

Feminist Midrash: Storytelling as Survival
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"A story is a body for God."

-- Rachel Adler

Source 1: My Jewish Learning, "What is Midrash?"

Midrash (מדרש) is an interpretive act, seeking the answers to religious questions (both practical and theological) by plumbing the meaning of the words of the Torah. (In the Bible, the root d-r-sh [דרש] is used to mean inquiring into any matter, including occasionally to seek out God's word.) Midrash responds to contemporary problems and crafts new stories, making connections between new Jewish realities and the unchanging biblical text.

Midrash falls into two categories. When the subject is law and religious practice (halacha), it is called midrash halacha. Midrash aggadah, on the other hand, interprets biblical narrative, exploring questions of ethics or theology, or creating homilies and parables based on the text. (Aggadah means "telling"; any midrash which is not halakhic falls into this category.)

Discussion:

- What do you make of the practice of writing midrash? What do you think about the fact that it means to "inquire"?
- What questions about authority does this raise for you? In what ways are midrashim both part of the original text and something separate?
- Why is storytelling such a powerful way to make interventions in the text?

Source 2: Rabbi Rachel Barenblat, "Transformative Work: Midrash and Fanfiction"

Judaism has long been a read/write tradition. We are not expected to be passive recipients of revelation; we are expected to join the conversation. Receiving Torah at Sinai was the beginning of our story, not the end. The Jewish daily liturgy describes a God Who every day renews the work of creation; just so, revelation is an ongoing process, and we are expected to take part. Torah itself urges the reader to find a voice, since one of the last commandments in Torah is to write one's own Torah. (Deut. 31:19) This is an injunction which can be interpreted either literally (mastering the scribal arts of sofrut) or metaphorically (adding our perspectives to the body of commentary surrounding Torah—or, in another

interpretation, donating money to a qualified scribe who can write Torah for us.) The canon is never closed. New interpretations are always being created. Through midrash we reveal Torah's meanings. Midrash allows us to posit answers to our questions, to explore hidden motivations for mysterious moments in Torah, to offer explanation. Sometimes through midrash we temper Torah, rendering it more comprehensible to a contemporary audience or more in-tune with contemporary values. Midrash allows us to celebrate the loopholes and inconsistencies in Torah. They are not (only) accidents or signs of where the text was stitched together from disparate elements, but rather the hooks placed there by God precisely for the purpose of giving us something to work with.

Discussion:

- How do midrashim allow us to participate in Jewish text differently?
- What possibilities does this open up for people who have traditionally been marginalized by Jewish text - women, queer people, etc?
- What do you think about the idea that the canon of Jewish text is not closed? How does midrash allow us to tap into that?

Source 3: Rabbi Jill Hammer, "Miriam Under the Mountain" from *Sisters at Sinai: New Tales of Biblical Women*

"Moses led the people of the camp toward God, and they took their places at the foot of the mountain...The Lord came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain, and called Moses to the top of the mountain." - Exodus 19:17-20

And Miriam the Prophetess, Moses' sister, remained at the foot of the mountain. As Miriam looked at the mountain, she saw in the mountain a wrinkled brown stone like an eyelid.

Miriam looked around her and saw that everything in the camp had become still. No one saw the door in the mountain but Miriam. Inside the round tunnel there was darkness and silence. She thought that this must be what the world was like when Creation began: smooth and dark and narrow and round.

She walked and then, ahead of her, there was a light like the Sabbath, a golden light. Miriam turned and saw an old woman watching her. "What is this place?" Miriam asked.

"You are in the hollow of the mountain," the old woman said. "Inside the words. The stone tablets that your brother will receive - if he broke them open, this is what he would find. The Torah is the shadow and shell of this place."

Miriam trembled. "How am I worthy to have come here?" she asked.

"You who tend to the wombs of Israel are worthy to tend the womb of Torah," said the old woman. "I give you the gift of all of the empty spaces in the Torah," said the old woman. "Every place there is no ink, every place there is no word, I give to you as my gift."

"That is no great gift," said Miriam.

"When the world was created," the old woman told Miriam, "it began with a space."

Discussion:

- What questions do you think this contemporary feminist midrash is attempting to answer?
- How does this text relate to ideas of authority and revelation?
- What do you make of the idea of the "space between the texts"? Why is this a gift to Miriam?
- How do you understand the old woman's response at the end of the text, particularly to her relating the creation of midrash to the creation of the world?

Write your own midrashim! Some prompts from the Jewish Women's Archive:

1. What was life like on the ark? How did it feel to be Noah's wife or a son or daughter-in-law, taken along without having heard from God about the flood yourself? (See [Genesis 6:9-9:17](#))
2. How did Isaac or Rebecca feel when they first met? ([Genesis 24](#))
3. What was it like to be either Leah or Rachel, sisters who share one husband? How was it from Jacob's perspective to be married to two women? (See [Genesis 29:9-30:24](#))
4. What was Miriam's life like? ([Exodus 2:1-10](#), [Numbers 12](#))
5. Why did Aaron build the golden calf? ([Exodus 32](#))
6. What was it like to be an Israelite slave in Egypt and then taken on a journey with Moses into the wilderness, where there was limited food and water? ([Exodus 1:13-14](#), [5:6-23](#), [Exodus 16:1-4](#))