





*Abstract*

“The Midrash of Law and Legend:  
Applying Jewish Interpretive Methods to Christian Preaching of the Hebrew Bible”

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Project under the direction of Professor David Stark

Christian preachers often find the scriptures Jews and Christians hold in common difficult to preach on Sunday morning for many reasons. Whether they fear crossing over into supersessionism, believe that their congregants will find the text to be culturally inaccessible, or misunderstand the Hebrew Scriptures, the outcome is the same. Preachers fail to balance their preaching between the Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament. The result of this disproportionate preaching reinforces a myth of inaccessibility and the idea that the Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament are somehow separate from one another. This thesis argues, therefore, that Christian preachers can help their listeners value the Hebrew Bible by incorporating Jewish interpretive methods such as Midrashic dialogue, imagination and PaRDeS into their sermon preparation. In so doing, the preacher can also provide their congregants with new methods for learning from and engaging with the Hebrew Bible.

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The Midrash of Law and Legend:  
Applying Jewish Interpretive Methods to Christian Preaching of the Hebrew Bible

by

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## **Acknowledgements**

To Dwight, Emory, and Adelaide. The kitchen table is all yours again.

## List of Abbreviations

BCE	Before the Common Era
CE	Common Era
Deut	Deuteronomy
GNT	Greek New Testament
HB	Hebrew Bible
Lk	Luke
Mt	Matthew
PaRDeS	Acronym representing the Levels of Understanding in Jewish Biblical interpretation: <i>Peshat, Remez, Derash, and Sod</i>
TaNakh	Acronym representing the three divisions of the Hebrew Bible: Torah, Nevi'im, and Ketuvim or Teachings, Prophets and Writings



## Introduction

Christian preachers often find the scriptures Jews and Christians hold in common difficult to preach on Sunday morning for many reasons. Whether they fear crossing over into supersessionism, believe that their congregants will find the text to be culturally inaccessible, or misunderstand the TaNaKh<sup>1</sup>, the result is that the preacher fails to balance their preaching between the Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament. In opting for the Gospel or the Epistles in lieu of the Hebrew Bible, our congregants miss the richness of thirty-nine books of the Bible or approximately 68% of the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). Preaching solely from the Greek New Testament also perpetuates the common view that the Hebrew Bible is irrelevant or too culturally distant to be applied to our current context. This disproportionate preaching reinforces a myth of inaccessibility and the idea that the Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament are somehow separate from one another. This results in the devaluing of the scripture that Jews and Christians hold in common. Therefore, the challenge for Christian preachers is to help their listeners value the Hebrew Bible while encouraging them to engage with the text as they read, study and inwardly digest the law and literature found in the TaNaKh. This thesis argues that by incorporating Midrashic dialogue, attentive imagination and Jewish levels of understanding (or PaRDeS) from Jewish interpretive methods into sermon preparation, Christian preachers can break down the myth of inaccessibility and give congregants new methods for learning from and engaging with the Hebrew Bible.

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<sup>1</sup> TaNaKh – Acronym for the three divisions of the Hebrew Bible: *Torah*, *Nevi'im*, and *Ketuvim* or Torah, Prophets, and Writings.

Simply put, Midrashic dialogue is defined as finding the law within the law by creating new narratives that apply the law to the reader’s current context. Similarly, attentive imagination employs a meticulous or close reading of the Biblical text by forming a new narrative that explains the elements of the text. The Jewish levels of understanding (best known by its acronym, PaRDeS) includes *Peshat* or the straightforward interpretation of scripture, *Remez*, that uses metaphor, simile, or allusion to interpret the text, *Derash* which asks “What are the gaps in the story?” and finally, *Sod*, which explores what the passage tells us about the Divine. Together, these interpretive methods invite the reader into a literal, ethical and spiritual reading of the scripture while engaging the reader’s imagination.

## **Chapter 1: Framing the Problem**

In his article, “How Many Christians Preach from the Hebrew Bible?: Hermeneutic Problems and a Proposal,” Robert R. Howard argues that the Hebrew Bible is “all-to-often undervalued” in the Christian pulpit today especially mainstream Protestantism.<sup>2</sup> This act of undervaluing has negative consequences; the greatest being that it creates a divide between the two faiths in the minds of our congregants. He notes,

If preaching indeed “shapes our common faith,” then the way Christians handle the Jewish scriptures in preaching will reveal underlying theological and hermeneutical assumptions – a theological “lens of faith,” if you will – which will in turn form how we Christians view and treat the Jewish people.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Robert R Howard, “How Many Christians Preach from the Jewish Scriptures? Hermeneutic Problems and a Proposal,” *Encounter* 60, no. 2 (1999): 207–27.

<sup>3</sup> Howard quoting David G. Buttrick in *Preaching Jesus Christ*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988, 69.

Since Christianity is the larger of the two faiths, it also has the power to influence convictions and “their resultant actions, both individually and socially.”<sup>4</sup> So, exactly how the Christian preacher “handles the first thirty-nine books of our Bible is no idle matter at all” because it can affect overall attitudes and assumptions about Judaism among congregants causing them to undervalue the Hebrew Bible.<sup>5</sup>

### **Undervaluing or Devaluing?**

Yet, the problem is not just one of undervaluing. Ronald J. Allen and John C. Holbert in their collaborative work, *Holy Root, Holy Branches: Christian Preaching from the Old Testament* write that this problem involves devaluing as well. Their analysis of the problem is quite broad yet, like Howard, the authors agree that the general devaluing of the Hebrew Bible starts with the name, Old Testament. Using the term Old Testament to describe the Hebrew Bible, connotes images of a bent-over, arthritic centenarian, while using the term New Testament connotes images of a teenager full of freshness and vitality. What is the result? Preachers and their congregants treat the Hebrew Bible as something “past its day” or “slightly embarrassing to Christians” which stands in stark contrast to the people of antiquity who typically honored things of old.<sup>6</sup>

Many contemporary scholars agree that the terms ‘Old’ and ‘New’ add to this problem of devaluing the Hebrew Bible but still struggle with adopting a universal

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<sup>4</sup> Howard, 208.

<sup>5</sup> Howard, 208.

<sup>6</sup> Ronald J. Allen and John C. Holbert, *Holy Root, Holy Branches: Christian Preaching from the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995).

nomenclature.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, we sometimes refer to the first thirty-nine books of the Bible as the Old Testament, the Old Covenant, the Hebrew Bible, the Hebrew Scriptures, the Jewish Scriptures, the First Testament (with the last twenty-seven books being the Christian Second Testament).<sup>8</sup> Allen and Holbert recommend that Christians refer to the whole canon (Old and New) as ‘The Bible’ and then site individual books by name. Others suggest First Testament and Second Testament or Jewish Scriptures and Greek Scriptures. For this paper I will use the terms Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament to ensure that both scriptures are respected and valued equally.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to our struggle with names, Howard writes that the Lectionary exacerbates this problem of undervaluing in the minds of our congregants by serving up two readings each Sunday from the Greek New Testament (Gospel and Epistle) and only one from the Hebrew Bible.<sup>10</sup> The Greek New Testament is simply given more air time in the pulpit. And what is the result? On Sundays, the reading from Hebrew Bible is treated like some eccentric uncle at Thanksgiving dinner, says Allen and Holbert. The uncle is barely tolerated but allowed to offer an occasional story which the family finds to be quite odd as they smile politely and continue with their meal. Sadly, this remains true of most

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<sup>7</sup> Tertullian (c155-240) and Origen (c 184-253) were two of the earliest Christian scholars to use the terms Old and New Testaments.

<sup>8</sup> Allen and Holbert, 12-13.

<sup>9</sup> Note that Howard uses ‘Jewish Scriptures’ to reference the Old Testament while Allen and Holbert use the term ‘Hebrew Scriptures.’ Both Howard and Allen/Holbert note that ‘Hebrew Bible’ is still insufficient because some texts were in Aramaic.

<sup>10</sup> Howard, 207.

sermons preached from Christian pulpits today. They show little or no interest in addressing the Hebrew Bible.<sup>11</sup>

The problem, however, is much bigger than avoiding certain texts in favor of the Gospel on Sunday morning because undervaluing or devaluing the Hebrew Scriptures, over time, leads to supersessionism. Simply put, supersessionism is the belief that Christianity somehow succeeded Judaism, replacing the old covenant with the new. Supersessionism comes in two flavors, hard and soft. Writer David Novack states, “Hard or maximal supersessionism asserts that God has elected Christians to displace the Jews in the covenant between God and His people. Christianity [then,] is taken to be Judaism’s necessarily total successor or fulfillment. For hard supersessionists the only option for Jews is conversion to Christianity.”<sup>12</sup> Hard supersessionism (known as replacement theology) also purports that Jews who do not acknowledge Jesus as the Jewish Messiah fail in their calling as God’s chosen people. More commonly found in the pulpit today, however, is soft supersessionism which, “can mean accepting the historical fact that Jews have remained with the ‘un-supplemented’ ancient covenant while Christians have been called by God to a higher level by their affirmation of Jesus as the Christ.”<sup>13</sup> Regardless

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<sup>11</sup> Allen and Holbert, 15-16.

<sup>12</sup> David Novak, “Supersessionism Hard and Soft,” *First Things* 290 (February 2019) 27–31.

<sup>13</sup> Novak, 29.

of hard or soft, our Christian history of subordinating the Hebrew Bible (and the Jewish people and culture) is long, varied and often ugly.<sup>14</sup>

### **Supersessionism: How did we get here?**

Scholars argue that the beginning of the end has its locus in Justin Martyr's "Dialogue with Trypho the Jew" (c150 C.E.). Here the early Christian apologist argues his case for a "New Israel" or "True Israel" to replace Biblical Israel. This supersessionist sentiment was picked up by others including Martyr's contemporary Marcion, writing in Rome between 137 and 144 C.E. Marcion was often ridiculed as one of the church's "most dangerous heretics" for his rejection of the Hebrew Bible as being the work of an "alien God who was not the God of the New Testament."<sup>15</sup> Marcion famously advocated that, "The God of Jesus of Nazareth, and the God of Jesus's most sublime apostle Paul, could have had nothing to do with the monstrous collection of writings that the early church had looked to as its scriptural guide."<sup>16</sup> Marcion campaigned for cutting off the Hebrew Bible *in toto* from the Greek New Testament which sparked multiple controversies over what would be included or excluded from the Christian canon. Allen and Holbert note, however, that Marcion's ideas did force the church to determine what would be in or out of its canon.

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<sup>14</sup> Novak, 28. Novak also argues in his article, that supersessionism is not exclusive to Christianity because many Jews reject the validity of Christianity. In this way, Jewish hard supersessionism is the reverse of the Christian version.

<sup>15</sup> Allen and Holbert, 17.

<sup>16</sup> Allen and Holbert, 17.

It was also Marcion “who contended that the New Testament was a revelation of the real God and father of Yeshua [Jesus], the loving God of spirit and grace, as opposed to the Jewish God of the Hebrew Bible, a lesser and hateful deity who was quite willing to preoccupy Himself with material creation.”<sup>17</sup> During Marcion and Martyr’s time there existed a mind-body dualism in which all things spiritual and heavenly (of the mind) were given priority over Jewish concerns about God’s creation, the natural world (or things of the body). While Marcion was eventually condemned as a heretic by the church for his anti-Hebrew Bible sentiment, his ideas and that of Martyr’s germinated and took root. Over the centuries, scholars guilty of eisegesis (reading values and beliefs into the Scripture that are not there) “have attempted to make the New Testament party to that same mentality.”<sup>18</sup> Additionally, parts of the New Testament lend themselves especially well to this anti-Jewish and anti-Hebrew Bible reading. While a complete discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of this project, note that other Church Fathers including Origen and Augustine picked up and ran with Martyr’s and Marcion’s supersessionist ideals. From there it found fertile ground in Martin Luther and other reformers and hence bled into European and Western Protestant hermeneutics. Sadly, Marcion’s brand of supersessionism still haunts the Christian pulpit to this day.

The result of supersessionism, whether hard or soft, was hugely detrimental to the Jewish people over the past 1,500 years because supersessionism fostered the growth of anti-Jewish ideologies. This myopic view of the Hebrew Bible, its people and culture,

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<sup>17</sup> Raymond Gannon, “Supersessionism: Nothing Super About It!” *Jewish Voice* (December 1, 2015), <https://www.jewishvoice.org/supersessionism-nothing-super-about-it-jewish-voice> (Accessed April 10, 2020).

<sup>18</sup> Gannon, Paragraph 1.

would result in thousands of assaults upon the Jewish people and be a contributing factor to Christian complicity in the Holocaust. But on another level, supersessionism also damaged Christian self-understanding. Elizabeth Achtemeier writes,

“The history contained in the whole Bible seems to have one purpose in mind, to reveal to us who God is.... To the question, who is God? The Bible replies: I am Yahweh who brought you out of the land of Egypt; I am the king who sent Isaiah out to meet Ahaz at the end of this aqueduct from the upper pool, on the highway to the laundryman’s field; I am the God and father of your Lord Jesus Christ, who was born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried...”<sup>19</sup>

The Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament combine to witness to us from beginning to end, says Achtemeier. Together they are a “revelation of who [God]... is in terms of what He [God] has done.”<sup>20</sup> The Hebrew Bible gives us that history no less than the Greek New Testament. Thus, it is folly for Christians to attempt to practice Christianity without the Hebrew Bible. Without it we have no way of seeing the entire witness of God’s work in the world and, therefore, have no way of understanding our own tradition. Supersessionism in the end causes a distortion of the meaning of both texts.

What’s the solution? First, seek to understand how both hard and soft supersessionism in particular are used in the pulpit, and secondly, to adopt measures to shift our myopic view to a broad-minded one. In other words, the preacher must adopt a broader hermeneutical lens in order to help themselves and their listeners value the Hebrew Bible. To do that, the preacher must first identify hurtful strategies that eliminate

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<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Achtemeier, “Old Testament in the Church,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 12, no. 3 (March 1957): 48.

<sup>20</sup> Achtemeier, 48.

or subsume the Hebrew Bible. The following is a brief summary of some of those detrimental strategies.

### *Eliminating or Subsuming*

Howard states that, “Within the larger framework of supersessionist hermeneutic strategies that developed in European and Western Protestantism, we find two primary groupings: those which effectively eliminate the Jewish Scriptures, albeit with rather a subtle hand; and those which subsume (absorb) the Jewish Scriptures into a Christian model.”<sup>21</sup>

The Evolutionary Strategy, Howard argues, is an example of eliminating the Jewish Scriptures. This hermeneutic insists that the Hebrew Bible only recorded humankind’s evolution toward “true God-consciousness.” In other words, within history, faith continually evolves into higher and higher forms, and therefore the Hebrew Bible is at best only “propaedeutic” or an introductory study to the “full Christian faith.”<sup>22</sup> This can be witnessed in the Christian pulpit when the preacher makes a pretense of using a text from the Hebrew Bible but then quickly moves on to a Greek New Testament text that is offered as the “right” form of faith. In this model Christianity stands as a correction to the lesser faith of Judaism effectively eliminating the need for the Hebrew Bible. A variation of this Evolutionary Strategy can be found in Promise/Fulfillment Theology.<sup>23</sup> This

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<sup>21</sup> Howard, 211–12.

<sup>22</sup> Howard, 212.

<sup>23</sup> One should note that Achtemeier advocates for Promise/Fulfillment Theology in her preaching strategy (following the work of Gerhard von Rad). To faithfully preach the Hebrew Bible, Achtemeier believed that scripture readings from Hebrew Bible must always be paired with a reading from the Greek New Testament. This writer disagrees with Achtemeier’s strategy because it does not allow the Hebrew Bible to stand on its

maintains that God's promise to Israel in the Hebrew Bible is ultimately fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In other words, Christ is the final interpretation and Israel is not needed or is eliminated.

Yet another variation of elimination, writes Howard, is the Existentialist Strategy in which the Hebrew Bible is believed to be theologically antecedent to the Gospel. This strategy assumes that human nature remained the same in the Hebrew Bible (sinful or chronically pulling away from God), and that the Gospel is the final solution for reconciliation. When preachers fall prey to this strategy, they tend to "alert hearers to this condition, and (then) impel them to the newness of the Gospel."<sup>24</sup> The result is that the Hebrew Bible is eliminated by the sovereignty of the Gospel.

An example of subsuming (absorbing) the Jewishness of the Hebrew Bible is typology. Typology is generally defined as the interpretation of types and symbols in the Bible. An example of typological hermeneutics would be identifying a Jewish historic figure such as King David as a 'type of' or a 'foreshadowing of' Christ. This was first applied, notes Howard, by patristic preachers (c. 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> C, CE) with an emphasis on the mystical interpretation of the scripture. Yet this move still exists today as preachers create links between Jewish Biblical figures and Jesus, implying that the true meaning can only be found in the Greek New Testament. Another obvious example would be calling Adam a 'type of Christ' or Paul referring to Jesus is the "new Adam." (Romans

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own. Ultimately this approach can lead to the Christianization of and devaluation of the Hebrew Bible.

<sup>24</sup> Howard, 218. Quoting Elizabeth Achtemeier in "The Relevance of the Old Testament for Christian Preaching." *A Light Unto My Path: Old Testament Studies in Honor of Jacob M. Myers*, ed. Howard N. Bream et al. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1974) 8-9.

