Moses at fifteen feet.

Strange thing, no one inside the story seems to notice—not Pharaoh, not the Jewish people, not even the daughters of Jethro, who tell their father, “An Egyptian saved us from the shepherds!” The fact that he was a giant about three times their size seems to totally pass them by. **12**

So, Maharal tells us that the real Maharal tells us that the real Moses truly was fifteen feet tall. Just not the Moses that Pharaoh saw. Moses truly was fifteen feet tall. Not the one that Pharaoh saw, or that the fleeing shepherds saw. They saw only the physical shell of Moses, as he is invested in a body within our physical world—a world that for several reasons can’t manage a ten-cubit human form. But Moses is a complete person, and ten is the number of completeness. He *should have* been ten cubits tall—would the physical world be capable of such a thing. Certainly, writes Maharal, whatever could be reflected in

the physical world was reflected, and Moses was likely taller than the average human being. But not as tall as he really was. **13**

Which Moses is more pertinent to our understanding? If we want to understand the simple meaning of the text, a giant Moses will just confuse matters—as we’ve seen. If we want to have an idea of the soul-power of Moses, his impact on the crowd when he walked in the room, his true height as a spiritual giant—he was as big as they get, not missing a finger’s breadth of the ten cubits of perfection.

We’re used to considering the precise measurements of our world as the final arbiter of all truth. It might help to jump to an event in Mezhibuzh, Ukraine, a century or two after Maharal:

One of the homeowners of Mezhibuzh was involved in a nasty dispute with another resident of the town. It happened that while in the Baal Shem Tov’s presence, in his *shul*, he yelled that he was going to rip the other guy apart like a fish.

The Baal Shem Tov told his pupils to hold one another’s hand, and to stand near him with their eyes tightly closed.

He then placed his holy hands on the shoulders of the two disciples next to him. Suddenly the disciples began shouting in great terror: They had seen how that fellow had actually ripped his disputant apart like a fish.**14**

Now, what if I ask you, “Did a resident of Mezhibuzh tear apart his disputant like a fish?”

You might answer, “Well, not really.” Problem is, I have witnesses. Very reliable ones. And they all saw exactly the same thing.

But can the perpetrator be charged in court for bodily harm? Problem is, his disputant is still walking around without a scratch.

So, which world is real? One world can be perceived by anyone with ears for hearing. The other requires senses of a higher grade than most of us will ever achieve. But does that make it less real? On the contrary, perhaps the higher reality is the truer one. There, after all, is where we can perceive the real effects of our actions and words.

Maharal takes the same approach to the gnat in Titus’ brain. The sages are not concerned with telling us a story for the medical annals. Their concern is to present to us the real Titus and his true destiny. Did a physical gnat enter his brain? Perhaps not, writes the Maharal. But the story is still true, because the gnat got in there anyways. Every living creature has its essential quality that makes it uniquely

what it is—and the essential quality of the gnat made its way in. **15** This essential quality, if it could be seen, would appear in its most intense state with a mouth of bronze and iron claws.

The same applies to Rabbi Yehudah's description of the universe with an open north end. The purpose of this description was not for astronomical predictions, or to send a man to the moon. Rabbi Yehudah was telling us what the world is all about: that it was not created as a perfect place. As Maharal writes, the world is not a cause, it is an effect, and an effect can never be perfect. Only the original cause, the ultimate Creator, can be complete. Our world reflects this, to some degree, through the effects of the north wind. But again, in an incomplete way.**16**

Maharal sums up his approach in Maharal sums up his approach: "The sages do not speak of the physical at all; they speak of a world stripped of physicality." one simple line: "The sages do not speak of the physical at all; they speak of a world stripped of physicality."**17** Every midrashic teaching is a peek behind the veil, dressing deep truths in language that is meant to reveal an inner world. If that language seems foolish to us, it is only because we have not yet cracked the code. We are grabbing the clothes, the words, as though they themselves were their own meaning.

On the other hand . . .

Maharal wrote many volumes of commentary on Midrash, perhaps more than any other Torah giant, all following these same principles. Reading them, we often sense a modern mind, and indeed his writings are more popular today than they were in the 16th century, when he was perhaps less understood.

Rabbi Shmuel Eidels, whose mother was a cousin of Maharal, composed what is likely the most popular work on almost all the aggadah of the Talmud. It is included in the standard editions of the Talmud under the title *Chiddushei Aggadot Maharsha*. He follows a similar approach, using principles of both philosophy and Kabbalah.