5:14 1 Cor 10:6). This negates the inherent Jewishness of the Hebrew Bible and again robs Jews of their sacred writings and Biblical figures. Ultimately, this also forces onto the Hebrew scriptures a dependency upon the Greek New Testament and denies “their autonomous integrity.”<sup>25</sup>

One could argue that types and symbols are heavily used in the Greek New Testament (by Paul in particular), so why is it wrong for the Christian preacher do the same with the Hebrew Bible? The simple answer is that Paul was a Jew and a Pharisee, and he used typology to confront other interpretations of his day. We, however, are not Jewish like Paul and therefore not part of the internal debate that occurred when Paul wrote his epistles. Consequently, using typology in preaching promotes supersessionism.

#### *The Law/Gospel Dichotomy*

Often preachers eliminate large portions of the Hebrew Bible by mis-characterizing the Hebrew Bible “as a book of law.”<sup>26</sup> In brief, this oppositional strategy stresses that the Hebrew Bible represents “the repressive Jewish law from which the Gospel liberates ...with its message of justification by grace through faith.”<sup>27</sup> This move was made popular in Protestantism by Martin Luther.<sup>28</sup> In so doing, this strategy overlooks “any text [in the Hebrew Bible] that might just contain liberative dimensions, thus demeaning

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<sup>25</sup> Howard, 218.

<sup>26</sup> Allen and Holbert, 17.

<sup>27</sup> Allen and Holbert, 17.

<sup>28</sup> This move was perpetuated in a different form in Paul Scott Wilson’s popular homiletic that instructs preachers to structure their sermons around trouble in the text, trouble in the world, grace in the text, grace in the world. See Paul Scott Wilson, *The Four Pages of a Sermon: A Guide to Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999).

both the scriptures and Judaism.”<sup>29</sup> Using this scheme, law is essentially dark and negative and stands in contrast to the goodness and light offered in the New Testament.<sup>30</sup>

### *Wrath/Mercy*

Wrath/Mercy is yet another variant of the same oppositional strategy. Here, the preacher portrays God as the God of wrath in the Hebrew Scriptures while Jesus reveals to us the merciful, loving side of God. Like its cousin, Law/Grace, this hermeneutical move leaves out other characteristics of God found in Hebrew Scripture: “wrath and mercy, but also grief, patience, humor, tolerance, justice, intimacy, and a willingness to be persuaded out of an action.”<sup>31</sup> For every oppositional strategy, the result is the same: “the Jewish Scriptures are [subsumed and] not permitted to stand on their own [as a] legitimate revelation of the purposes of God.”<sup>32</sup>

### *Allegory*

On its own, Allegory is a helpful interpretive mode whereby a meaning is read into the text from outside the text itself. “Allegorical methods of interpretation were an exceedingly popular interpretive move in Judaism and Christianity for well over fifteen hundred years.”<sup>33</sup> Christians will note that allegory is utilized heavily by Jesus in his

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<sup>29</sup> Howard, 218.

<sup>30</sup> Allen and Holbert, 17.

<sup>31</sup> Howard, 218.

<sup>32</sup> Howard, 217.

<sup>33</sup> Allen and Holbert, 23.

teaching, yet when overly applied to the law and literature of the Hebrew Bible by the Christian preacher, allegory results in absorbing or subsuming the Hebrew text.

When do preachers run into trouble with allegory? When they abuse it as a rhetorical device.<sup>34</sup> An obvious example is the story of the binding of Isaac where the boy, Isaac, is used as a foreshadowing of Jesus and Jesus's crucifixion (the son even carries his own wood for the sacrifice). The misuse of allegory here attempts to salvage the story of the binding of Isaac and make it into something else as if it needs to be rescued by Christianity. This approach denies the story of its inherent history and Jewishness and sends a message from the pulpit that the Jews have somehow misunderstood their own scriptures. This also compels the listener to believe that the Bible, as they know it, is in totality a Christian book and not Jewish at all. Ultimately, the misuse of allegory disparages the biblical history of Jewish people and suddenly, as Howard notes, "Adam is not really Adam, paradise is not really paradise, the serpent is not really a serpent and ultimately, Israel is not really Israel."<sup>35</sup>

### *Moralism*

In her article "The Old Testament in the Church," Elizabeth Achtemeier notes that moralism is another hermeneutical mode of 'supersessionism by elimination' in today's preaching. She writes that a frequent error of the preacher is to "moralize" the Hebrew Scriptures by presenting it as a collection of general religious truths "by which the

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<sup>34</sup> Allen and Holbert. 24.

<sup>35</sup> Howard, 214. Quoting Robert M. Grant and David W. Tracy. *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, (London: SCM Press) 1984.

present-day Christian can live.”<sup>36</sup> This occurs when the preacher attempts to construct a simple moral teaching from Hebrew law or literature and then draws a connection to contemporary life. The result is that the historical context of the Hebrew Bible is again eliminated, and the people, contexts, and our God who shaped this scripture remain remote from and irrelevant to the person in the pew. Yet, this stands in sharp contrast to the purpose of the Hebrew Bible, says Achtemeier, which is to reveal who God is by witnessing God’s action in its history. The Bible, then, is a witness from beginning to end of God’s unique story - the revelation of who God is in terms of what God has done.<sup>37</sup>

Achtemeier also notes that the preacher is charged with the task of giving the person in the pew the full story, “nothing lacking!”<sup>38</sup> Giving the full story includes thanking God for that divine wisdom which led the fledgling church to preserve the Hebrew Bible as the Bible for early Christians since the Greek New Testament was canonized much later. The Old Testament, therefore, is no less revelatory in character, she says, than the New. “It too witnesses to the unique history created by God and because it does, it is, and must always remain, part and parcel of the Christian revelation.”<sup>39</sup> Ultimately, moralizing the Hebrew scripture denies its revelatory character.

In summary, Israel’s “history can authoritatively illumine and guide our history in Christ... We are not separate from Israel by some vast historical gap, but participate

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<sup>36</sup> Achtemeier, 45–49.

<sup>37</sup> Achtemeier, 49.

<sup>38</sup> Achtemeier, 49.

<sup>39</sup> Achtemeier, 48.

historically in the relationship with God that Israel participated in.”<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Paul taught that through Christ we are adopted into the people of God along with Israel. Teaching this is today essential for the health of Christianity. “In fact, the Jewish Scriptures are absolutely essential in order for Christians to understand Jesus.”<sup>41</sup> While the Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament are distinct, “they both speak of the one God of Israel, describing this God as possessing a robust plethora of qualities. Ultimately, embracing the Hebrew Bible and recognizing that the covenant God forms is between the People and God, not just the individual, keeps the church from turning triumphalist. For these reasons (at least), Christian preaching cannot dispense with the Jewish Scriptures, lest it become aberrant – or something worse.”<sup>42</sup>

### **Healing Supersessionism from the Pulpit**

After acknowledging the myriad of ways that soft and hard supersessionism subsumes, allegorizes, moralizes or places the Hebrew Bible and Greek New Testament in opposition to one another, Christian preachers should reverse their course and adopt strategies to shift their own thinking and that of their congregants away from a myopic view of the Hebrew Bible. To do this effectively, the preacher can utilize the work of Krister Stendahl (d. 2008), former Dean of Harvard Divinity School and Lutheran Bishop

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<sup>40</sup> Howard, 214. Howard quoting Achtemeier, “The Relevance of the Old Testament for Christian Preaching,” 21; see also Achtemeier, *Preaching from the Old Testament*, 56-57.

<sup>41</sup> David Buttrick, *Homiletic Moves and Structures*, First Paperback Edition (Fortress Press, 1987). 354-55.

<sup>42</sup> Howard, 221.

of Stockholm.<sup>43</sup> Throughout his lifetime Stendahl worked diligently to seek out alternate ways to understand texts that caused harm especially in regards to the treatment of women and Jews. Mary C. Boys in her article “Turn It and Turn It Again” notes that Stendahl’s body of interpretive work gave rise to four hermeneutical principles that are still widely applicable for the pulpit and if embraced by the Christian preacher, can prevent further harm. They are 1.) It is not about me, 2.) Words grow legs and walk out of their context, 3.) Christianity as construct and, 4.) Leave room for holy envy.<sup>44</sup>

In many early articles Stendahl speaks about *tua res agitur* or “it’s all about you” or “it concerns you.”<sup>45</sup> Initially in his Biblical studies, he saw the stories in the Hebrew Bible or Greek New Testament as being all about him, a personal ethical guide. However, as Stendahl studied, he grew into a different way of reading the text that was much less ego centered. He realized that the Bible was not about him but about many other things from distant lands and ages.<sup>46</sup> (Much like Achtemeier’s warning against turning the Hebrew Bible into simple moralism.) Stendahl writes that the Bible then spoke to him from that “great distance, of centuries and cultures deeply different from [his] ...own. And it began to be, just by its difference, that the fascination grew, that it had a way of saying to [him]..., there are other ways of seeing and thinking and feeling and believing

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<sup>43</sup> Paul F Knitter, “Christianity and the Religions: A Zero-Sum Game? Reclaiming ‘the Path Not Taken’ and the Legacy of Krister Stendahl,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 46, no. 1 (2011): 5.

<sup>44</sup> Krister Stendahl, “Why I Love the Bible,” accessed January 13, 2021, <https://bulletin-archive.hds.harvard.edu/book/export/html/429591>, 1.

<sup>45</sup> Krister Stendahl, “Why I Love the Bible,” accessed January 13, 2021, <https://bulletin-archive.hds.harvard.edu/book/export/html/429591>, 1.

<sup>46</sup> Stendahl, “Why I Love the Bible,” 2.



when we use the Greek New Testament or Hebrew Scriptures to devalue the Jewish people or their sacred texts.<sup>50</sup>

With Stendhal’s third principle, Christianity as a religious construct, Stendhal writes, “Christianity is a construct that had not yet been formed – especially in New Testament times – and that the Jesus movement existed once as a Jewish “way” in Palestine and in the Diaspora.”<sup>51</sup> This detail is largely ignored by the Church. For example, congregants and preachers alike often speak of Jesus’s followers as Christians as if with his death and resurrection a great divide developed between Judaism and Christianity. If we preached that Christianity was not yet a religion, we could help our people “set aside simplistic dualisms and think more imaginatively,” says Boys.<sup>52</sup> Conversely, such an imagination might also reveal to us what a “limited construct we have made of the first-century Judaism” and help us place the text back in its historic context.<sup>53</sup> In this way, Jesus

Stands in primary opposition not to Judaism but to the Empire over which Caesar ruled as Lord and Savior. Responsibility for his death falls not to the Jews but to the Roman governor Pontius Pilate and [Pilate’s] alliance with the power class. Jesus, the Jew from Nazareth, suffered the excruciating death of crucifixion not as the lone victim of Jewish hostility to the son of God but as one of the thousands of Jews and others in the Empire tortured as a deterrent, lest they resist its rule.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Stendahl, “Why I Love the Bible.”

<sup>51</sup> Krister Stendahl, “Qumran and Supersessionism — And the Road Not Taken,” accessed January 18, 2021, [https://www.jcrelations.net/article/qumran-and-supersessionism-and-the-road-not-taken.html?tx\\_extension\\_pi1%5Baction%5D=detail&tx\\_extension\\_pi1%5Bcontroller%5D=News&cHash=f0d431225705ae589d2697cfe7f0d25e](https://www.jcrelations.net/article/qumran-and-supersessionism-and-the-road-not-taken.html?tx_extension_pi1%5Baction%5D=detail&tx_extension_pi1%5Bcontroller%5D=News&cHash=f0d431225705ae589d2697cfe7f0d25e).

<sup>52</sup> Boys, 291.

<sup>53</sup> Boys, 291.

<sup>54</sup> Boys, 291.

In his fourth hermeneutic, Stendahl suggests that we leave room for holy envy. Holy envy is when we recognize something beautiful in another tradition and let that tradition be, rather than trying to grab it and claim it.<sup>55</sup> An example of grabbing and claiming would be Christians hosting a Passover Seder meal. Holy envy, on the other hand, rejoices in the beauty of that tradition rather than trying to claim it as our own. Which begs the question, “Is this thesis grabbing and claiming Midrashic dialogue, attentive imagination and PaRDeS?” This writer argues in the negative because for Christians the purpose of studying Jewish interpretive methods is to better understand the mind of Jesus and his role as a rabbi and rhetorician. Like other rabbis of his time, Jesus used most of these interpretive methods organically long before the rabbis wrote their Midrashic commentaries. Furthermore, gaining knowledge of these interpretive methods helps us to better understand the Hebrew Bible which was Jesus’ Bible. Indeed, this thesis is an act of holy envy that helps the reader and this writer capture once again the imagination needed to “read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest”<sup>56</sup> holy scripture.

In summary, Stendahl’s four principles can become guiding hermeneutical questions that help the preacher avoid the pitfalls of devaluing or undervaluing the Hebrew Bible and its people from the pulpit. This project will continue in the stream of Stendahl’s thinking, that there is something to be gained from reading, studying, and inwardly digesting the Hebrew Bible within its own milieu that prevents the text from growing legs and walking out of its context while at the same time adhering to a healthy practice of holy envy. These two streams will be picked up again in a later Chapter where I apply these practices and some Jewish interpretive methods to my own sermons. The

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<sup>55</sup> Stendahl, “From God’s Perspective.”

<sup>56</sup> The Book of Common Prayer, Proper 28.

next Chapter will look at the body of work that falls under Jewish Midrashic Interpretation: *Halakah* and *Haggadah* in the *Talmud* to see what can be learned from early rabbinic sages and their methods of engaging with and interpreting their own scripture through dialogue, imagination and PaRDes.

## **Chapter 2: *Halakah* and *Haggadah*: One Big Ocean of Midrashic Interpretation**

Alexander Deeg, in his article “Imagination and Meticulousness: *Haggadah* and *Halakhah* in Judaism and Christian Preaching” argues that a study of Midrashic-Talmudic literature can promote a spirit of ecumenism and therefore stand counter to supersessionist tendencies so that “both traditions, which come from the same lineage, can ...live together.”<sup>57</sup> Deeg writes

“When there is mutual recognition of Christian and Jews as “twin brothers,” not only the old prejudices disappear; new possibilities for learning appear as well. This happens, for instance, when Christian homiletics does not merely explain again and again that Christian preaching has its roots in Jewish forms but instead accurately perceives how this Jewish homiletic foundation, from which the Christian sermon develop, came about, and in addition to this discovers how Jewish preaching and interpretation developed for hundreds of years up to the present alongside and with Christian versions.”<sup>58</sup>

Yet, there is a great irony at the core of rabbinic literature. On the one hand the ancient rabbis, the authors of the Talmud, believed that the Torah (the five books Moses) were dictated directly to Moses by God on Mount Sinai and “that every word and letter of the Torah - even the crowns of the letters - were meaningful, and the Torah contained all

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<sup>57</sup> Alexander Deeg, “Imagination and Meticulousness: *Haggadah* and *Halakhah* in Judaism and Christian Preaching,” *Homiletic (Online)* 34, no. 1 (2009). 139.

<sup>58</sup> Deeg, 139.

truth.”<sup>59</sup> On the other hand, the Rabbis did not hesitate to “embellish, retell, reimagine, or even radically change the stories of the Torah.”<sup>60</sup> This led to dual sacred traditions, The Written Torah and the Oral Torah. In fact, one midrash explains that Moses was given two Torahs on Mount Sinai: “God dictated the Torah to Moses during the day, and at night he explained it to him.”<sup>61</sup>

This chapter will study several Jewish interpretive methods in the Babylonian Talmud, the body of Jewish civil and ceremonial law and legend comprised of the *Mishnah* and the *Gemara*.<sup>62</sup> The first part of the Talmud, The *Mishnah*, is the first written compilation of Oral Law (generated c. 200 CE by Judah the Prince) and the second, the *Gemara*, is the compilation of subsequent rabbinical discussions about the *Mishnah*. This body of work that makes up the *Talmud* is part of an unbroken chain of literary tradition and interpretation in Judaism that begins with the Hebrew Bible and continues to the present day. Every generation while harkening back to the text also continues to extrapolate new meaning, “as a result, there is an ongoing process of reimagining the Bible found in virtually all postbiblical Jewish texts.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Howard Schwartz, *Reimagining the Bible: The Storytelling of the Rabbis* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1.

<sup>60</sup> Schwartz, 1.

<sup>61</sup> Schwartz, 1.

<sup>62</sup> The *Gemara* is rabbinical commentary on the *Mishnah*, and therefore forms the second of the two parts of Talmud.

<sup>63</sup> Schwartz, 1-11.

## Two Oceans: *Halakhah* and *Haggadah*

The expositions found in these commentaries deal with the underlying significance of the Biblical text and broadly answer two questions: “How must Jews conduct themselves and their institutions?” and, “What contemporary meaning can be drawn from the Scriptures?”<sup>64</sup> The amount of commentary generated by the sages to answer these questions is incredibly vast. “One reads and reads – yet realizes after much reading that only a teaspoonful of water has been taken out of this ocean.”<sup>65</sup> Therefore, in order to begin to grasp this giant sea of interpretation, scholars divide all of Jewish interpretive literature - into two oceans: *Halakhah* and *Haggadah*. *Halakah*, meaning “going or strolling” or “the way” is primarily concerned with the interpretation of the Five Books of Moses (the *Pentateuch*). It embraces all things statutory in answer to the above question, “How must Jews conduct themselves and their institutions?” On the other hand, *Haggadah* or “that which is told” is concerned with the imaginative or narrative literature of the sages and consists of parables, legends, sermons, wisdom sayings and ethical statements. Hence, *Haggadah* typically deals with all things “non-statutory” and seeks to answer the above question, “What contemporary meaning can be drawn from the Scriptures?” The sages’ exhortations here use “homiletic inventiveness” and imagination as they apply the Scripture to everyday life.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Reuven Hammer, *The Classic Midrash: Tannaitic Commentaries on the Bible* (Mahwah, NY: Paulist Press, 1994). 1.

<sup>65</sup> Deeg, 141.

<sup>66</sup> Hammer, 1.

Deeg provides more detail of these two oceans in his article. *Halakhah*, he says, is about “relating everything – every life experience – to Torah.”<sup>67</sup> The rabbis did this meticulously; passing down this form of study, discussion, and storytelling about the application of the law to each new generation and each new generation picked up the thread and continued the dialogue. *Haggadah*, like *Halakhah*, also functions as scriptural interpretation as the rabbis looked for small discoveries in the text; tiny tidbits of information that spark the imagination. “*Haggadah* refers to an exact reading of the words and letters in the written Torah”<sup>68</sup> and is characterized by slowness of reading, attention to the smallest detail, and notation of irregularities and contradictions. In this process, *Haggadah*, leaves more space for imagination, because there are no correct interpretations, and this freedom allowed the rabbis to construct new stories around the text.

Often, the term *Midrash* is used as a popular descriptor for this imaginative process of interpretation. This, however, can be confusing because, as scholar Jacob Neusner notes, *Midrash* can refer to Jewish Biblical interpretation as a whole, or the method used in interpreting scripture, or the collection of these interpretations into volumes (*Midrashim*).<sup>69</sup> For the sake of this paper, I will use *Midrash* to mean all of Jewish Biblical interpretation (both halakic and haggadic) that flourished during the Rabbinic period (200-700 CE). Why? Because often the line between halakic and

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<sup>67</sup> Deeg, 142.

<sup>68</sup> Deeg, 145.

<sup>69</sup> Jacob Neusner, *Questions and Answers: Intellectual Foundations of Judaism* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005). 41.

haggadic interpretation is hard to draw. The two oceans, after all, share the same water. It is this water, says Reuven Hammer, in his preface to *The Classic Midrash: Tannaitic Commentaries on the Bible*, that gave Judaism its afterlife and today still shapes Jewish theology, ethics, spirituality, and behavior.<sup>70</sup>

While I cannot cover everything in these two oceans due to the breadth and depth of the Talmud, I intend to focus on four approaches: 1.) examine several Halakic and Haggadic writings to find evidence of Jewish interpretive methods 2.) document those methods 3.) use them to go in search of contemporary Jewish Preaching that utilizes Midrash and finally, 4.) incorporate three of those methods into my own sermons: attentive imagination, Midrashic dialogue and PaRDeS.

## **Primary Methods of Interpretation**

*Howard Schwartz in his book, Reimagining the Bible: The Storytelling of the Rabbis, gives an excellent overview of these interpretive methods or tools, but first, Schwartz notes that Jewish storytelling, its legends, and myths, have become so entwined with all aspects of Jewish life that they took on the quality of archetypal symbols. "As with any system of symbols, then, it is necessary to [explain]...the symbolic intent. This requires a search for and mastery of the primary symbol."<sup>71</sup> It is this interpretation of the primary symbol that forms our first tool, what I will call open dialogue. Open dialogue*

The Rabbinic Academies of *Hillel* and *Shammai*<sup>72</sup> in the Talmudic period fostered this foundational method of interpretation by expressing opposing views as an act of

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<sup>70</sup> Hammer, 1.

<sup>71</sup> Schwartz, 31.

<sup>72</sup> Named after the Rabbis that founded them in late 1<sup>st</sup> Century BCE and early 1<sup>st</sup> Century CE.

exegesis.<sup>73</sup> A quote from Rabbi Eliezer (c. 800) shows that even the academies themselves, and not just their rhetoric, were oppositional in nature.

About Hillel and Shammai: Notwithstanding the fact that one school prohibits what the other allows, that one declares unfit what the other declares fit, the disciples of the two schools have never refrained from intermarriage. Likewise, as regards Levitical cleanliness and uncleanness, where one school declares clean what the other declares unclean, nevertheless they never hesitate to help one another in the work that according to the other faction might not be considered clean.<sup>74</sup>

In this example, one can see that dialogue was held in high esteem. Rabbinic schools regarded this as the best tool for understanding the text (or for arriving at the symbol behind the text). In truth, it is this mastery of meaning through argument that is at the heart of Midrash where open dialogue is the cornerstone for this and other interpretive methods. Howard Schwartz, notes that this need for interpretation through dialogue goes back to the existence of both a Written and Oral Torah (with the oral intended to explicate the written). Therefore, “the need for commentary [generated through debate or dialogue] was regarded as a necessity from the very giving of Torah on Mount Sinai.”<sup>75</sup> Or as the Talmud states regarding this method of interpretation, “Prior to the time of Solomon, the Torah was like a basket without handles, but when Solomon came he affixed the necessary handles.”<sup>76</sup> Open dialogue forms those handles.

*A Close Reading of the Text and the Seven Principles of Hillel*

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<sup>73</sup> Schwartz, 31-32.

<sup>74</sup> Schwartz, 32. Schwartz is quoting *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*.

<sup>75</sup> Schwartz, 33-38.

<sup>76</sup> Schwartz, 33-38. Schwartz quoting Genesis, Gen Rab. 69:8.

A second tool of interpretation (and possibly the oldest) is *Peshat* or scriptural exegesis where one passage in the Bible is used to explain another. From this method evolved more intricate ways to apply a close reading of the text, including seven principles or rules (*middot*) of Hillel which were later expanded to thirteen *middot* by Rabbi Ishmael (a Rabbi of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> C) and then to thirty-two rules by Rabbi Eliezer ben Jose (a Rabbi of the 2<sup>nd</sup> C). All were formed with the same purpose in mind, to help interpreters “reach an understanding of the *Hallakhah* (law) and provide general principles that could be deduced from the text. These *middot* were primarily focused on extracting the literal meaning of the text (or *Peshat*).”<sup>77</sup>

#### The Seven Principles Attributed to Hillel

Principle 1	<i>Qal Vahomer</i> : This is the principle of inference. The argument moves from a minor premise to a major one. It assumes that “a rule which applies to some minor matter will be [...] more applicable to a comparable matter of major importance.” The converse is also assumed: if a law is applicable to a major case, it will certainly apply to comparable minor instances.
Principle 2	<i>Gezerah Shavah</i> : This principle of "inference by comparison" is based on the assumption that the similarity of expression of two biblical laws implies that they may be interpreted similarly. The rule can be used to solve very basic lexicographical problems by comparing two different instances of rare biblical terms, but it can also be used much more broadly to solve problems arising from apparent contradictions within Scripture and to expand and apply the law.
Principle 3	<i>Binyan av mikatuv echad</i> : The main proposition of the third principle is to build a teaching based upon one verse. <i>Binyan av</i> is another device for establishing comparability between laws. It is based on the assumption that the presence of a similar obligation in several laws of the Torah must derive from a factor which all share in common, and that cases other than that specified by the text itself may be decided similarly, provided that they share that common

<sup>77</sup> W Sibley Towner, “Hermeneutical Systems of Hillel and the Tannaim: A Fresh Look,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 53 (1982): 101–35.

	factor. By using this <i>middah</i> , the rabbis were able to regard as merely illustrative the specific application of a legal principle reported in Scripture. This gave them the freedom to widely apply the principle to the problems of their own age, and thus they prolonged the discourse of Scripture.
Principle 4	<i>Binyan av mishnai katuvim</i> : Building a teaching based on two verses. This is like Principle 3.
Principle 5	<i>Kelal uferat-perat vekelal</i> : Teaching from a general principle to a specific one, or from a specific principle to a general one. Two variations of the same principle are in this case treated as one <i>middah</i> in the traditional list attributed to Hillel. The principle here is that "general and particular" stipulations limit one another, as do "particular and general" stipulations. It is based on the premise that if a general statement of law is followed immediately by specifics, further application of the law will be governed by the terms of those specifics. The opposite will also be true. This rule obviously could have special exegetical applications in the elucidation of biblical texts. However, it could in fact be used by expositors to make hermeneutical moves which had significant implications for the practices and laws of their own times, such as limiting the scope of applicability of sweeping biblical legal maxims.
Principle 6	<i>Keyotza bo bamakom acher</i> : "teaching based upon what is similar in another passage. "It is based on the very natural and proper assumption that an exegetical problem which arises with a text may legitimately be clarified by comparison with another text affected by the same question, but which has received adequate exegetical explanation. This <i>middah</i> seems to be less fixed in the traditional list of seven than the others. This is the only one of the <i>middot</i> of Hillel which is not incorporated into the traditional list of 13 rules of R. Ishmael.
Principle 7	<i>Devar halamed meinyano</i> : This final rule of Hillel establishes that "a matter [is to be] explained from its context." It is based on the observation that further clarification of the meaning of a word or phrase of Scripture, whether obscure or self-evident, can be discovered through analysis of the modifiers or predicates attached to it, and through attention to the literary structure or larger narrative environment in which it stands.

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<sup>78</sup> Towner, 101-35. My adaptation.

Schwartz notes that in addition to the rules of exegesis concerned with the literal meaning of the text, there were four other common techniques: *gematria*, *notarikon*, *temurah*, and *tzeruf*. In the application of *gematria* a numerical value is assigned each letter. When those values are added up the words with matching totals are assumed to be related. An example would be “the ladder Jacob saw reaching into heaven could be related to Mount Sinai, since the numerical total of *sullam* (ladder) is 130, the same as that of Sinai. After all, both the ladder and the Torah, received on Mount Sinai, connect earth and heaven, each in its own way.”<sup>79</sup> *Notarikon* takes the first letters of a word and makes an acrostic. An example would be the first words of the Torah (*Bereshit* or “in the beginning”) can represent the phrase, “In the beginning God saw that Israel would accept the Torah.” In that same vein, the method called *temurah* substitutes one letter in an acrostic for another and *tzeruf*, “rearranges a word to make it into another.” All of these methods, *gematria*, *notarikon*, *temurah* and *tzeruf* encourage free association (but Schwartz cautions that they can also be used to manipulate scripture to win an argument).<sup>80</sup>

Another interpretive approach was the use of allegory. Allegorical readings appear in the apocryphal text, the Wisdom of Solomon, and in the writings of Josephus and Philo, a second century Jewish historian and early Jewish philosopher, respectively.<sup>81</sup> Philo’s extreme allegorical reading of the Hebrew Bible (along with others) were at the time controversial because the Rabbis feared that this method of interpretation might be used

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<sup>79</sup> Schwartz, 35.

<sup>80</sup> Schwartz, 34.

<sup>81</sup> Josephus was a 1C Jewish historian. Philo was a 1C Jewish Philosopher.

against Judaism by Christian commentators (as indeed it was). Yet allegory was eventually embraced by the sages to explain passages that were hard to interpret any other way. Allegorical interpretations were necessary, the rabbis said, “to explain anthropomorphic expressions such as ‘the hand of God’ to sustain the conception of God as an incorporeal Being.”<sup>82</sup> In the end, allegorical interpretations made it possible for some passages to express profound meaning that those conveyed by the literal reading could not. One example is Hosea 12:5. This is one of the earliest interpretations using allegory. It suggests that “Jacob’s struggle with the angel may have been a struggle in prayer rather than physical contest.”<sup>83</sup> Another example would be Abram and Nabor taking wives in Genesis; Sarai being Abram’s wife and Milcah, Nabor’s wife. Milcah, the scripture says, is the daughter of Haran who is the father of Milcah and Iscah. (Gen 11:27-29) There is no mention of Iscah (Milcah’s sister) after this and the rabbis were at a loss as to how to identify her. The problem was solved in the Talmudic period by Rabbi Isaac, who observed that Iscah was really Sarai. Rabbi Isaac had no information about Iscah, but he looked at the root of the word Iscah (*sakhah*) which means to see or gaze. Sarai (Sarah) was known to have foreseen the future by divine inspiration.<sup>84</sup> Therefore, he deduced that Iscah must really be Sarai (Sarah), the missing sister. From this Rabbi Isaac goes one step further, he develops an allegorical explanation, being that Iscah represents the “pole of Sarah’s personality that functions as a seer. For tradition has it that

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<sup>82</sup> Schwartz, 35.

<sup>83</sup> Howard Schwartz, 34.

<sup>84</sup> *Degel Maheneh Ephraim, Bereshit 3C.*

Abraham was a great soothsayer, but that Sarah was even greater.”<sup>85</sup> Another example of a book of the Bible being allegorized is the Song of Songs. Rabbi Akiba, who established the principle of allegorizing an entire book, was the first to suggest that this be read as an allegory of the love between God and Israel (rather than between a man and a woman).

“The rabbis’ reservations about allegory remained a point of contention throughout the talmudic and midrashic periods (3-6 C), and allegory did not receive full sanction as a primary approach to the interpretation of Torah until the Kabbalistic era (13 C). At that time allegory was codified as one level of interpretation in the system identified by the acronym PaRDeS. This [allegorical]... approach was of the greatest value in perpetuating the expectation that any passage of the Torah is subject to multiple levels of meaning.”<sup>86</sup>

## PaRDeS

As noted previously, PaRDeS is an acronym for four levels of Jewish understanding: *Peshat*, *Remez*, *Derash*, and *Sod*. As interpretive methods these were applied to both Halakic and Haggadic writings. (Note that PaRDeS is not a four-step process, rather, each approach was utilized individually as the sages saw fit.)

*Peshat* – At the literal level is concerned with the straightforward meaning of the passage. (Reference Hillel’s Seven Principles above.)

*Remez* – *Remez* looks for connections between one text and another using metaphor, simile or allusion.

*Drash* (as in midrash) – *Drash* searches out both implicit and explicit meanings in the text. This level of understanding asks, “What is missing from the text or what is not readily apparent?” The rabbis then used this type of attentive imagination to add to or to

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<sup>85</sup> Schwartz, 36.

<sup>86</sup> Schwartz, 37.

fill in the gaps. Often a passage would be explained through allegory which is one dimension of *Drash*.

*Sod*, or “secret.” This is the Rabbis’ mystical understanding of the text or biblical narrative. It constitutes a vast grouping of literature known as Kabbalah. This method asks, “What is the hidden meaning that can be revealed here in the life of human beings, and what does this tell us about the inner nature of the Divine?”<sup>87</sup> An example of how the Rabbis applied different levels of understanding to scripture, can be found in an examination of rabbinic commentary on the Song of Songs.

From the *Sefer Ha-Aggadah*: (Song of Songs)

“Behold, thou art fair, My love, behold, thou are fair” (Song 4:1). R. Akiva said: The entire world, all of it, is not equal in worth to the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel. Why? Because all other books in the Writings are holy, whereas the Song of Songs is holy of holies.

In illustration, R. Eleazar ben Azariah told the parable of a man who took a *seah* of wheat and gave it to a baker, to whom he said: Try to get out of it so much [course] flour, so much bran, so much course bran, and so much fine flour. And sift out of the fine flour enough for me to bake a cake, elegant, dainty, and savory. So, too, from all of Solomon’s wisdom there was sifted out for Israel only the Song of Songs, the most beautiful of songs, the most sublime of songs. See how the Holy One praises Israel in it: “Behold, thou art fair, my love, behold, thou art fair.”<sup>88</sup>

Of course, at the literal level or *peshat*, Song of Songs speaks of erotic love between a man and a woman. As required of Talmudic interpretation, the sages begin by grounding the discussion in one verse. Here that verse is, “Behold, thou art fair, my love, behold,

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<sup>87</sup> Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, *Midrash: Reading the Bible with Question Marks* (Brewster, Mass: Paraclete Press, 2007), 28-30.

<sup>88</sup> Hayyim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky, eds., *The Book of Legends/Sefer Ha-Aggadah: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. William G. Braude, (New York: Schocken Books, 1992). 484:136.

thou are fair” (Song 4:1). Then another level is easily recognizable, *Remez*, where the rabbi uses a simile to explain the depth of meaning in the Song of Songs (e.g. The Song of Songs is like asking the baker to grind your wheat for different cooking purposes: course bran for regular use or fine flour for baking sweet cakes, so too are the multifaceted meanings of the Song of Songs). It is only after this level of understanding is exhausted that *Drash* as another level of interpretation comes into play. Here the Song of Songs is now allegory depicting a love song between God and Israel saying, “See how the holy one praises Israel.”<sup>89</sup>

This example shows how the rabbis selectively applied different levels of understanding or PaRDeS. Again, note that PaRDeS is not a linear method that demands the completion of one level before proceeding to the next. The rabbis were free to apply each as they saw fit. However, as seen above, their interpretations were always grounded in a verse of scripture, *Peshat*, and typically exhausted all aspects of *Remez* (looking for connections between one text and another through the use of metaphor, simile or allusion) before moving to allegory (one function of *Drash*).

### **Halakic Interpretation: Making What is Implicit Explicit**

To understand “what is at stake in studying the *Talmud*, imagine, if you can, a classic that portrays the norms of an entire society – but only in bits and pieces.”<sup>90</sup> This massive collection of bits and pieces forms an disjointed classic making study difficult to say the least because it can be thoroughly unfocused and unsystematic. Yet the Babylonian Talmud (known also as the *Talmud Bavli* or simply *Bavli*) is exactly that and,

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<sup>89</sup> Schwartz, 38.