Now a systematic approach to midrash had been laid out clearly by Maimonides and Maharal. But that raises a new question, perhaps a more difficult one: If the point of midrash is not the story itself, but that which it contains, not the foreground but the background, and if anyone who understands these stories literally is a fool—then how is it that we tell these stories to children and simple folk, who certainly take them at face value? Are we to hide all of these tales from them? Have we been doing things wrong all these centuries?

Maharal himself provided the key to answering this crucial question. It becomes clearer when we examine the works of his contemporaries, and of those who followed in his footsteps. Which is what we will discuss in the next installment.

Footnotes

1. If a “reliable source” is not provided—for example, names are not provided—that may be considered evidence that the anecdote need not be taken literally. See Rabbi Avraham ben ha-Rambam in his treatise on Midrash (printed in the preface of Ein Yaakov):

We found a place in the Talmud (Eruvin 63a) where it is openly admitted that the sages spoke in parabolic style, and that their words should not always be taken literally: “A disciple of R. Eliezer decided a question of Torah law in the latter’s presence. R. Eliezer said to his wife, Ima Shalom, ‘I wonder if he will live through this year?’ And he died during that year. ‘Are you a prophet?’ his wife asked him . . .” [The student is then identified by name.] “The disciple’s name and his father’s name,” continues the Talmud, “were purposely mentioned so that we should not construe it as a parable, but as a true fact.” From this is clear that in many instances their words were not taken literally, but in the form of a parable. Put this proof in your heart and let your eyes watch it, for it is a wonderful thing as well as important evidence.

See also Maharal, Chiddushei Aggadot 1:28; Rabbi Yosef Chaim of Baghdad, Ben Yehoyada, Eruvin loc. cit.

2. On this topic, see *Will the Moshiach Usher In a Miraculous Era? Alternatively, one could easily imagine the sages viewing today’s post-industrialization wardrobes and refrigerator stockpiles as “bread and fine clothes growing on trees.”*

3. Talmud, Bava Batra 73b.

4. Some have pointed to an exception: Rashbam to Bava Batra 73a, s.v. אמר רבה אשתעו לי כו'. The authors, however, are not convinced that Rashbam is insisting on a literal understanding of every story that follows. Ritva and Maharsha maintain that at least some of these events actually occurred.

5. Zohar 3:223b (Raya Mehemna).

6. Exodus 15:1.

7. Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah 1:65.

8. Indeed, many passages of the Talmud seem to imply just that. The intent of these passages, however, is generally rather opaque, and their meaning is disputed. Many of these statements appear in the Jerusalem Talmud, which despite its terser style is far more dense with aggadah than the Babylonian Talmud. See the following examples from that Talmud: Shabbat 16:1, Maaserot 3:4 and Nazir 7:2.

9. In retort to this opinion of Maharal, some cite a statement of Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban) in the midst of a staged dispute with a representative of the Church. See, however, Haim Maccoby, *Judaism On Trial*, pp. 44–49. According to his explanation, Ramban does not necessarily differ from Maharal’s opinion that these tales are all true, only that they are not (necessarily) discussing the physical or historical reality.

10. Rabbi Yehuda Loewe, *Be’er ha-Golah, Be’er Shishi* (p. 135 in the standard edition).

11. Talmud, Shabbat 92a.

12. See *Sichot Kodesh* 5730, vol. 1, p. 564.

13. Chiddushei Aggadot, vol. 3, p. 33 (on Talmud, Bava Metzia 84a).

14. Hayom Yom, 29 Tishrei.

15. It seems difficult to understand the report of a tumor in his brain at death as purely allegorical. The language in which it is stated seems factual: “I was with the great men of Rome at the time when Titus died.” But then, such a size for a brain tumor is not so unbelievable. The largest brain tumor removed from a living person on record to date was 72 cubic inches—the size of a small pigeon.

16. *Be’er ha-Golah, Be’er Shishi* (p. 129 in the standard edition).

17. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

Limitless Truth for the Limited Mind

The very first day I came to cheder¹ as a small child, I was brought by my father and my uncle. As is the custom, they threw candies at me, and they told me that the archangel Michael had thrown them. My father told me that when he was brought to cheder, his grandfather Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch was still alive, and he threw candies and told him the same—that the archangel Michael had thrown them. My father took this very seriously. He didn't want to eat the candies, they were so precious to him.