<sup>90</sup> Jacob Neusner, *First Steps in the Talmud: A Guide to the Confused* (University Press of America, 2012). Preface. 42.

regardless of these traits, it serves as a primary source of Jewish Law. To review, the *Talmud* is comprised of the *Mishnah*, the authoritative collection of exegetical material embodying the oral tradition of Jewish law, and the *Gemara*, a rabbinical commentary on the Mishnah, forming the second part of the Talmud. The Gemara often encompasses other Tannaitic writings and expounds heavily on the Hebrew Bible.

The Mishnah's governing rule is to make explicit what is implicit. Jewish theologian Jacob Neusner in his book, *First Steps in the Talmud: A Guide to the Confused*, categorizes the types of Mishnah's commentary beginning with Rhetorical Paradigms. He writes about three such paradigms. The first and most commonplace is framed by the question, "What is the source of the rule of the Mishnah?" The second paradigm is to ask, "Does the law stand for an individual's opinion or a consensus of sages?" Another way to phrase that question would be to ask, "Who is the authority behind the Mishnah's rule?" The third and the most conventional paradigm according to Neusner is the "explanation of meanings of words and phrases in the Mishnah, appealing for scriptural parallels." The rabbis also used text-criticism employing the words 'it is necessary' to present more than a single rule or case in order to solve an exegetical problem. The rabbis' goal here was to determine if the law/rule under discussion was coherent and if not, determine which principles conflict.<sup>91</sup>

In addition to our three paradigms and textual criticism, the rabbis were also concerned with the execution of the law of the Mishnah. In other words, "How is the law realized?" This often involves, as Neusner notes, "presenting a theoretical possibility that is subject to confirmation, or refutation, by a statement of a Mishnah-paragraph." And

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<sup>91</sup> Neusner, *First Steps in the Talmud*.49-52.

finally, if there is a dispute among the rabbis, “a statement of the decided law” is generally included.<sup>92</sup>

An example of this incoherent classic follows as a discussion on the *Shema* that begins, “Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one.” The *Shema* (Deut. 6:4) is prayed twice daily, in the morning and evening to fulfill a *mitzvah* or religious commandment in response to, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.”<sup>93</sup> (Exodus 20:2) “The *Mishna* opens with the laws regarding the appropriate time to recite *Shema*.<sup>94</sup> This appears in the first of the six orders of the *Mishnah*: Seeds (*Berakhot* or Blessings), Holidays, Women, Damages, Holy Things, and Purity. Seeds discusses the rules of prayer and blessings. What follows is the Rabbis’ debate regarding when the *Shema* should be recited.<sup>95</sup>

From *Bavil Berakhot* (Blessings) 1 and 2:

MISHNA: From when, that is, from what time, does one recite *Shema* in the evening? From the time when the priests enter to partake of their *teruma* [offering]. Until when does the time for the recitation of the evening *Shema* extend? Until the end of the first watch. The term used in the Torah (Deuteronomy 6:7) to indicate the time for the recitation of the evening *Shema* is *beshokhbekha*, when you lie down, which refers to the time in which individuals

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<sup>92</sup> Neusner, *First Steps in the Talmud*, 56.

<sup>93</sup> For the complete *Shema*, Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21; Numbers 15:37-41, see Appendix 1.

<sup>94</sup> Neusner, *First Steps in the Talmud*, 44-46 and *Bavli Berakhot* 1.

<sup>95</sup> Jacob Neusner, *Questions and Answers: Intellectual Foundations of Judaism* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Pub, 2006). 67. When the Talmud puts forth an authoritative statement of the *Halakah*, it will be in Hebrew. When it moves to analytical discussion of the law, it will be in Aramaic. “Hebrew is the language of the law, Aramaic of the argument and analysis.” (67)

go to sleep. Therefore, the time for the recitation of *Shema* is the first portion of the night, when individuals typically prepare for sleep. That is the statement of Rabbi Eliezer.

The Rabbis say: The time for the recitation of the evening *Shema* is until midnight.

Rabban Gamliel says: One may recite *Shema* until dawn, indicating that *beshokhbekha* is to be understood as a reference to the entire time people sleep in their beds, the whole night.

The Mishna relates that Rabban Gamliel practiced in accordance with his ruling. There was an incident where Rabban Gamliel's sons returned very late from a wedding hall. They said to him, as they had been preoccupied with celebrating with the groom and bride: We did not recite *Shema*. He said to them: If the dawn has not yet arrived, you are obligated to recite *Shema*. Since Rabban Gamliel's opinion disagreed with that of the Rabbis, he explained to his sons that the Rabbis actually agree with him, and that it is not only with regard to the *halakha* of the recitation of *Shema*, but rather, wherever the Sages say until midnight, the mitzva may be performed until dawn.

GEMARA: The Mishna opens with the laws concerning the appropriate time to recite *Shema* with the question: From when does one recite *Shema* in the evening? With regard to this question, the Gemara asks: On the basis of what prior knowledge does the *tanna* [teacher] of our *mishna* ask: From when? It would seem from his question that the obligation to recite *Shema* in the evening was already established, and that the *tanna* seeks only to clarify details that relate to it. But our *mishna* is the very first *mishna* in the *Talmud*.

The *Gemara* asks: And furthermore, what distinguishes the evening *Shema*, that it was taught first? Let the *tanna* teach regarding the recitation of the morning *Shema* first. Since most mitzvot apply during the day, the *tanna* should discuss the morning *Shema* before discussing the evening *Shema*, just as the daily morning offering is discussed before the evening offering (*Tosefot HaRosh*).

The *Gemara* offers a single response to both questions: The *tanna* bases himself on the verse as it is written: "You will talk of them when you sit in your home, and when you walk along the way, when you lie down, and when you arise" (Deut 6:7). By teaching the laws of the evening *Shema* first, the *tanna* has established that the teachings of the Oral Torah correspond to that which is taught in the Written Torah. And based on the Written Torah, the *tanna* teaches the oral law: When is the time for the recitation of *Shema* of lying down as commanded in

the Torah? From when the priests enter to partake of their *teruma*. Just as the Written Torah begins with the evening *Shema*, so too must the Oral Torah.<sup>96</sup>

Applying the above rhetorical paradigms from Jabob Neusner's *First Steps in the Talmud*, I attempt to answer the following questions:

1. What is the source of the rule of the Mishnah? "You will talk of them when you sit in your home, and when you walk along the way, when you lie down, and when you arise" (Deut 6:7)
2. Does the law stand as an individual's opinion or a consensus of the sages? It is evident here that there is no consensus between Rabbis, hence the need for this debate. Note that Rabbi Eliezer's opinion is that "the time for the recitation of the *Shema* is the first portion of the night, when individuals typically prepare for sleep." A previous consensus among the Rabbis says, "The time for the recitation of the evening *Shema* is until midnight."
3. Are there explanations of the meaning of words and phrases in the Mishnah? Are there scriptural parallels? The Mishnah relates the story of Rabban Gamliel's son coming home late from a wedding party. He missed the recitation of the *Shema*. Therefore, Gamliel advocates for the recitation of the *Shema* until dawn, so that the son can complete his *mitzvah*. The scriptural parallel used to support this argument is, "You will talk of them when you sit in your home, and when you walk along the way, when you lie down, and when you arise." (Deut 6:7)

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<sup>96</sup> "Mishnah Berakhot 1:2 with Connections," accessed August 6, 2020, <https://www.sefaria.org/>.

4. Is there final consensus or judgment passed down? Yes, as it is written, “By teaching the laws of the ‘Evening *Shema*’ first, the *tanna* [teacher] has established that the teachings of the Oral Torah correspond to that which is taught in the Written Torah. And based on the Written Torah, the *tanna* teaches the oral law: When is the time for the recitation of *Shema* of lying down as commanded in the Torah? From when the priests enter to partake of their *teruma* [offering].

The foregoing shows that Mishnah-commentary is a process of clarification. The Rabbis stand not only within the framework of the *Mishnah*, aiming at the explanation of what it says, they also take a stance outside of that framework and propose to challenge its statements or its implications. To understand precisely what the *Talmud* means by a commentary to the *Misnah*, we have to begin with the understanding that the *Talmud* asks the questions of not only of the teacher, standing inside of the document and looking outward, but also of the reader, located outside of the document and looking inward.<sup>97</sup> Regardless of location, the writings of the Rabbis were not incoherent but rather “purposive and internally coherent, all of them displaying that sustained analytical and systematic, argumentative purpose that characterizes the Talmud overall.”<sup>98</sup>

### **Haggadic Interpretation – Legend and Lore**

An excellent example of the “extreme midrashic license” and attentive imagination that the Rabbis took with *Haggadah* is the Binding of Isaac, the *Akedah*.

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<sup>97</sup> Neusner, *First Steps in the Talmud*, 38.

<sup>98</sup> Neusner, *First Steps in the Talmud*, 195.

Here the rabbis work to fill in the gaps in the story by adding to the narrative to explain or clarify the text. In *The Book of Legends, Sefer Ha-Aggadah*,<sup>99</sup> Satan plays a large part in goading Abraham to perform the sacrifice, and Isaac himself becomes a very willing participant (nothing like the child depicted in Genesis 22:6-8 who remains silent when told by his father that God would provide the ram necessary for the sacrifice).

“When Abraham was about to do the sacrifice, Isaac said, “Father, bind my hands and my feet, for the urge to live is so willful that when I see the knife coming at me, I may flinch involuntarily causing the knife to cut improperly and thus disqualify myself as an offering. So I beg you bind me in such a way that no blemish will befall me.” So Abraham “bound his son well” (Gen 22:9). Then Isaac said to Abraham, “Father, don’t tell mother about this while she’s standing over a pit or on a rooftop, or she might might herself down and be killed.”<sup>100</sup>

At this point in the story it is Satan that appears and shoves, “Abraham’s arm aside, so that the knife fell out of his hand.” As Abraham reaches again for the knife, intent on his purpose, he quotes Psalm 121, raising his voice so that he is heard by God, “I lift mine eyes to the mountains; whence will my help come?” (Ps 121:1) God hears his plea and flings open the heavens to reveal a host of angels. The angels ask God, “Master of the universe, the oath ‘Thus shall be thy seed’ (Gen 15:5), what is to become of it?” (Referring to God’s promise to multiply the line of Abraham.) It is then and only then that God responds, sending the angel Gabriel to intervene saying to Gabriel, “Why are you standing still? Do not let Abraham go on!” But in the sages’ version, the appearance of Gabriel is not sufficient to dissuade Abraham from completing his task. Instead, Abraham chides the angel Gabriel insisting that he will not leave the altar until he speaks his mind directly to the Holy One who commanded the sacrifice in the first place. He will

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<sup>99</sup> An anthology of classical Rabbinic literature.

<sup>100</sup> Bialik and Ravnitzky, *The Book of Legends: Sefer Ha-Aggadah, Legends from the Talmud and Midrash. Sefer 3.41.*

not leave until he says, “All that I need to say.” As you can imagine, a robust dialogue follows in an attempt to answer the angel’s question, “Why would God break his original promise to make Abraham’s descendants ‘as numerous as the stars in the sky?’” (Gen 26:4)

Looking closely at *Sefer 3.45* one can see how this imaginative opening out of scripture was used with remarkable freedom. After all the purpose of many midrashim was not primarily literary; they were an attempt to substantiate a point of the Law, clarify a contradiction in the biblical text or offer an analogy. However, “the legends of the Midrash had to remain linked to the biblical verses...”,<sup>101</sup> as this legend does with the primary texts being the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen 22) and God’s promise to make numerous Abraham’s descendants (Gen 15). The legend also fits within the definition of *Drash* (as in *midrash*) as the Rabbis searched for what was missing from the text that was not readily apparent to correct the contradiction.

In this case (*Sefer 3.45*) the legend is crafted to clarify a contradiction or gap in the biblical text, “Why would God order Abraham to kill Isaac after promising to multiply his descendants?” The answer (through storytelling) that the sages construct, inserts new characters like the protagonist Satan, gives more agency to Isaac who becomes an active and willing participant in his own sacrifice, has Abraham demand a satisfactory answer from God as to why he would break his promise, and concludes with a rousing dialogue between Abraham and God as God attempts to explain His ways to Abraham. At one point in the concluding dialogue, God says, “You had your say, and now I have Mine.” (*Sefer 3.45*) In short, the people will continue in their cycle of living,

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<sup>101</sup> Schwartz, 5.

sinning, and being tested by many things and God will continue to judge, redeem, and forgive. God concludes the argument by reassuring Abraham that in the future when His people call upon him (by blowing the horn of a ram or *Shofar*) that he will hear them.

This answer must not have been satisfactory because subsequent Rabbis return to Satan's involvement in the story. As it is told in *Sefer* 3.46, a ram was following Abraham and Isaac during their journey to the altar, but Satan blocked it in order to make a substitute sacrifice impossible. Furthermore, it was God that provided the ram. This speaks to the subtext of this legend, "Why do we sin?" Because, in the view of the sages, Satan was an active protagonist leading us astray so that we cannot recognize God's presence in a time of crisis. The ram represents God's presence. This addition represents a common practice of the Rabbis in adding to or continuing to clarify. "In many ways, then, the postbiblical written tradition may be seen as an extension of the oral tradition: instead of regarding what had been set down in writing as fixed, later commentators regarded the tale itself as malleable, as if a single story were being retold and embellished over many generations."<sup>102</sup>

While this chapter examined some of the methods that early rabbinic sages engaged with when interpreting their own scripture, from here I turn to modern day applications by investigating how Talmudic hermeneutics and in particular – dialogue, attentive imagination and PaReDs – are utilized by contemporary Rabbis in their homilies and storytelling. Chapter 3: Midrashic Interpretation in Jewish Preaching and Storytelling Today

Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso is a storyteller and author of children's books that reimagine the foundational stories of the Hebrew Bible. Some of her best-known books for children include *Adam and Eve's First Sunset*, *Cain and Able: Finding the fruits of*

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<sup>102</sup> Schwartz, 8.

*peace*, and *Noah's Wife*. Sasso also wrote *God's Echo: Exploring Scripture with Midrash*, a book for adults that encourages the reader of scripture to ask "What are the gaps in the story?" and "What is missing here?" Each of her books is an adventure in the application of *Derash* (of PaRDeS) and attentive imagination as she forms new narratives around the original stories.

Sasso's work, specifically her book *Noah's Wife* of rabbinic hermeneutics summarized in a table below, three sermons from rabbis use dialogue, attentive imagination and PaRDeS.

### **Sasso and Storytelling**

Sasso writes in her article, "Once Upon a Time – The Rabbi as Storyteller" that

Every child has a spiritual life, an innate religious curiosity. Unfortunately, we have not honored that life. Instead, we sought to tell our children what God's voice is, assuming, of course, that we hear it, rather than allow them to tell us of the voice of God they hear, and assuming, of course, that they really do not. But the opposite is true.<sup>103</sup>

What happens when a child's religious curiosity is not honored? If we can't find a home in God as children, when our spirituality is full of organic wonder and imagination, we are bound to have difficulty finding God as adults.<sup>104</sup> Helping children connect to the voice of God through story is Sasso's main objective. She notes that the rabbis of old embraced the same purpose. They knew that they could talk about Torah all day long but the message and meaning behind the scripture was "was insufficient without story."<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, "Once upon a Time: The Rabbi as Storyteller," *The Reconstructionist* 68, no. 2 (2004): 65.

<sup>104</sup> Sasso, "Once upon a Time," 65–69.

<sup>105</sup> Sasso, "Once upon a Time," 66.

Sasso uses Genesis 1:1 as an example. The beginning of the Hebrew Bible starts with a story, “In the beginning,” rather than the law to quickly engage the reader. Rabbi Nathan of Nemirov adds to this by suggesting that Genesis begins with a story because “stories have the power to awaken a person’s heart.”<sup>106</sup> Sasso found this to be true as a young Rabbi. After preaching week after week on Maimonides, Abraham Joshua Heschel and Mordecai Kaplan, she could tell she was not getting through to her people. Then one day, she told a children’s story which the congregation loved. Why? Because the story spoke to that hunger. Through story, we can easily see ourselves in the faces of our less-than-perfect ancestors. So, in short, stories transform the soul as we encounter ourselves and God in the message.

Sasso names several attributes of storytelling in her article that are pertinent to both Jewish and Christian preaching:

1. The act of storytelling and listening to stories are both spiritual exercises.  
Because, to truly hear a story, it is necessary to focus your attention, be present and quiet yourself. This makes space for God.
2. The characters of a story invite the reader into the story as witnesses.
3. “Stories help us imagine what lies beneath the surface, to wonder at what we might otherwise take for granted.”<sup>107</sup>
4. “Stories leave a lasting impression on the brain and heart that influence how we respond to life.”<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Sasso, “Once upon a Time,” 65.

<sup>107</sup> Sasso, “Once Upon a Time,” 68-69.

<sup>108</sup> Sasso, “Once Upon a Time,” 68-69.

5. A good story can narrow the field of preaching possibilities for the Rabbi/Pastor; allowing the preacher to go into meticulous detail with one idea rather than constructing the sermon around too many themes. In a similar fashion, the sermon based on story or narrative, holds the listeners by focusing on one point of attention.
6. Good narrative doesn't simply explain, it transforms.<sup>109</sup>

Sasso addresses most of these attributes in her children's book, "Noah's Wife: The Story of Naamah"<sup>110</sup> Like the early rabbis, she embellishes the stories of scripture with rabbinic Midrashim. In this story she utilizes *Derash*, asking, "What's missing from the story of Noah and the Ark?" and "Who is invisible or absent here?" She then endeavors to fill those gaps with new narratives, stating "What the Bible doesn't say, the Midrash imagines."<sup>111</sup>

In *Noah's Wife: The Story of Naamah* (2002), Sasso asks after a close reading of the text, "Where was Noah's wife during the building of the ark and the flood?" Simply put, she's missing. Turning then to rabbinic midrash, Sasso found only two names: *Naamah*, meaning because her deeds were pleasing (*neenum*) and *Emzerah* – meaning mother of seed.<sup>112</sup> From there Sasso uses attentive imagination to create a parallel story to Noah's

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<sup>109</sup> Sasso, "Once upon a Time," 68-69.

<sup>110</sup> Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, *Noah's Wife: The Story of Naamah*, 1st edition (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2002).

<sup>111</sup> Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, "The Role of Narrative in the Spiritual Formation of Children: Walking in Cain's Shoes: Sacred Narrative with Question Marks," *Journal of Family Ministry* 19, no. 2 (2005): 13–26.

<sup>112</sup> Sasso, "The Role of Narrative in the Spiritual Formation of Children," 19.

of Naamah collecting two of every kind of plant. She builds a garden on the Ark to protect her seedlings. However, on one of her many botanist-like outings, she decides to ignore the weed-like dandelion. Sasso goes into great detail about the plants and seeds Naamah does collect and has God point out to Naamah that she must take the lowly, forgotten dandelion as well. After the floodwaters recede, Naamah replants the earth making certain the dandelion is included with the rest. God saw all that Naamah had planted and called her the ‘mother of seed’ because of her great love of the earth. The dandelions were spread all over the earth. Naamah now loved her dandelions.<sup>113</sup>

This, like other midrashim, draws a connection between tradition’s ancient story and the personal world of the author often introducing new matters of concern to another generation, remaking what constitutes “our story.” Here, Naamah represents all people, ostracized children, or women, who have been denied a voice in history or the Biblical narrative. They are the dandelions.<sup>114</sup>

Sasso’s childrens’ books (as stated above) are an adventure in Midrash or *Derash* of PaRDeS. However, to invent a new narrative that explores the gaps, Sasso first used attentive imagination which requires a close reading of the text. Based on this close reading, Sasso creates new dialogue in her narrative that develops the character of Naamah who goes unnamed in the original story. In this way the Biblical story is re-imagined for a new audience and the gaps in the story are expounded upon. If this process works well for storytelling, how then, does *Derash*, along with attentive imagination and dialogue, materialize in the Jewish pulpit today? That will be the topic of

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<sup>113</sup> Sasso, “The Role of Narrative in the Spiritual Formation of Children,” 19-20.

<sup>114</sup> Sasso, “The Role of Narrative in the Spiritual Formation of Children,” 16.

the remainder of this chapter, as I search for Jewish hermeneutics and levels of understanding in the following sermons:

- “Life Eternal Say My Name” a sermon by Rabbi Sharon Brous, IKAR, Los Angeles, CA. Yom Kippur, 2019 (video/text)<sup>115</sup>
- “Words from Under the Table” a sermon by Rabbi Ed Feinstein, Valley Beth Shalom, Los Angeles, CA. Yom Kippur, 2016. (text)<sup>116</sup>
- “Their Lives a Page Plucked from a Holy Book” a sermon by Rabbi Margaret Moers Wenig, Beth Am: The People’s Temple, NY. Parshat Bo, 1998. (text)<sup>117</sup>

As I summarize these sermons, the table below will be used to evaluate each as I search for these interpretive approaches. This same table will then be used to assist me in writing/analyzing three sermons of my own that incorporate dialogue, attentive imagination and/or PaRDeS.

### Criteria for Evaluation

Searching for Dialogue, Attentive Imagination and PaRDeS	
Use of Dialogue: Halakic Writings – Finding the Law within the Law	<p>If applicable, does the modern-day Rabbi:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Name the source of the rule of the Mishnah in their sermon?</li> <li>2. State the authority figure behind the Mishnah’s rule? Or does it remain anonymous?</li> <li>3. Include explanations of the meanings of words and phrases in the Mishnah, appealing for scriptural parallels?</li> <li>4. Address whether the law under discussion is clear and if not, determine which principle conflicts?</li> </ol>

<sup>115</sup> Sharon Brous, “Life Eternal: Say My Name” (IKAR Los Angeles, CA, October 8, 2019), <https://ikar-la.org/wp-content/uploads/KN-Grief-1.pdf>.

<sup>116</sup> Ed Feinstein, “Words from Under the Table: Yom Kippur 2016/5777,” <https://www.vbs.org/>, Yom Kippur 2016, [https://www.vbs.org/worship/meet-our-clergy/rabbi-ed-feinstein/sermons?post\\_id=1021042](https://www.vbs.org/worship/meet-our-clergy/rabbi-ed-feinstein/sermons?post_id=1021042).

<sup>117</sup> Margaret Moers Wenig, “Their Lives a Page Plucked from a Holy Book,” in *Birthing the Sermon: Women Preachers on the Creative Process* (St Louis, 2001), 185.

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. Include a pattern of dialogue in their sermon where one person in the conversation suggests a solution, the second objects, and a third offers another hypothesis?</li> <li>6. Use brief stories to imagine a real-life application of the law?</li> <li>7. Invite the reader/listener into their halakic narrative making what is implicit explicit?</li> </ol>
<b>Attentive Imagination:</b> Halakic (Law) and Haggadic Writings – Legend and Lore	If applicable, does the modern-day Rabbi: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Present evidence of a meticulous reading of the text by calling out contradictions, irregularities, or difficulties as well as new discoveries in the Biblical text?</li> <li>2. Ground their use of imagination in this meticulous reading? (Attentive imagination flows out of a meticulous or close reading of the text.)</li> <li>3. Assist the listener in seeing something new in the text or legend?</li> <li>4. Form a new narrative in the sermon that makes what is implicit explicit?</li> <li>5. Create new dialogue between Biblical characters to explain elements of the text?</li> <li>6. Weave various Biblical stories together to create a new narrative?</li> <li>7. Search for God’s will - using imagination?</li> <li>8. Project back into the ancient story a current custom or marker of their own lifetime?</li> </ol>
<b>PaRDeS:</b> Levels of Understanding	What level(s) of Jewish understanding did the modern-day Rabbi apply in the sermon? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Was it grounded in a verse of scripture? Was the literal/straightforward interpretation given? (<i>Peshat</i>)</li> <li>2. Was metaphor, simile or allusion utilized? (<i>Remez</i>)</li> <li>3. Did the Rabbi ask, “What is missing here? What are the gaps in the story?” And if applicable was allegory applied? (<i>Derash</i>)</li> <li>4. What does the passage tell us about the divine? (<i>Sod</i>)</li> </ol>

**“Life Eternal: Say My Name, Kol Nidre 5780”**  
**An Original Sermon By Rabbi Sharon Brous, IKAR Los Angeles, CA<sup>118</sup>**

This sermon is a love letter to Gail and Colin, whose beautiful children, Ruby and Hart, were tragically killed when hit by a drunk driver early this summer.

Every year as we enter Yom Kippur, we take a step out of our death-denying culture and peer, for one day, into the deep. Every year we talk about how the rituals and

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<sup>118</sup> Sharon Brous, “Life Eternal: Say My Name,” October 8, 2019, <https://ikar-la.org/wp-content/uploads/KN-Grief-1.pdf>.

liturgy of this day create for us a deathscape: we fast, we wear white, we say Yizkor, immersing in the memories of loved ones who have died. We sit with the terrible realization that we are—all of us—standing at the edge of the abyss. That some of us will be here next year and some will not. We do this not to punish ourselves, but because we have more clarity around what matters most when we stand at the edge of life.

This year, maybe we don't need Yom Kippur to remind us.

There's a way in which profound, catastrophic loss reverberates, shaking everyone to the core.

Ruby and Hart's deaths have sent tremors through our community. A week after the funeral, I was sitting in my dentist's chair and—I couldn't help it—I burst into tears. The dentist (thankfully) pulled her hands out of my mouth and said, "What, is this about Ruby and Hart?" She didn't know they were IKAR people, she didn't even know that I knew them. But she, it turned out, was their dentist too, and was equally devastated. The pain waves tore through our city and far beyond.

So tonight, maybe we don't need the reminder of how very fragile life is. Maybe instead, tonight we need to figure out how to hold grief and love in light of the ever-present reality of loss.

So I dedicate this sermon, with love, to Gail and Colin.

And to everyone else in this room for whom grief is real and lives at the surface, whether the loss is fresh—like it is for R' Dvora and Sara & David, for Laurie, Gerald, Marlene, Caroline and others—or happened years ago. This sermon is dedicated to everyone who has walked through the valley of the shadow of death, who has struggled

with waves of grief and wrestled with survivors' guilt, who has wondered if you can go on with your loved one gone.

And to all of you, our beautiful community. Maybe loss hasn't touched you directly yet, but you have shown up with love when you could have run away, and that means everything. This is a love letter to all of you.

There are a few lessons that you learn, in the course of time, that live within you forever.

My friend Mindy lost two siblings in two different tragic car accidents. She knows something about loss. I called her three years ago after Gidi—a beloved child in our community—died, just a few days before his 5th birthday.

“Gidi’s family is coming to shul again this Shabbat,” I said. “Should I say his name again?”

“Why would you not?”

“I don’t know. What if they’re finally breathing and I bring them back into the grief?”

“Let me tell you something, Sharon,” she said. “You say his name. This time, and every time you see them. They’re never not thinking about him. By not saying his name, you’re not protecting them, you’re only making them feel like they’re holding their grief alone.”

A couple of weeks ago, Gidi’s older brother, Zeve, reinforced this idea at his bar mitzvah: “[The] darkness in our lives is real,” he said, “and honoring the pain is how we help ourselves and others. My family retells Gidi’s story to remember him. We know that it can be hard to listen to the tragedy and curse that has befallen our family. But the fact that our community has been willing to listen has been so important for our hearts.”

I said Gidi’s name that Shabbat, and every time I’ve seen the family since.

I want to speak tonight about the power of saying a name.

There's a very old, very beautiful Jewish idea that when you teach, you should always speak *b'shem omro*, in the name of the person you learned an idea from.

That's why you'll see throughout Rabbinic literature the meticulous, even onerous listing of attributions. Who brought that powerful teaching in *Masekhet Shabbat* (54b) about the obligation to protest transgressions committed in our home, our city, our country and the world? That's Rav and R' Hanina, R' Yohanan and R' Haviva, though some say it was R' Yonatan not R' Yohanan. No editor today would tolerate that—a two, three, or four generation recitation of those who inspired every teaching you now cite.

The notion of speaking *b'shem omro* is so central, so essential, that in *Pirkei Avot* (6:6) the Rabbis say -- The one who speaks in the name of the person who originally taught it brings redemption to the world.

Redemption to the world? I understand why it's important to give credit when you share other people's ideas. Years ago, after a friend attempted to publish my Master's Thesis in her own name, my rabbi, Marcelo, said to me: If you're a person in the world with something to share, you have two choices. Either you give it to the world, and others will claim it as their own, or you lock it up inside and it will remain forever yours and yours alone, but no one will ever see it. That's how I learned that putting anything into the world makes us vulnerable. And yes, it's worth it even still. And yes, the Rabbis were right that we should do what we can to teach and speak *b'shem omro*, crediting the person who taught or inspired us whenever we can.

But still, aren't the Rabbis overstating the point when they say that speaking in the name of another person brings redemption to the world? Is that not a stretch?

Here's one way to understand it: none of us stands separate and apart from the rest of humanity. Even the most brilliant ideas, art, and poetry all grow out of seeds planted by someone who came before us.

I imagine some might reject this idea, so attached as we are to the myth of the lone genius. But I find it deeply inspiring. It reinforces that we—like those glorious Aspen Trees—are all one great, big, living organism, connected to one another by complex root systems mostly invisible to the naked eye, but ever-present, nonetheless. Yes, even or especially in this time of division, polarization and alienation, there's something very powerful about affirming that we are all intimately and inextricably connected to one another: past, present and future.

Last summer, David and I saw an exhibit at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts called: From Africa to the Americas: Picasso. I think it's fair to say that art after Picasso was like music after the Beatles—these artists so profoundly shifted the paradigm that it's not even really possible to peel away the layers of their influence on everyone who came after.

But what's rarely told is how Picasso was deeply influenced by African art, which he encountered early in his career. He once wrote: “The greatest artistic emotion I have felt was when I was suddenly struck by the sublime beauty of the sculptures carved by anonymous artists in Africa. Passionately religious, yet rigorously logical, these works are the most powerful and most beautiful things ever produced by the human imagination.”

In a bold rereading of art history, this exhibit juxtaposed Picasso's masterpieces to the African sculptures that inspired him. It's a stunning act of truth-telling: obvious,

essential and long overdue, as African influence on western culture has so often been ignored and rendered invisible. And it forces you to consider: even Picasso—the greatest of the great—didn't conceive of his bizarre, extraordinary representation of the human form in isolation from the world. Of course, the “anonymous” artists who inspired him weren't really anonymous at all—they were men and women of exceptional talent whose contributions had simply gone unrecognized. And they, too, were influenced by those who came before them.

That's the beautiful, mysterious power of human connectedness. Any one of us could share an idea that might affect another, and then another, and then another. I talked to my friend Lorne Buchman about this—he's the President of Pasadena Arts Center College of Design. He said: “Creativity itself is always a kind of dialogue over time, a continuing conversation with new layers, shades, and perspectives woven together in an ever-evolving exploration.” Acknowledging influence doesn't diminish your achievement, it only reflects how deeply bound up you are in the bond of life.

And now I see the *mitzvah* of speaking *b'shem omro*—in someone else's name—as adding even an additional layer of beauty, mystery and holiness to our lives.

A story from the Talmud (*Yevamot* 96b-97a): A young Rabbi went into the *beit midrash*, the study hall, and taught a lesson, something he had learned from his teacher, R' Yohanan. But—whether from absent-mindedness or arrogance—he neglected to teach it in R' Yohanan's name. R' Yohanan heard about this and was outraged. He stewed in his anger for a while. Too long. The other Rabbis began to worry, and sent students to placate him by talking about the danger of holding grudges. One after the next, they failed to appease him.

Finally, one colleague went before R' Yohanan and reassured him: even when your student doesn't say your name, everyone knows everything he's saying is based on what he learned from you. And when R' Yohanan heard this, he felt much better. But the Rabbis are troubled. They ask: Why was R' Yohanan really so angry about this slight? Because he fully believed that when you speak a person's name, her spirit stays alive even after her death. It's as if she herself is speaking, even from the next world. Even from the grave, R' Yohanan said, her lips flutter as you speak her words.

It turns out, R' Yohanan wasn't motivated by hubris or pettiness. He wasn't interested in the royalties or syndication checks. Instead, he fundamentally understood that teaching, speaking and acting in someone's name is the way that we keep them alive in this world, even after they die. This is how a person achieves eternal life.

Please excuse my hutzpah in speaking about this, tonight, with many people in this room who have a PhD in Grief. But I feel a profound sense of urgency in sharing two lessons I learned about grief and love from Ruby and Hart themselves, and which I offer *b'shem amram*, in their names, and in their memory.

Hart won the bar mitzvah lottery when he landed on *Parashat Tazria-Metzora* a year and a half ago, a lengthy exploration of contagious, erupting skin lesions. It's not exactly the easiest for kids (or rabbis) to make meaning of. He was troubled by the Torah's insistence that a *metzora*, a person afflicted with the mysterious skin disease—*tzaraat*—must go out into community and declare himself “Unclean! Unclean!” Hart thought that it was unfair that on top of dealing with illness, this person was also to be shamed in front of the whole community. He struggled with this idea, until he read an interpretation that likened the *metzora* back then to a person with anxiety or depression

today. This made more sense—Hart could see how people struggling with mental illness might withdraw from community. He saw, too, how that withdrawal could contribute to the stigma around the illness, and further distance the person suffering from the very help she needs. He ultimately realized that only when a person steps forward and makes herself vulnerable by sharing her struggle with people she can trust, might she be embraced with love and support.

Hart spoke so courageously about the anxiety epidemic in America today. “In this room of 300 people,” Hart said, “one of every four people is struggling with anxiety. Add in the political climate, and the fact that most of us are Jewish, and I’d say it’s more like one in three,” a line he delivered perfectly. What Hart learned from the *parasha* was that when people are hurting, we’re often desperate to keep our pain private. But that’s precisely when it’s more important than ever that we open up. Everyone struggles with some version of *tzaraat*, he said, whether it’s a physical, mental or spiritual struggle. So talking about it, he said, “helps the whole community, not just the afflicted.”

After he spoke, I told Hart that speaking so openly about these inner struggles, not being afraid to talk about where the pain lives, was an act of *pikuah nefesh*. He just might have saved the life of someone in that room that day. I still believe that to be true.

What we didn’t realize at the time, was that he was not only teaching us about how to hold loved ones struggling with anxiety and depression, but how to hold immeasurable grief. It is exactly in the moment of the most profound, burning pain, that we want to self-quarantine. In this way, grieving a death functions similarly to other forms of grief—like after the end of a marriage, or when struggling with illness. With each new person we encounter, we have to experience the freshness of the anguish in our

hearts again and again. Thus, the instinct to stay away. Somehow, Hart, as a 13-year-old, had the unusual sensitivity to recognize that.

I talk a lot about Kaddish Yatom, the Mourner's Kaddish, and my strong sense that its secret power lies in the fact that it's really a container to hold sacred dialogue between a mourner and the community. The one with the broken heart starts: *Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'mei rabbah* – in other words: I'm broken.

And whole community says: Amen. She doesn't even finish her first sentence before we interrupt to say, We're right here. You're not alone.