Eventually, the day before Passover arrived, and as usual, they were checking the pockets of the small children for crumbs of bread. His grandfather called him and asked him where he kept the candies. At that point, he had to eat them all.

This is the kind of education we have to have!

Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, Sefer ha-Sichot 5701, pp. 29–30 (translated).

Heaven forbid we should tell a child an untruth! It is a Jewish custom, and a Jewish custom is also Torah—the Torah of truth. Everything the child is told is true: Those who throw the candies are doing it on behalf of the archangel Michael, the angel who seeks out the merits of the Jewish people. The sweetness of the candies is the sweetness of Torah as it descends and clothes itself in a physical object.

When he grasps the outer clothing, the child grasps the archangel Michael and all the truth that is within that clothing!

An adult won't accept this, because he sees that he, and not an angel, is the one throwing the candies. When a child is older, we can explain to him that this is only a garb for something much higher. But when he is a three-year-old child just beginning his education, we tell him these things clothed in a story, and he has no problems with any of it. Nevertheless, when he grasps the outer clothing, the child grasps the archangel Michael, and the sweetness of Torah, and all the truth that is within that clothing!

Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, talks of Shabbat Parshat Pinchas 5734 and 8th day of Chanukah 5739 (translated, combined and abridged).

Midrash For the Rest of Us

If you've been following this series, by now you should know that when you come across a fabulous story from the Midrash, you need to peel back the covers to discover what it's trying to tell you. The stories are all true stories—just not necessarily the way things were able to unfold in our physically limited realm. This reality is not the ultimate expression of truth.

But, we asked, what about those aren't capable of peeking beneath the surface? What about small children—and even simpleminded adults—who have no patience for abstractions, and take all they hear and read at face value? Are we supposed to hide these stories from them?

Historically, that just hasn't been the case. Many, if not most of these midrashim are collections from sermons of popular rabbis of past generations. To whom were they sermonizing? To whoever came and listened: men, women and children—most of them simple folk.

So too, over the last thousand years or more, these collections were read by the simple, literate Jew and retold to small children in their plain, undecoded form. They were our mother's milk, and they became part of the Jewish DNA. They pumped through our blood and inspired us to hold tight throughout all the hardships and persecution. Where intellectuals collapsed and accepted apostasy rather than lose their lives or their property, those who embraced the simple meaning of these stories without question stood firm and strong. On these stories were raised men and women who lived lives of truth.

Truth doesn't grow where falseness is planted.

Truth doesn't grow where falseness is planted. We must say that even as they are understood on their most basic level, each of these stories is *absolute* truth.

But how is that so? Either fine clothes will be growing on trees when Moshiach comes, or they will not. Can we say that for the small child they will do so literally, while for the sophisticated adult they will do so only figuratively?

To return to the story of the Zohar we quoted in Part I: A beautiful woman in the palace appears to her beloved first by peeping out a small window, then by speaking to him from behind a curtain, and then through a thin veil. The thin veil is *aggadah*—the midrashic tales we are discussing. A person who enjoys these stories without grasping their deeper meaning, it would seem, is like someone enamored with the veil. But this can't be true. It must be that somehow in the veil itself rests the entire beauty and truth of the Torah.

The question is not on midrashic *aggadah* alone. The Hebrew Bible is filled with anthropomorphism—Gd's eyes and hands, His wrath, His disappointment and His love, Gd as king, Gd as father—all understood by innocent and simple people exactly as stated.

When a child hears the story of Abraham arguing with Gd over the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, he most certainly imagines the two standing face to face, as a man argues with a close friend. When he reads that Gd smote Egypt with an outstretched arm, he imagines a giant arm extending down from the heavens. And he won't give up that image, no matter how much his teacher may try to explain. A hand means a hand. The child has no concept of deeper meaning or higher reality. The child is concerned with the world he sees and feels. This is the world of the child—free of abstraction, simple and concrete.

Yet Maimonides categorically ruled that one who believes that Gd has any form whatsoever is denying His oneness, and has thereby forfeited his share in the world to come! **2**

No, Maimonides is not booting all the little children out of heaven. No, Maimonides is not booting all the little children out of heaven. He is obviously speaking of an adult who has read the classic commentaries and has the intellectual capacity to conceive of oneness and formlessness, yet nevertheless insists on a literal understanding of Gd as a being of form. The child isn't quite there yet. **3**

Nevertheless, the question remains: How could the Torah—a Torah of truth—mislead the innocent reader of simple faith?