*B'alma divra khirutei v'yamlikh malkhutei*, she goes on... *ba'agalah u'vizman kariv v'imru*:

Amen. We're still here. We know our job is not to make you feel better, to distract you from your pain. We're never going to pretend things are ok when they're not. Instead, we're just going to sit down beside you in the darkness for as long as you need.

A few years ago on *Kol Nidre*, I called this the Amen Effect—the power of ritual to help the community hold us when all we want is to do is disappear. I imagine Hart looking at Mourner's *Kaddish* and thinking: How cruel to have the very people who are hurting the most stand up in a room of seated people and say out loud: *Yitgadal v'yitkadash*, these terrible words that echo generations of pain. How unfair! Have they not suffered enough?

And yet, I now imagine Hart would say: don't you see? It's precisely when you're hurting that you need to step forward! As awful as it is, it's only when we proclaim Unclean! Unclean! Broken! Shattered! Devastated!... that we can be held the way we need and deserve to be.

A second lesson. At the funeral, I told a story from the Talmud about R' Akiva, who is travelling on a boat that is shipwrecked. One of his colleagues sees the wreckage and is convinced that his friend has died. He is plunged into grief. But then that friend gets home, and he finds R' Akiva teaching Torah. "I don't understand!" he says to R' Akiva. "Who brought you up from the water?"

R' Akiva answers that when the ship crashed, everything around him was shattered. He grabbed onto one plank of wood that floated by, and he clung to it. "Holding it tight," he tells his friend, "I bowed my head with each wave that came toward me, and let it pass over me knowing I'd be brought back to the surface." (Talmud *Bavli, Yevamot* 121a)

That day I said that even though everything was truly shattered, in that room there were hundreds of planks floating by: family, friends and community. Grab hold of us, I said, and I promise we'll do our best to help you catch your breath after each wave passes over.

I didn't know, that day, how important the wave imagery would become over the next few months. A few weeks later, Gail and Colin shared a brilliant and beautiful essay Ruby had written earlier that year about her own experience navigating the waves. Gail and Colin will read this essay in full tomorrow, at *Yizkor*, our memorial service. But for tonight, I want to teach its essence, in Ruby's name.

Ruby loved the ocean. She writes of the mix of anticipation and danger as she steps into the water on a beautiful, blue-sky day. The waves are rough, and before long, a wall of water rumbles towards her. She takes a deep breath, and dives to the ocean floor, waiting for the wave to pass above her. Sometimes, it passes quickly and she reemerges,

unharmd. But sometimes, the force is so great that she tumbles and turns in the darkness, unable to tell which way is up.

She writes so vividly about the terror of not knowing when the wave will pass, and only praying that it does. But the instant she resurfaces, gasping for air, she's already scanning the sea for the next wave. Again she is thrashed about, her body slammed against the hard-packed sand. She is left battered, mind and body. Finally, she emerges and gasps for air. "I wonder, will the next wave come? It feels both inevitable and impossible at the same time..." But by now Ruby knows the ocean—and knows that the only way to survive the next wave is to "swim forward to meet it."

Ruby wrote about the ocean, but she was really writing about the struggle of living with and learning to overcome anxiety and OCD. What she could not have known is that she was also writing a guidebook for surviving unrelenting grief. She was signaling to Gail and Colin, and to all of us—what we must do when the waves are devastating and unyielding. Ruby knew you cannot outsmart the ocean of grief. Sometimes, you can dive under, and find your way back to surface. But the waves are unpredictable—any one of them can drag you across the ground and flip you around, knocking you into the deepest, darkest, most breathless place you've ever been.

But when you're there, Ruby is teaching us, when you are lost and broken and beaten, you must remember that grief is not to be escaped, but experienced. You know what's bearing down on you is massive, but you dive into it anyway. You have no choice. And eventually, you must remember, eventually this wave, too, will pass. You will breathe again. You will again feel the heat of the sun on your face as you float in the calm of the sea, just past the breakers.

So Hart teaches that we are not to hide, even when we most want to. The support we need can't come to us if we self-isolate. We can't take the pain away, the community says with its embrace, but please let us love you. And feed you. And hear you. And hold you.

And Ruby? Grief comes in waves. Rogue waves. You can't overcome them; your only option is to swim forward to meet them. But when you do—as R' Akiva would say—be sure to grab hold of something, some plank, some friend, a lifeline. And trust when you go under that you'll be brought back to surface, again and again.

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We've been talking this season about the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel. He's heading home after twenty years away, when he learns that his brother Esav is heading toward him with four hundred soldiers. Jacob is terrified. He spends the night alone, but when he is most vulnerable, a stranger attacks him, and the two wrestle until morning. It's the most intense struggle of his life, and Jacob has seen struggle—with his brother, his father, his father-in-law. This time, he has met his match. The stranger is strong, fierce, unyielding.

They wrestle for hours. Jacob is badly injured—his hip is dislocated. But then, the moment the dawn begins to break the stranger shouts: Let me go! The dawn is breaking. Jacob though, has a strong intuition that this fight doesn't just end with battle scars. He grabs the stranger with all his might and insists: I will not let you go until you bless me.

(Genesis 32:27)

Jacob has been through hell. He knows that in this sunrise, at the end of his long, dark night of exile, even when the wrestling has left him exhausted and injured physically and psychically, some good has got to come.

He gets his blessing. The stranger, who turns out to be an angel, a servant of the Holy One, gives him a new identity. A new understanding—self of sense new a, name new longer will it be said that you are Jacob. You are now Yisrael—one who wrestles with God and man, and survives (Genesis 32:29).

The battle behind him, Jacob now approaches Esav in a spirit of reconciliation.

All summer, I've been circling around this story. I will not let you go, until you bless me. It's so human, what Jacob asks for: I need you to show me how there is still good, even in a world of hurt.

To be clear: this doesn't mean that suffering comes to us so we can receive blessings. That is a cruel theology—I do not believe in a God who makes us hurt so we can learn life lessons. And I really don't believe in a God who makes other people hurt so we can learn lessons.

But now I wonder: What morning? After some losses, especially after traumatic loss, isn't it too facile to speak of the break of dawn? And is it a betrayal—of the pain, of the ones we've lost, of our own suffering—to look up from the battlefield in order to even try to catch a glimpse of some blessing? To laugh again, to love again, even to eat again. All of these can feel like an act of disloyalty.

The passage of time—as I've learned from Ellen and Hanne and Karen and so many of you—may see the waves of grief coming less frequently, and they may be less

formidable. But even time doesn't stop the rumbling of the ocean. We may still be hit, and even subsumed, by waves of grief even many years later.

I talked to Jesse and Amit, Gidi's parents about this. Maybe it's not the Blessings that Came in the Morning, they suggested, but the Blessings that Came in the Night. Because there are always blessings, even when the night never ends.

My friend Rev. Najuma Smith-Pollard is here with us tonight. Najuma has been a teacher for me in so many ways—aside from being a prophetic preacher and courageous fighter for justice, this past year she also became a grieving parent. Her son, Daniel S. Brown, was shot and killed in Las Vegas last fall. He was 24. Najuma is a woman of faith. She found holy currents running everywhere, even in the midst of terrible tragedy. It started with the nurse who greeted her at the trauma center and shared with her a verse from Proverbs 3:5 (“Trust the Lord with all your heart...”) and extended to what Najuma calls the ministry of presence—the many friends that walked with her and her family through their grief.

For Najuma, the blessing that came in the night was very clear: Daniel became an organ donor, saving five people's lives. As Najuma said:

“I had one request of the [organ] donor foundation... that someone would get his heart, because Daniel had a good heart. We got word that that someone was a 22-year-old young man, which means that his family will not have to go through what we're going through, that he'll get to live. I know what it means to ask God for a miracle for your child. Daniel was this baby's miracle. Let's let our living and our dying never be in vain.”

Walter Brueggemann once wrote, “After the unthinkable end comes unimaginable beginnings. An embrace of ending permits beginning.” I want to believe that’s what drove Jacob too. Not the fantasy of a fresh start, but the realization that even in the unthinkable ends, there are new beginnings.

And even still, I can’t stop thinking of R’Yohanan, and his insistence that we teach, speak and live *b’shem omro*. How did he know the redemptive power of this practice? What did he see that the other Rabbis did not? And then I remember. R’Yohanan was not only the beautiful, brilliant teacher, the renowned founder of his Rabbinic academy in Tiveria and the author of thousands of decisions recorded in the Talmud. He was also a bereaved parent (*Brakhot 5b*). The Talmud tells us that he suffered inconceivable loss—the death of multiple children. And while he continued to teach, and bring healing, and render legal decisions... while he had a long and fruitful life, he carried his children with him everywhere. That’s how he knew that speaking in someone’s name is what grants them eternal life. For him it wasn’t theory, it was personal obligation, to his own beloved children.

Over the past few months, I have learned that when we speak, live, and act *b’shem omro*—in the name of the one who is gone, we can create the space for the blessings to eventually flow. Something new is breathed into even the bleakest night when we allow ourselves to tell the sacred stories, to live in the light of the goodness that was and still is.

So here’s the lesson we may not need to be reminded of this year: We don’t know what the year ahead has in store for us. We don’t know what tomorrow has in store. But we do know that it is our life’s work to lift up the light of those who dwell in the place

where the righteous go: to teach their words, to honor them, to remember them. To say their names. And when we do, I fully believe that they feel the echoes of our words and our actions too. It is what grants them, and all of us, life eternal.

*G'mar hatimah tovah* – May this holy day bring comfort, consolation and blessing to us all.

### **Evaluation – “Life Eternal: Say My Name”**

Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) is the most solemn fast of the Jewish Year. It follows ten days of penitence that begins with the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah. Rabbi Brous gave this sermon in October 2019 on the eve of Yom Kippur (*Kol Nidre* 5780) and dedicated the sermon to Gail and Colin whose two young children, Ruby and Hart, were killed by a drunk driver the previous summer. Brous artfully intertwines Ruby and Hart’s stories with stories from the Talmud and scripture. From the table provided above, she employs Rabbinic Dialogue, PaRDes, and Attentive Imagination in a sermon that is thoroughly Midrashic in nature. She opens her sermon by giving an overview of Yom Kippur.

Every year as we enter Yom Kippur, we take a step out of our death-denying culture and peer, for one day into the deep. Every year we talk about how the rituals and liturgy of this day create for us a deathscape: we fast, we wear white, we say Yizkor [memorial prayers], immersing in the memories of loved ones who have died. We sit with the terrible realization that we are – all of us – standing on the edge of the abyss. That some of us will be here next year and some will not.

Brous insists that immersing oneself in the memories of those who have died (as is customary on Yom Kippur) is not to torture us or to punish us, rather, its purpose is to gain “more clarity around what matters most when we stand on the edge of life”. This year, however, her community needs no reminder of how fleeting life is because the

deaths of Ruby and Hart are reminder enough. Instead Brous suggests a different focus for her sermon saying, “So tonight, maybe we don’t need the reminder of how very fragile life is. Maybe instead, we need to figure out how to hold grief and love in light of the ever-present reality of loss.” Brous then widens her dedication to “everyone who has walked through the valley of the shadow of death, who has struggled with waves of grief and wrestled with survivor’s guilt, who has wondered if you can go on without their loved one”.

Brous alludes here to the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel through a long dark night and in that way connects mourning the loss of a loved one to a long dark night of struggle. (PaRDeS – Was metaphor, simile or allusion utilized? *Remez*) Jacob’s story will appear later in the sermon as three different levels of understanding of PaRDeS are utilized: *Peshat* (the straightforward interpretation of scripture), *Remez* (metaphor, simile or allusion) and *Derash* (utilizing allegory).

Brous moves from framing the premise of the sermon, figuring out how to hold grief and love in light of the ever-present reality of loss, to the question, “When is it appropriate (or not) to speak the name of the deceased in front of the family?” She relates a recent call to a childhood friend, Mindy, who lost two siblings in two different car accidents. Mindy in Brous’ eyes is an expert on loss. Her question to Mindy is an important one. Do you purposely say the name of the deceased when the family is present, or does this prevent them from healing by plunging them deeper into grief? Mindy replies, “Let me tell you something Sharon, [...] you say his name. This time, and every time you see them. They are never not thinking about him. By not saying his name, you’re not protecting them, you’re only making them feel like they are holding their grief

alone.” Here, by conversing with Mindy, Brous includes a pattern of dialogue in her sermon.<sup>119</sup> Brous begins by stating the problem: How can individuals and communities figure out how to hold grief and love [in tension] in light of loss? She proposes a solution of not repeating the name of the deceased in front of their loved ones. Her friend Mindy provides the objection and offers another hypothesis, that saying the deceased’s name is the only way to help the family journey through grief. Saying the name aloud means the person is not forgotten.

Brous continues with “I want to speak tonight about the power of saying a name. There’s a very old, very beautiful Jewish idea that when you teach, you should always speak *b’shem omro*, in the name of the person you learned the idea from.” She gives several examples from the Mishna. “The notion of speaking *b’shem omro* is so central, so essential, that in *Pirkei Avot* (6:6) the Rabbis say: One who speaks in the name of the person who originally taught it brings redemption to the world.” Here we encounter Dialogue again as Brous names the source of the rule in the Mishna. She follows this with a brief story from the Talmud that invites the listener into this *halakic* narrative.

Brous relates a story from the Talmud (*Yevamot* 96b-97a) about a young Rabbi who went to study hall to teach a lesson but neglected to name his source, his mentor. The elder Rabbi and mentor was outraged and stewed in his anger for days until another young Rabbi intervened. Brous follows with an explanation of why the elder Rabbi was so angry. It was because “he fully believed that when you speak a person’s name, her spirit stays alive even after her death. It is as if she herself is speaking, even from the next world. Even from the grave, [...] her lips flutter as you speak her words.” This is Brous’

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<sup>119</sup> Dialogue – Here Brous includes a pattern of dialogue in her sermon where one person in the conversation suggests a solution, the second objects, and a third offers another hypothesis.

first clarification of her thesis: holding love and grief in tension means not forgetting the deceased. By saying the name aloud, we hold the person in memory and honor the tradition of *b'shem omro*.

Brous again includes a pattern of dialogue in her sermon, this time taking the role of the person who objects to the solution that the ancient Rabbis propose. In dialogue with *Pirkei Avot* (6:6) which states, “One who speaks in the name of the person who originally taught it brings redemption to the world,” She asks, “Aren’t the Rabbis overstating the point when they say that speaking the name of another person brings redemption to the world? Is that not a stretch?” She then provides another hypothesis saying, “Here’s one way to understand it (*b'shem omro*); none of us stands separate and apart from the rest of humanity. Even the most brilliant ideas, art, and poetry all grow out of seeds planted by someone who came before us. [...] We are intimately and inextricably connected to one another: past, present, future.”

She follows this explanation by applying *b'shem omro* to Hart and Ruby’s own contributions to the community. Both of these stories are real-life applications of the Mishnah as well as the criteria found under ‘Dialogue’ (above).<sup>120</sup> Her first example is the story of Hart speaking at his *bar mitzvah*. Hart spoke on the importance of naming mental illness (rather than hiding it) so that when people are hurting, they are more likely to come forward and ask for help. When pain is kept private, said Hart, it only grows. Yet, when we are open about pain, the entire community is helped. Here Brous moves her sermon from implicit to explicit as she applies *b'shem omro* to Hart’s story. She names Hart as the person who originally taught this concept to their community. Hart in this way was a conduit for redemption. He will not be forgotten.

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<sup>120</sup> Which advocates for using brief stories to imagine a real-life application of the law.

Ruby's contribution to the community was her written, first-hand account of her struggle to overcome OCD and anxiety. Here, the ocean and swimming into the waves serve as the primary metaphors for facing fear. (PaRDeS) Brous notes that Ruby, a great lover of the ocean, chose to face her anxiety head on like swimming into a giant wave. You know before you face the wave, that the wave may tumble you down to the bottom, but you also know that you will pop back up again. Ruby, says Brous, taught us that "you can't outsmart the ocean of grief." Sometimes you can dive under and miss the wave, but the next wave will always come. When you find yourself at the bottom, teaches Ruby, you know that you will surface and soon be able to breathe again. So, says Brous, Hart teaches us not to hide from our pain and Ruby, that grief comes in waves and, "Your only option is to swim forward and meet them."

Brous now embraces a new move in her sermon by applying attentive imagination to the story of Jacob wrestling with the or God-figure. As required, before moving into attentive imagination, she first gives evidence of having completed a close or meticulous reading of the text, Genesis 32:22–3. Brous then creates a new narrative based on Jacob's struggle with the angel by relating a friend's story of losing a son in a shooting. Her friend notes that sometimes blessings come out of a period of darkness and pain. Like Jacob who was blessed by the angel after an all-night struggle and a broken hip, we often encounter blessings in the middle of deep-deep pain or mourning. In her friend's case, her son became an organ donor and in so doing saved another child's life. Here Brous uses the blessing of organ donation allude to Jacob's blessing after the pain of a broken hip.

(PaRDeS *Remez*)

Brous concludes by coming back to *b'shem omro* – “I have learned that when we speak, live and act *b'shem omro* – in the name of the one who is gone – we can create space for blessings to eventually flow.” When we take this up, honoring and remembering those who have died, as our life’s work they are granted eternal life.

### **“Their Lives Plucked from a Holy Book”**

An Original Sermon by Rabbi Margaret Moers Wenig<sup>121</sup>

*D'var Torah* prior to the reading from the *Sefer Torah*:

The aspect of *Parshat Bo* which most troubled the rabbis--and which most troubles many of us--is the Torah’s repeated statement "*Veyitchazek Adonai et lev Paroah*. God hardened Pharaoh’s heart and Pharaoh would not let the Israelites go."

On the face of it this strikes many readers as unjust: God hardened Pharaoh’s heart and then punished Pharaoh and all Egypt for Pharaoh’s hard-heartedness. Not Fair! Moreover, for Maimonides (and the rest of us), who believe in the free will of the individual, the very notion that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart is outrageous. God does not, insists Maimonides, deny an individual his free will. So how, then, does Maimonides, how do other commentators, understand the statement: "*Veyitchazek Adonai et lev Paroah?*"

In *Parshat Bo* and the previous *Parasha Vaera* there are a total of 10 plagues. Twenty times the text tells us Pharaoh’s heart is hardened against the appeal of Moses. But the Hebrew words expressing that notion vary tremendously. Sometimes the verb is *chazak* , sometimes *kaved* , sometimes *kash*. Sometimes the verb is intransitive, and

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<sup>121</sup> Margaret Moers Wenig, ““Their Lives a Page Plucked from a Holy Book,”” in *Birthing the Sermon: Women Preachers on the Creative Process* (St Louis, 2001), 185.

Pharaoh's heart is the subject, sometimes Pharaoh's heart is the object of a transitive verb and Pharaoh is the subject, only in half of the cases is God the subject of the verb.

Immediately before the first five plagues, God is not the subject of the verb "to harden." God does not appear in these verses at all. On closer look, Pharaoh apparently hardens his own heart or to translate, the heart of Pharaoh was not moved. (Not unlike Saddam Hussein.)

Then comes the sixth plague. With the sixth plague the text actually says: As God earlier forewarned Moses, God hardened Pharaoh's heart. Remember the Mishnah from *Pirkey Avot* (which kids sing at camp with great vigor) "*Mitzvah goreret mitzvah. Averaah goreret averah.* One mitzvah leads to another mitzvah. One sin leads to another sin."

Maimonides explains our text this way: Initially Pharaoh sinned of his own free will, over and over again. Pharaoh's arrogance, Pharaoh's lack of responsiveness to reason, Pharaoh's lack of compassion, ultimately defined him. His intransigence became habitual. His character became his destiny. Attributing to God Pharaoh's hardness of heart, in the later plagues, is a way of saying: Pharaoh dug himself in so deep that he ultimately lost the ability to dig himself out.

## Introduction

My sermon this morning is a midrash. Midrash is usually commentary on the Torah in the form of a story. If you are familiar with rabbinic midrash you will, I hope, recognize the style. If you are unfamiliar with rabbinic midrash you need to know a few of the operating principles which the rabbis employed and which I employ as well: First of all the rabbis grant themselves license to invent conversations between Biblical characters and even to invent characters and insert them into the Biblical story. The

rabbis imagined, for example, that Isaac did not resist his father's attempt to sacrifice him so that he could show-up his older half-brother, Ishmael, who had boasted to him, "When our father circumcised me at the age of, I did not resist." The rabbis imagined the cause of Sarah's death to be her reaction to a visit from Satan who informed her that her husband Abraham had sacrificed her son.

Now, there is no evidence in the text of Ishmael's boasting to Isaac or Satan's visit to Sarah, but through these imagined conversations the rabbis endeavor to explain elements of the text that are hard to understand: Why didn't Isaac resist his father's attempt to sacrifice him? Why did Sarah die precisely when she died (at the beginning of the *parasha* immediately following the story of the binding of Isaac)? I too will invent conversations in order to try to account for elements of the text that cry out for explanation.

Second operating principle: The rabbis take the liberty of weaving together verses and information from a wide variety of sacred sources often without identifying them. Sometimes a midrash will say "*k'mo shecatuv*: as it is written" — before quoting Torah but sometimes a midrash just quotes without preface and the reader either recognizes the quotes, identifies them with the help of a concordance or relies on a critical edition or annotated translation, complete with footnotes, to provide the Biblical sources woven into the midrash. As for their own ideas, sometimes a midrash will credit a given rabbi: e.g. "Rabbi Ishmael taught," but often a midrash speaks anonymously. I too will weave together verses and information from sacred sources. Many of you will recognize which words are from the Torah, and which words are poetry of Kadya Molodowsky, Adrienne

Rich or Marge Piercy. Or you may consult the footnoted version of the sermon. No part of this midrash is attributed to a R. Ishmael or R. Elazar — It is entirely my own.

Finally, you need to know that it is not unusual in midrash for the rabbis to project back into an ancient story a custom or an institution from their own time. They do this for the sake of filling in an ellipsis in the text.

For example, after the story of the binding of Isaac — in which Isaac's life is saved at the last minute. The Torah says, "Abraham returned to the lads and they went to Beersheva and dwelled there." Why does the text say that Abraham returned to the lads, why is Isaac's name omitted? One answer is found in a midrash which says that Isaac did not accompany his father to Beersheva because Isaac was sent to study Torah with Shem.<sup>13</sup> Well! There was no Torah in Abraham and Isaac's day! But the rabbis insist: "*Ein mukdam v'ein m'uhar batorah*. There is no early or late in Torah." The truths of Torah transcend chronological time. So it is altogether possible in midrash to say that Isaac studied Torah in the Yeshiva of Shem. For what else ought a young man do but study Torah? I too will assume the liberty of projecting back into ancient times elements of contemporary culture.

Therein ends my introduction. Herein begins my sermon. *Yi'yu l'ratson imrei phi vehigyon libi l'fanecha*. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable before you.

### **Their Lives a Page Plucked From A Holy Book**

Two weeks ago we began reading the opening chapters of the book of Exodus: "*Eleh shemot b'nai Yisrael habaim mitzrayma*. These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin,

Dan, Naphtali, Gad and Asher... Joseph being already in Egypt." So begins a story about seven, brave women. *Eleh shemot ha ivriot v'hamitzriot habaot shamayma*. These are the names of the Hebrew and Egyptian women who came close to Heaven: Shifra, Puah, Yochevet, Miriam, Bat Pharaoh, Zipporah and Elisheva.

There are other brave women in the Torah Esther, Vashti, Ruth, Naomi... But nowhere else in the Torah do we find so many women mentioned by name or by deed within one story. If you were in synagogue two weeks ago the characters are fresh in your memory: Shifra and Puah *ham'yaldot*, the midwives, who defy Pharaoh's order to kill all newborn Israelite boys and are rewarded by God with great houses. Yochevet bat levi, the mother of Moses, who hides her son until he can be hidden no longer, places him in the river Nile in an ark lined with pitch and then suckles him as a paid wet nurse; Miriam, sister of Moses, stands watch over her brother and offers to find a wet nurse for him; Bat Pharaoh, Pharaoh's daughter, who draws baby Moses out of the water and chooses to raise him; Zipporah: Midianite wife of Moses, the mother of his two sons, who saves Moses' life by performing an emergency circumcision; Elisheva, daughter of Aminidav, sister of Nachshon, wife of Aaron who is the mother of Aaron's four sons.

The opening portion of the Book of Exodus provides us with a stunning collection of women who resist and defy... women, celebrated in feminist *haggadot* for the role they played in freeing the Israelites from slavery.

So, tell me... What happened to these brave women when the men they birthed, nursed, raised, saved and nurtured were leading the Israelite fight for freedom that resulted in the exodus from slavery... and the mass destruction of Egyptian land, livestock and population? In *Parshat Shemot*, these women risked death to save the lives of their

own male babies or to save the lives of sons of their enemies. How could it be that these same women remained silent during the plagues?

*dam*  
*tzefardeya*  
*kinim*  
*arov*  
*dever*  
*shechin*  
*barad*  
*arbeh*  
*hoshech*  
*makat bechorot*

What were the seven women of *Parshat Shemot* doing during *Parshat Vaerah* and *Parshat Bo*26. Where were these women during the plagues? And what became of them after the Israelites left Egypt?

Just as Miriam had stationed herself at a distance to watch her brother Moses in the bull rushes so too Miriam stationed herself at a safe distance to watch to watch her brothers Moses and Aaron negotiate with Pharaoh. When Pharaoh refused to let the Hebrews go "*Vayarem b'mateh vayach et hamaim asher bayaor*. Aaron lifted up the rod and struck the water in the Nile in the sight of Pharaoh and his courtiers and all the water in the Nile was turned into blood and the fish in the Nile died. The Nile stank so that the Egyptians could not drink water, and there was blood throughout the land of Egypt."

"What are you doing?" Miriam asked her brothers when they returned home. "Pharaoh ordered every male Israelite child thrown into the Nile," Moses answered her, "Now the Egyptians will suffer when the Nile flows with blood. This is God's will." "I don't believe it," replied Miriam and she left them.

A week later, the negotiations resumed: once again Pharaoh refused to let the people go, this time Aaron brought a torrent of frogs. Then it was lice. Then swarms of insects. Then a plague which killed Egyptian livestock. Then boils.

“Stop this craziness!” Miriam yelled at her brothers.

“The Egyptian people want us dead,” Moses replied.

“Not all of them do.” answered Miriam.

Miriam sent a message to all the Egyptian women she knew and they organized a mass letter writing campaign to convince Pharaoh that the Israelite people were no threat. To no avail. Once again Pharaoh refused to grant Moses’ request and heavy hail and fire rained down striking all that was in the open: grasses of the field and trees as well.

Intensifying their efforts, a coalition of Egyptian and Israelite women, led by Shifra, Puah, Yochevet, Miriam, Ziporah, Elisheva and Pharaoh’s own daughter, gathered tens of thousands of women in a demonstration of protest against the escalation of the conflict.

Pharaoh was not moved. And a thick mass of locusts ate all of the grass, all of the fruit of the trees not already felled by hail. Egyptians were starving. Insect-borne diseases were rampant and darkness engulfed the land. But Pharaoh would not let the Israelites go. “*Vayomer Adonai el Moshe v’el Aharon ba’eret Mitzraim lemor...* The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: This month shall mark for you the beginning of months it shall be the first of the months of the year for you. Speak to the whole community of Israel and say that on the tenth day of this month each of them shall take a lamb to a family a lamb to a household.... You shall keep watch over it until the fourteenth day of this month and the entire community of Israel shall slaughter it at

twilight.” “*Velakchu min hadam venat’nu al shtei hamezuzot ve’al hamashkotf al habatim....* They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they are to eat it... For that night I will go through the land of Egypt and strike down every first born in the land of Egypt both human and animal... And the blood on the houses in which you dwell shall be a sign for you: when I see the blood I will pass over you, so that no plague will destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.”

Miriam spoke to her brother Moses, “How can you go along with this plan? When God threatened to destroy all of Sodom, Abraham argued with him, ‘Will you destroy the righteous along with the wicked?’ Surely you will not allow the innocent to die?!” Moses answered her: “Please, if you can obtain our freedom through nonviolent means this plague will be averted. Be my guest, You have fourteen days.”

In many regions of Egypt Israelite and Egyptian women dressed in black, held vigils, marches, sit ins. Men were among the demonstrators too. Moses and Aaron joined an Israelite hunger strike.

But whenever Pharaoh showed signs of softening, his right wing threatened him and he was forced to hold fast.

Miriam failed to obtain agreement from Pharaoh to release the Israelites. Nothing was left for her to do but 5 to warn the Egyptians and try to protect them: On the thirteenth day “*Veyishalu ish me’eit rei’eihu ve’isha me’eit re’utah klei kesef uklei zahav*” As Israelite men and women went from Egyptian house to Egyptian house to ask for objects of silver and gold from their Egyptian neighbors, they warned the Egyptians of the impending danger. And as the Israelites left each Egyptian home, they put blood on

the lintel and the two doorposts of each Egyptian house. *Vayitein Adonai et cheyn haam b'eyney mitzrayim*. The Egyptians were deeply grateful.

When word reached Pharaoh that the Israelites were seen leaving Egyptian homes with sacks of silver and gold and marking Egyptian doorposts with blood, Pharaoh immediately dispatched his army to arrest the thieves and vandals and to wipe clean the markings of blood from off of the Egyptian doorposts. Yochevet and Elisheva were among those arrested and thrown in prison. The next day, their families left Egypt without them.

Miriam had wanted to be the one to warn Pharaoh's daughter. But she arrived too late. "*Vayehi b'chetzi halaila vAdonai chika kol b'chor b'erez mitzrayim mebechor Paroah hayoshev al kiso ad bechor hashevi asher beveit habor vechol bechor beheimah*." In the middle of the night the Lord struck down all the first born in the land of Egypt from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on the throne to the first born of the captive who was in the dungeon..." "*Mi bechor Paroah...*" The Torah never mentions a son. Pharaoh's daughter was his first born. (Lest the masculine noun *b'chor* lead you to believe that only male first born were felled, the Haggadah suggests otherwise: "*dam, zefardeya, kinim, arov, dever, shechin, barad, arbeh, hoshech, makat bechorot*." Pharaoh's daughter was among them.

Miriam failed to arrest the destructive course of the plagues. Moses, on the other hand, finally succeeded in freeing his people. On the far shore of the Reed Sea he sang, "*Ah shira lAdonai ki gao ga'ah sus v'rochvo rama vayam*."

I will sing to the Lord for he has triumphed gloriously

horse and driver he has hurled into the sea.

The Lord is my strength and my might

He is become my salvation.

This is my God and I will glorify Him.

The God of my father and I will exalt Him.

The Lord, the Warrior, the Lord is His name.

Pharaoh's chariots and his army He has cast into the sea;

and the pick of his officers are drowned in the Sea of Reeds..."

When the men finished singing their song, "*Vatikach Miriam haneviah et hatof be'yadah*. Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand and all the women went out after her in dance with timbrels and Miriam chanted for them,

'Sing to the Lord for He has triumphed gloriously;

Horse and driver...He has hurled... Into the sea...'

Her voice trailed off. She did not echo the rest of the verses her brother had sung. She was heard only to whisper, "Praise to life though it crumbled in like a tunnel on ones we knew and loved."

Miriam withdrew from politics after the Exodus from Egypt, emerging only once to challenge Moses' sole authority as a prophet. She was stricken with scales and Moses, himself, prayed for her recovery.

A midrash in Sifrei Bamidbar teaches that Miriam became the wife of Caleb, foremother of Bezalel or King David. But that's not how I imagine the rest of Miriam's life.

I think Miriam spent the remainder of her days as a teacher, a teacher of girls and of her nephews, Nadav and Avihu, Elazar and Ithamar, whose father had ceased to show any emotion<sup>40</sup> after the arrest and disappearance of his wife, Elisheva. Miriam used to tell her nephews stories about their mother, arrested before they were old enough to remember her. "My heart is moved by all I cannot save," sighed Miriam, "so much has been destroyed [and yet] I have to cast my lot with those who age after age, perversely, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world." Aaron blamed Miriam for Nadav and Avihu's death. Some days she blamed herself.

No longer did Miriam place herself in the middle of the great conflicts of her time: the battles with Amalek, the building of the golden calf, the report of the spies, the rebellion of Korah... It was the day to day work of sustaining a community that drew her in. She used to tell her students,

"The people I love the best

jump into work head first

without dallying in the shallows

and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.

They seem to be natives of that element,

the black sleek heads of seals bouncing like half-submerged balls.

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,

who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,

who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward

who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge in the task,  
who go into the fields to harvest  
and work in a row and pass the bags along,  
who stand in the line and haul in their places  
who are not parlor generals and field deserters  
but move in a common rhythm when the food must come in or the fire be put out.”

Zipporah, the Torah tells us, survived the plagues in safety in Midian where Moses had sent her and their sons when the trouble started. They saw Moses, once again, briefly, when Jethro brought them to visit at Rephidim. “*Vayetzei Moshe likrat Yitro chotmo vayishak-lo*. Moses bowed low and kissed his father-in-law. They asked after each other’s welfare and went into Moses’ tent.” But Moses had no words or embrace for his wife. There was no longer any love between them. Zipporah took the boys back to Midian. They never inherited their father’s mantle. They didn’t even mourn his death. But Zipporah went on to become a physician, saving lives as she had once saved her husband’s life. And her sons, after her, became doctors, in Midian, as well.

Shifra and Puah did not fare as well. After the death of the first born Shifra went mad and took her own life. Puah died a year later of cancer.

Yochevet and Elisheva? No one knows whether they were ever released from prison. Miriam tried to find them after *yetziat mitzrayim*. She never did. “All these lives — like pages torn from a holy book.”

“At night I dream the women of our family come to me and say: We who modestly carried our pure blood through generations, bring it to you like wine kept in the kosher cellars of our hearts.”

When Miriam was dying, her mother's words came back to her - words Yochevet once said as her husband was reciting *Eshet chayil*. "Miriam, my *mamelah*, when they say, 'A woman of valor who can find her worth is far above rubies' I want you always to remember: a woman's worth is not measured only by what she does in her life time. A woman's worth is measured also by what she inspires others to do years, generations after she has died."

A man's worth is not measured only by what he does in his life time. A man's worth is measured also by what he inspires others to do years, generations after he has died. So too the value of a movement is not measured only by what it accomplishes during its lifetime. The value of a movement is measured also by what it inspires others to accomplish years, generations after the movement has died.

Miriam never married and never had daughters of her own. But among her students, and the students of her students, and the students of her student's students, are numbered: rebels and radicals, legislators and lawyers, poets and painters, teachers and organizers, nurses and doctors, scientists and rabbis. And your worth is far above rubies.