Indeed, Rabbi Abraham ben David (known as Raavad) criticized Maimonides for making this ruling. **4** He himself agreed that Gd has no form, physical or otherwise. What he could not bear is the

condemnation, as he writes, of “many who were better than him [meaning Maimonides (!)] who believed such things due to their innocent reading of the text.”

“Better than him,” writes Rabbi Abraham. Even though they believe something about Gd that he himself agrees is utterly false! What is so wonderful about people who cannot fathom a formless Gd? **5**

To answer that question, we need to readjust our thinking about several issues: about Torah, about reality, and about human language.

The View from Higher Worlds

First, let’s examine our approach to midrash a step deeper. While Maharal was composing his elucidations of midrash in Prague, Rabbi Menachem Azariah of Fano, Italy, was taking a similar approach to Torah text in general.

R. Menachem Azariah was concerned with a statement of the Talmud, that the Torah sometimes exaggerates. **6** One of the examples the Talmud offers was when Moses tells how the spies described the cities of Canaan. He quotes them as saying that these are “great cities, fortified up to the heavens.”**7**

R. Menachem Azariah writes, “Heaven forbid that the Torah should exaggerate! Everything in the Torah is truth—even the lies the characters of the Torah tell are truth. For in a Torah of truth, there is no room for inaccuracies, never mind exaggeration. And in this case the cities are truthfully fortified to the heavens, for in the higher realms the external ministering angels cannot enter the boundaries of the land.”**8**

To R. Menachem Azariah, that itself is the meaning of exaggeration in Torah—not an inflation of the facts, but a statement of a higher truth that cannot be expressed in our physical world. Torah, however, speaks only secondarily about our physical world—and in a world higher than our own, there is certainly some very real manifestation of this truth.

Ramban (Nachmanides) had written that the Torah speaks about earthly matters and alludes to spiritual ones.**9** R. Menachem Azariah The Torah speaks principally about higher matters—the earthly matters are secondary.turned that around: The Torah speaks principally about higher matters, he wrote; it’s the earthly matters that are secondary.**10**

Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz was the chief rabbi of Prague shortly after Maharal. His voluminous *Shnei Luchot ha-Brit* (known by its acronym, *Shelah*) was a highly popular and influential work among European Jewry in the **17**th and 18th centuries. In it, he quotes R. Menachem Azariah and supports his view. But he carries the idea further, into the domain of midrash.

“Just as every verse of the Torah must be understood according to its simple sense,” he writes, “so too, every midrashic story is true in its simple sense.”¹¹ But what he means by “simple sense” in midrash is certainly not what we would consider it to be.

To explain himself, ¹² he cites the great Kabbalist Rabbi Moshe Cordovero.¹³

Rabbi Cordovero presented a unique understanding of anthropomorphism. Others understood biblical anthropomorphism quite plainly: when we read about Gd’s hand or ears, we understand that Gd’s hands are not real hands, but since we have no other way to describe Him, we use something of which we do have a grasp—namely, our own hands and ears. But, wrote Rabbi Cordovero, in truth the reverse is true: The real hands and ears are those of Gd, since it is from Gd that all things originate, as the prophet remarks,¹⁴ “Does the One who made an ear not hear; the One who formed the eye not see?”

The real hands and ears are those of Gd. Only that His eyes and ears are verbs, rather than nouns.

It is only that Gd’s eyes and ears are verbs, rather than nouns. As he wrote, “When talking about Gd, we are not discussing the bodily ear, but rather the function of that ear. Just as a bodily ear hears and discerns the meaning of what it hears, so the divine power receives a voice and discerns whether it is acceptable or not.” But the point is, the real ear is the divine verb, not the corporeal noun. The ear on the side of your head is only a cheap imitation of the genuine McCoy.

This is a radically original way of thinking of metaphor in Torah: all that exists in our reality is nothing more than an analogy derived from the true reality to which it points. As the Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, explained this view, Gd gave us a hand and eyes and ears so that we could understand the true hand and eyes and ears as they are above. And the same with all that we find in our world. The whole world is one big parable, a crystallized analogue of the real thing.

Rabbi Horowitz understands midrash in much the same way as Rabbi Cordovero understands anthropomorphism—the metaphors are not foreign to their subject, but actual derivations of a higher reality. “So too,” he writes, “the simple meaning of any midrashic tale—its essential meaning—is as it is above. That which we generally understand as its simple meaning is actually how it comes to us having been clothed and clothed again in many layers of clothing.”

As Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi writes in *Tanya*:

“The Torah descends from its place of glory, as it is Gd’s will and wisdom . . . and from there it has journeyed in a descent though hidden stages, stage after stage . . . until it has clothed itself in materials matters and things of this world . . .”

Midrash, too, is speaking principally of something above. Where above? In which world?

For this, we have recourse to a teaching of Rabbi Isaac Luria, the Ari: The *peshat* (simple, literal) meaning of the text belongs to our World of Action. The alluded meaning (*remez*) speaks in the World of Formation, a step up from this physical reality. The midrash then provides us a glimpse into how things look from the World of Creation, the deepest plane of the created reality. Beyond that, the Kabbalistic meanings belong to the World of Emanation, a world in which all is open Gdliness.¹⁵

As it turns out, as we move through the various departments of Torah, we are actually traversing worlds. We move through the various departments of Torah, we are actually traversing worlds, viewing the same idea as it manifests in the various layers of the entirety of reality, like many facets of a single diamond.

Metaphor As Clothing

All of this will become clearer if we examine this metaphor of the metaphor: clothing. Why do ideas need clothing?

An author wishes to communicate an idea, an ethic or a perspective on life. If he would spell it out in the raw, the point won't come across. He needs something that will carry his audience from their perspective to his, so that they will see that which is currently imperceptible to them. He can't pick them up and take them there, and he can't plop his mind into their brains.

But what he can do is find clothing that fits the subject and makes it presentable, that hides whatever is distracting them and brings out the highlights he wants to point out. As good clothing brings out the natural beauty of the subject, so a good parable brings out a depth otherwise ineffable. Paradoxically, both do so through concealment—concealment for the sake of revealing a deeper beauty.

Right now, for example, I am providing a metaphor for metaphor. If I just tell you what a metaphor is and its purpose, I doubt that I'll get my point across. By telling you that metaphor is like clothing, I can communicate something about it that you may not have previously realized.

Now, clothing is a foreign layer, and so too a metaphor or analogy. The analogy may be a story about a wolf in a vineyard, a traveler to distant islands, or animals on a farm—and yet its content has nothing to do with wolves, grapes, islands or farms. If the audience gets stuck in the trappings and remains in the vineyard or on the farm, it would seem that the author has completely failed. George Orwell would certainly be dismayed by the number of high-school students (and some of their teachers) who believe he wrote a cute story about pigs and horses.

That is the case with most parables. But with the parables, metaphors and anthropomorphisms of Torah, matters are different: it's impossible to grasp the clothing without also grasping whatever is clothed inside. Even if you are oblivious to those contents, you're holding them tight.

Why the difference?

Because Aesop, Jonathan Swift and George Orwell found metaphors off the shelf and dressed their ideas within them. But, as Rabbi Horowitz wrote, the metaphor of Torah grows out of the ideas themselves. Just as you can't grab a turtle's shell without grabbing the turtle, so you can't grab a Torah metaphor without grabbing the entire Torah in all its essence.

You can't grab a turtle's shell without grabbing the turtle, and you can't grab a Torah metaphor without grabbing the essential Torah.

Why is a candy sweet? Because Torah is sweet. That is the authentic, primal sweetness—and from there is derived all the sweetness in the world.

Why is it that fish can live only in the sea? Because there are souls that can live only within the sea of Torah.

Why is it that the space beyond our tiny planet goes on for so many light-years beyond? Because the material world is so infinitesimally insignificant in comparison to the transcendental worlds beyond it.

And so, when the human being tastes a candy tossed at him in the schoolroom, ponders a midrash about fish in the sea, or stares up at the sky in awe, in all those things he senses a truth far beyond.

Human Language

It turns out that when discussing metaphor and midrash, we're really talking about human language.

Language, developmental psychology has taught us, is much more than a means of communication. Language is the human gateway from the world of sensation to the world of abstraction.

When the child begins to understand language and form sentences, a transformation begins, a metamorphosis from a creature of a world of colors, textures, sounds, tastes and smells to a transcendental being that conceives objects, classes of objects and relationships between them. That's why, while we've taught animals to communicate, we've yet to teach an animal language. As Bertrand Russell succinctly put it, "A dog cannot relate his autobiography; however eloquently he may bark, he cannot tell you that his parents were honest but poor."¹⁶

Language means more than saying, “I want a banana” or “the banana is yellow.” Language provides the ability to see beyond the banana and beyond the yellow, and to conceive of those as ideas, so that you can construct new ideas—and perceive ideas that you have never seen. You can understand the banana as one of a set called bananas, a subset of fruits, which are in turn a subset of food. You can build relationships in your mind between the yellow of the banana and the yellow of other objects. You can conceive of a red banana, or a yellow coconut, even though you’ve never seen such a thing. As the Russian social psychologist Language empowers us to turn the universe symbolically inside out. Alexander Luria wrote,¹⁷ with language “we can, if we will, turn the universe symbolically inside out.”¹⁸

Bruno Bettelheim is best known for his classic work of child psychology, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. He criticizes the “narrow-minded rationalists” who object to telling children fantasies, pointing out the value children receive from these stories in dealing with the emotions and turmoil of life. As for the unrealism, he writes that this is “an important device, because it makes obvious that the fairy tales’ concern is not useful information about the external world, but the inner process taking place in an individual.” In short, “The child intuitively comprehends that although these stories are *unreal*, they are not *untrue* . . .”

The Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, seems to be going beyond this. When a small child is told that the archangel Michael threw candies at him, that *is* very real to him. He imagines the angel there in the room, and the candies become very precious candies. And yet it is not a lie.

Indeed, that is just the point: That which is absolute truth in the world of the child, in your world is an absurd lie. Not because your world is any closer to the truth than the child’s. On the contrary, the innocence and simplicity of the child can embrace truths which the adult can only faintly apprehend from afar. The simplicity of the child can embrace truths which the adult can only faintly apprehend from afar. But because in the world of the child, language is not about facts, but about their meaning. The child has no problem with absurdities in the external world, because the child’s world is entirely an inner world. The inner world is all that counts to the child.

This is also the point being made by the Rebbe when he points out that when a speaking person talks about a hand, his principal meaning is not the muscle, skin and bones of the hand, but the vitality of that hand. If he says he was “handed” something, he is not saying that chunk of meat gave it to him, but that the life of a living being that is invested in that hand gave something to him.

So too, the Rebbe explained, when the small child hears about Gd’s hand, what is of principal concern to him is the awesome vitality of Gd’s mighty hand. When he is told that the candy was thrown by the archangel Michael, he principally relates that to the sweetness of that candy. That abstraction is there

with him immediately—because all human language is abstraction. As he grows older, the outer layers fall away, while that essential perception of awe remains.

And what could be more precious than the awe felt by a small child when imagining Gd’s mighty hand?

Yes, as the child grows older, he will have to strip away the fantasy and metaphor to find the concepts within. And it is vital that he have teachers that he respects, so that he will understand that they were not fools, that there must be something much deeper here.

Yet, as deep as he will fathom any truth, the most valuable approach will always be the awe and wonder, the simple faith and innocence which he experienced as a small child. “When I pray, I pray with the mind of a small child.”As Rabbi Isaac ben Sheshet Perfet (1326–1408) wrote, “When I pray, I pray with the mind of a small child.”**19**

Chaim Topol (best known for his role as Tevye in Fiddler on the Roof) once had a private audience with the Rebbe. He described one of his proposed television productions, a series of Bible stories for children.

The Rebbe told him that since he is doing this already, he would not discourage him. But if he had asked to begin with, he would not have recommended it.

Why?

Let us take the story of Abraham arguing with Gd over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, said the Rebbe. Imagine for a moment how the scene appears in the mind of a small child. The child sees Gd standing there before Abraham as they discuss the case at hand, face to face. In that, he sees the greatness of Abraham and his closeness to Gd, in a way no adult possibly could. And in a way that a television program must not portray.

As the child grows older, he understands that Gd is not a person with a body. Those trappings fall away. But the perception of closeness to Gd and the greatness of Abraham—that stays with him. And because he learned it as a child, it is far more real than anything an adult could be taught.**20**

Midrash, Torah and Reality

In our brief exploration here, we’ve come not only to a new way of understanding what midrash is all about, but a new approach to some of our most basic building blocks: What is language? What is Torah? And what is reality?

Some are stuck with a very pedestrian view of the Talmud and Midrash as nothing more than a repository of teachings from various teachers—teachers they imagine to be much like themselves, prone to exaggeration for the sake of making a point. Such a view is sorely insufficient at explaining Jewish practice and belief. Maharal of Prague, Rabbi Menachem Azariah, Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz, et al take a thoroughly different perspective, which extends from their concept of reality in general.

As Ramban lays out for us in his introduction to the Book of Genesis, Torah is not *about* reality; Torah *creates* reality. Things first exist in Torah and then emerge into the created world.

The world is the background to Gd’s story, and all that exists emerges from His telling of it.

The world is the background to Gd’s story, and all that exists emerges from His telling of it. It’s just that His voice reaches us muffled and distorted. But Torah is the direct communication between the Director and His people. Torah is the one channel through which His voice comes to us as a clear signal—albeit encoded in “materials matters and things of this world.”

Without this perspective, the uncompromising insistence of these scholars on the reality of aggadah is perplexing. What is so terrible if a Torah sage might tell a little scrap of fiction to make a point? Isn’t there value to poetry and fiction even if it has no substance even in some deeper plane of reality?

But once we understand that the words of the Torah sages are also Torah, that they too are clear channels through which the divine speaks to us, then everything changes. As Ramban says about the Book of Genesis, so the same could be said of midrash: If it was not a reality before the sage said it, it emerged into such at that point.

If the world is Gd’s palace, then Torah is the window through which the Master of the Palace peeks out at us. It’s left up to us to get the hint. And then, to go running after it.

Now that we know what Midrash is and what it isn’t, we really should apply all of this to a model case, one where we can determine what is to be taken as anecdote, what is to be taken figuratively, and how it could be true for each person on his or her own level.

Footnotes

1. A Jewish schoolroom.
2. *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah* 3:7.
3. See *Sefer ha-Ikkarim, Maamar 1, ch. 2, near the end*. See also *Torah Sheleimah, vol. 16, Miluim* 36.
4. *Mishneh Torah ad loc*. See also *Kesef Mishneh ad loc*.
5. On the following, see *Likkutei Sichot, vol. 15, pp. 79–80; Torat Menachem* 5743, Nasso, sec. 22; *Sefer ha-Sichot* 5752, vol. 1, pp. 126–127; and talks of 5734 and 5739 referenced above.
6. *Talmud, Chullin* 90b and *Tamid* 29a.
7. *Deuteronomy* 1:28.
8. *Responsum, Rabbi Menachem Azariah of Fano, page* 73.
9. *Nachmanides, introduction to his commentary on Genesis*.
10. *Rabbi Menachem Azariah of Fano, Asarah Maamarot, Maamar Chikur Din, part 3, chapter 22 (paraphrased)*. See *Likkutei Sichot, vol. 23, pp. 37ff and the footnotes there*. There is not necessarily a dispute between the two views.
11. *Shnei Luchot ha-Brit, Torah shebi-Chtav, near the end of Parshat Va'eira; ibid., Torah she-Baal Peh*.
12. *Ibid., Toldot Adam, Bayit Acharon* 12.
13. *Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, Pardes Rimonim, Shaar Erchei ha-Kinuyim, ch. 1*.
14. *Psalms* 94:9.
15. *Shaar ha-Gilgulim, end of hakdamah* 17; *Eitz Chaim (cited in the opening of Negid Mitzvah and in Nehar Shalom, end of Hakdamat Rechovot ha-Nahar); Mishnat Chassidim, Mesechet Chiyuv ha-Neshamot, ch. 1, mishnah* 2; et al.
16. *Bertrand Russell, Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits (1948), pt. 2, ch. 1*.
17. *A. R. Luria and F. I. Yudovich, Speech and the Development of Mental Processes in the Child (London: Staples Press, 1968)*.
18. For a fascinating discussion of the transformation effected by the acquisition of language and a history of the deaf learning to speak, see *Oliver Sacks, Seeing Voices, ch. 2*.
19. *Responsa of Rabbi Isaac ben Sheshet Perfet, 157; cited and explained in Sefer ha-Sichot* 5752, vol. 1, pp. 126–127.
20. Based on an interview by *Jewish Educational Media (JEM)*.