### **Evaluation – “Their Lives a Page Plucked from a Holy Book”**

While Brous employed primarily dialogue and PaRDeS (*Remez*) in her sermon, Wenig chooses a different style of Midrashic interpretation. Using primarily attentive imagination, she creates a new Exodus story elevating female characters from the margins of the story to center stage to explain irregularities in the text. Finally, like the ancient Rabbis, she takes the liberty of projecting back into ancient times elements of contemporary culture.

Wenig grounds her sermon in Exodus 1:1-5:

These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his household: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. The total number of people born to Jacob was seventy. Joseph was already in Egypt. (Exodus 1:1-5)

The long list of ‘sons’ makes Wenig wonder, “Where are the daughters during the Exodus?” So begins her story of seven brave Jewish and Egyptian women: Shifra, Puah, Yochevet, Miriam, Bat Pharaoh, Zipporah and Elisheva. Miriam, the sister of Moses, takes the lead in the action and dialogue. The remainder are supporting characters but are all connected in some way to the Exodus/Moses saga. Shifra and Puah are the midwives that thwart Pharaoh’s order to kill all newborn Israelite boys. Yochevet is the mother of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. She later serves as Moses’ wet nurse as well. Bat Pharaoh, the daughter of Pharaoh, fishes Moses out of the river and raises him as her own. Zipporah is Moses’ wife, and Elisheva is the wife of Aaron. Wenig notes that she chose this reading from Exodus “because nowhere else in the Torah do we find so many women mentioned by name or by deed in one story” and this provided an opportunity to craft a feminist *haggadot* “for the role they played in freeing the Israelites from slavery.” Most of Wenig’s account attempts to answer the question, “What were the women doing [...] during the Plagues?” These women risked death to save the lives of their own male babies as well as the lives of the sons of their enemies. How could it be that these same women remained silent during the plagues?<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> PaRDeS – *Derash*: What is missing here?

Just as she watched Pharaoh's daughter pull her brother Moses out of the river, Miriam now is watching her brothers, Moses and Aaron, negotiate their exit from Egypt with Pharaoh. When Pharaoh refuses, Miriam silently observes Aaron lift his staff and strike the water in the Nile, turning it to blood. While her brothers believe that the Egyptians deserved such treatment, Miriam does not, having no desire to harm the Egyptian people. She begins her campaign to stop this craziness as her brothers intensify their own efforts by delving out plague after plague: frogs, lice, insects, hail, fire, and some very hungry locusts. Miriam continues to harangue her brothers saying, "How can you go along with this plan?" and, "Will you destroy the righteous along with the wicked?" Finally, Moses agrees to stop and gives Miriam fourteen days to find a non-violent solution.<sup>123</sup> If no solution presents itself by the fourteenth day, every first-born baby will die.

Miriam responds by organizing the daughters of Israel who held vigils and marches and sit-ins. Moses and Aaron joined an Israelite hunger strike. However, whenever Pharaoh showed signs of softening, his right wing threatened him and he was forced to hold fast. In the end, Miriam could not convince Pharaoh to let her people go. With no other viable option, she and the other women can only warn the Egyptian people of impending danger by going from house to house marking their doorposts with blood. Pharaoh responds by sending men to wipe off all the markings on the doorposts. In the end, the Lord struck down all the firstborn including that of Miriam's friend, Bat

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<sup>123</sup> Attentive Imagination – Project back into the ancient story a current custom or marker of their own lifetime. Wenig alludes here to the Civil Rights Movement in her own day.

Pharaoh. Several other women were jailed for their involvement in Miriam's non-violent movement.

Finally, the Israelites flee Egypt. Miriam withdraws from politics and spends her last days schooling Israelite children. The balance of the sermon summarizes how the remaining daughters of Israel fared and notes that their "worth is far above rubies."

Wenig concludes the sermon with:

A man's worth is not measured only by what he does in his lifetime. A man's worth is measured also by what he inspires other to do years, generations after he has died. So the value of a movement is not measured only by what it accomplishes during its lifetime. The value of a movement is measured also by what it inspires others to accomplish years, generations after the movement died.

Here she brings her own politics into an ancient story. Her reference to 'a movement' most likely refers again to the Civil Rights Movement and to the Feminist Movement of the 1960's and 1970's. At the same time, throughout the sermon, Wenig is searching for God's will (via Attentive Imagination) as she addresses the primary difficulty in the text and the ethical dilemma of the entire Passover story: Why would a loving God kill innocent Egyptian children? With this sermon Wenig presents evidence of a meticulous reading of the text by calling out contradictions, irregularities, or difficulties in the Biblical text and then shaping new stories to correct the same.

**"Words from Under the Table: Yom Kippur 2016/5777"  
An Original Sermon by Rabbi Ed Feinstein<sup>124</sup>**

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<sup>124</sup> Ed Feinstein, "Words from Under the Table: Yom Kippur 2016/5777," <https://www.vbs.org/>, Yom Kippur 2016, [https://www.vbs.org/worship/meet-our-clergy/rabbi-ed-feinstein/sermons?post\\_id=1021042](https://www.vbs.org/worship/meet-our-clergy/rabbi-ed-feinstein/sermons?post_id=1021042).

A famous story told by the Hasidic master, Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav.

Once a family was cursed, and their son, their pride and joy, became convinced he was a rooster. He removed his clothes and sat clucking beneath the family table. He refused to eat human food, only chicken food. He refused to speak.

The parents were beside themselves. They called in doctors, healers, therapists, wizards. No one could help. Finally, they invited the rabbi. The rabbi assured them he could cure the boy, but it would be unconventional. The parents agree immediately. “Just heal our boy.”

So the rabbi took off his clothes, descended down under the table, began clucking like a rooster and eating rooster food. And now the parents are truly astonished, they now had a pair of roosters in the house.

The rabbi and the boy spend the day together, clucking and eating chicken food. And at one point the rabbi turned to the boy and said,

“It hurts my throat to speak this way. Wouldn’t it be better for us to speak like people?”  
“But we’re roosters!” exclaimed the boy.

“So we’ll be roosters who speak like people,” responded the rabbi. And the boy agreed. So they spoke.

The rabbi said, “it’s cold here with no clothes. Wouldn’t it be better for us to dress like people?”

“But we’re roosters! Roosters don’t wear clothes” exclaimed the boy.

“So we’ll be roosters who dress like people,” responded the rabbi. And the boy agreed, and he dressed.

And the rabbi said, “I don’t really like rooster food, wouldn’t it be better to eat like people?” And the boy agreed.

Finally, the rabbi said, “My back hurts. Wouldn’t it be better for us to stand and walk the world like people?”

And the boy agreed. They rose from beneath the table, and the boy was cured.

I know this rabbi. I am this rabbi. I have sat under the table with so many people who have forgotten who they are. They sit crumpled, bent over, under the table, under all the expectations and demands of life, naked and unprotected from the tragedies that come with adulthood, and starving from the spiritual chickenfeed fed them by contemporary culture.

She comes to me and shares that she’s just exhausted – dried up by the endless demands of being wife, mother, daughter, professional (or the guilt and regret for giving up her profession to be a mom). She can’t figure out what he wants, what might make him happy. She’s worn down by the endless car pools to school, soccer games, gymnastics practice, dance rehearsals, orthodontist appointments and Bar Mitzvah lessons.

Somewhere amid all that, she is still being trying to be a human being with a soul.

He comes when a crisis arrives. His dad dies. His best friend has a heart attack. His job gets downsized. His kid is in trouble. He can’t handle it. This isn’t the life he was

prepared for. He meets an attractive woman on a business trip, and barely resists the temptation to compromise his marriage, or doesn't resist. He feels like he's a stranger to himself.

These men and women aren't failures by any means. They have reached mid-life having achieved all the aspirations of their youth. From the outside, you'd call them very successful. They enjoy all the material rewards our culture metes out to clever, industrious, shrewd, effective people. The homes, the vacations, the cars, the clothes. They have it all. But they sit with the rabbi and confess that something is missing, something is lacking. They were so busy winning, they didn't notice what they lost. Now, there is an emptiness within, an emptiness that no new acquisition, no vacation adventure, no make-over can satisfy. They sing the anthem of our times:

I have climbed highest mountains

I have run through fields

I have run, I have crawled

I have scaled the city walls

But I still haven't found what I'm looking for.

What am I supposed to say to them? We don't speak the same language. I live in a world of tradition; a world which values the careful reading of very old books, and the conscientious practice of very old disciplines. The most precious object in my life is a scroll, handwritten with a goose quill, on parchment, containing very old words, words which are precious to me. My world values what is permanent, eternal, and lasting.

They come from a different world. The language of their world is change, innovation, the new. The icon of this world is Steve Jobs who prided himself not for any particular invention, but for initiating what he called, "a culture of disruption." Google insists it is not a tech company or a search engine, but an engine of change. The emblem of this world is the smartphone. You know that whichever phone you happen to own, it will be replaced in six weeks, and obsolete in six months. Whatever app's you're running, there will soon be a 2.0 which is better. We worship the new, the young, the original. We have little patience with all that was yesterday. What can I say to this world?

I climb down under the table and try to get through: There is much to be valued in new technologies, and the social changes they have brought. The products of innovation and revolution are miraculous. But something valuable is lost in all this -- something deeply important to being human. What is lost is a wisdom that is old and unchanging. What is lost are ways of looking at the self and at life that cannot be conveyed in app's and tweets and instagrams.

This what my old books and my old words teach. Father Jacob left home running from his brother. He spent that first night alone, sleeping with a stone for a pillow. That

night he dreamt of a ladder, reaching up into the heavens, and the angels of God ascending and descending the ladder. The Hasidic master, Yakov Yosef of Polnoye taught that the dream was a message: The human being is a ladder, planted on the earth with its top reaching heaven. Like the angels, the soul is always ascending or descending. The soul is always either growing or shrinking. In the course of life, we nurture the soul or we starve it. A soul that is starving leaves us empty, listless, bored, aimless, depressed. Nurturing the soul yields a sense of purposefulness, meaningfulness, and significance. Ultimately, life is not about winning. Life is about growing the soul so we can say, I matter, I belong, I am needed, I am loved.

Under the table I whisper to them: I admire your success. I deeply respect your accomplishments. I do not belittle or begrudge for a moment your hard-earned material prosperity, or the accolades and achievement you've reached in your life. I respect your accomplishments. But it seems to me that the success you've been reaching for is too small, too ordinary, too superficial. The success you've earned leaves you starving for something deeper; because it leaves your soul undernourished and underfed. There is another way, another kind of success.

The Book of Psalms sings: "*Pitchu li sha'arey tzedek*, Open for me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter and praise God. This is the gate of God, the Righteous may enter therein." The Rabbis of the Talmud wondered when one would make such a request? So they create a story as a context for these verses. When a human being dies, the body is buried in the earth, the soul ascends to heaven. There, the soul is met by the angels who guard the gates of heaven.

The angels ask: What was your occupation in the world?

If you say, In the world, I was a lawyer or a doctor or an executive, in the world I amassed a great deal of power, they will tell you: that's irrelevant here. But if the souls say, In the world, I fed the hungry; they will say, Zeh ha-sha'ar la' Adonai This is the gate of God, you who fed the hungry may enter.

If the soul says, In the world, I protected the vulnerable, they will say, this is the gate of God, you who protected the vulnerable may enter.

And so too for those care for the abandoned and those who performed acts of hesed, of kindness and love. You who opened your hand and your heart, and did hesed, these gates of God are open to you.

It's a beautiful midrash. But the truth is, the rabbis have no idea what really happens when we die. The midrash really isn't about that. It is, instead, about a transposition of values that happens in the face of eternity. From the vantage of eternity, what really matters, what is success?

Isn't it interesting that no child ever rises at the funeral to eulogize a parent and says, I'm proud of my Dad for all he earned? Or I'm proud of Mom for what she controlled. No. What do they say? I'm proud of all my father gave, the way he reached out and helped others. I'm proud of way my mother loved and cared and nurtured. There are twenty-thousand graves at Mt Sinai Memorial Park. And not one of them says,

“Graduate of Harvard.” Not one says, “Corporate Giant.” All the descriptions are relational: “Loving Father, Gentle Mother, Loyal Friend.” No child ever says, I love my parents for all they owned. They say, I love the moments we shared. I loved the times we were together. I wish we’d had a little more time, a few more words with one another, one more hug. It’s tragic, but sometimes it takes the shocking presence of death to awaken us to what really matters.

I remember a Bar Mitzvah we celebrated a few years ago, right here on this bima. The young man got up to give his talk and announced that today he is a man in the eyes of the tradition, and he looks forward to the day he’ll be a real man. And what does that mean? His own Ferrari, a condo in Mamouth or Maui, and a supermodel girlfriend. Thirteen-year old kid. I remember getting angry for a moment at his insolence. And then wondering, who taught him this? Who taught him that this is the meaning of adulthood, of manhood? And then sadness, because I know exactly where he will end up. He’ll end up under the table. Empty inside. Addicted. Depressed. Lonely.

I got up to give him his charge, his blessing. “I hope you get all that you wish for. I really do. Someday, I hope you have the car, the condos, the beautiful companion. Someday, I hope you’ll come and show me your fabulous professional resume with all your accomplishments, achievements, accolades, awards. I’ll be proud of you. All that’s important. But know this: There is more to you. There is another side of you, and I don’t want you to leave the synagogue today without learning this. So take that fabulous resume and turn the page over, and on the other side, I want you to ask yourself some simple questions:

(1) Who is with me in life? Who knows me and cares for me, who do I know intimately, and care for deeply? Is there someone you could call at 3 am and say, I need you, and they'd say, I'm coming. That's wealth beyond measure.

Martin Buber taught us that the greatest truth in life arrives only when we move from a life of I-It relationships to a life of I-Thou relationships. When we see beyond the functional – what someone does for me – and embrace and cherish another for who they are, in all their uniqueness. Someday, you will open the tightly drawn circle of yourself, and discover a deep need for an Other – a soul mate, a friend, a partner who offers the opportunity to learn to love and to be loved. Not someone who fulfills your desires, (that's not a partner, that's called a housekeeper), but someone who propels you to become the person you are meant to be. It is a strange existential fact that not one of us can see his or her own face unaided. It's also true that we cannot see our own soul, unaided. Only in relationship, in intimacy, will you come to know who you really are.

(2) What are the causes and purposes that inspire me? What vision of the world do I believe in, have I worked for, and struggled for? What commitments have I sacrificed for? What ideals define me?

Around the self, we carry a circle of concern, a circle of caring. Right now, kid, your circle ends at the tip of your nose. But someday, you will come to recognize that the bigger your circle, the wider your circle of concern, the more human you become. Right now, you prize your independence. No one depends on you. But one day you will understand that life's greatest dignity comes from recognizing that you are needed, that

something is asked of you. The question, wrote Abraham Joshua Heschel, is not what you get out of life, but what life gets out of you. You earn significance in your readiness to respond, to be responsible, to care, to give, to engage, to help, to heal.

(3) Where is my creativity? What can I contribute to the world that is precious, beautiful, and mine? You have a story to tell. Your eyes have seen the world in a way that is unique. So find a way to share what you know, what you've discovered. Tell your story. Make music. Make art. Touch the world in some special way. You were created in the image of the creator; there is creativity in you, and there is great joy in creativity.

(4) Am I growing? Am I becoming wiser, deeper, more compassionate? Am I becoming a better person than I was?

Know that there is another kind of success. It is not the success of achievement, advancement, or acquisition. It's not about gaming the marketplace or conquering the world or making a killing. It's not about winning. The journey toward this kind of success doesn't follow linear logic of economics, of investment and return, but a moral logic, which is paradoxical:

You give in order to get;

You sacrifice in order to gain;

In empathy for the suffering of the other you learn the power of the self to heal;

Only in losing yourself will you ever find yourself;

It is only in the selfless act will you ever discover the true nature of the self, who you really are.

This kind of success often begins, ironically, in defeat, in failure. When the self is displaced from the center of the universe, and we discover humility. We become painfully aware that we are not the sole authors of our destiny. You are not self-made. You are the product of myriad acts of self-sacrifice by others who created your world, assured your opportunities, sustained you, protected you cared for you, and asked nothing in return. Suddenly we break out of self-absorption and feel indebted. We are suddenly grateful. From that point of humility and gratitude, everything grows.

It's not easy. It takes time. A soul grows once choice at a time, one decision at a time. It takes devotion, commitment, persistence. And one more quality, the most rare quality. It takes courage. Because each of these gifts – humility, love, purpose, creativity, growth – involves vulnerability. They demand that you accept risk, that you give up control. The first time you look into the eyes of another and say, I love you. You will wait and hope and pray, they will say, I love you too. But there is no guarantee. You can't control that. There is no certainty in love. Someday, you will have children, and you will come to know the vulnerability of investing your heart and soul into an other, an other you cannot control. And someday, you will take the one you love and together sit with a doctor, who will say, "This is cancer." And the chill you will feel at that moment, that's the vulnerability of love. It takes courage to love.

It takes courage to care. Dedicate yourself to a cause, to a purpose, but know there is no guarantee you will succeed. The life of cynicism and pessimism and self-absorption is so much safer. No risk there. No chance of failure. But also no moral imagination, and

no growth. It takes courage to care. According to the midrash, someone had to jump into the Red Sea before God would open it. Before we could be redeemed, someone had to say, I'll go first. His name was Nachshon. And he didn't know if the sea would split, or if he would drown, but he jumped in. Because this he did know – no redemption ever comes if we stand in fear and wait. You jump in, and you hope you can swim. It takes courage.

Growing takes courage. Because growing only happens when you step in the vulnerability – into the discomfort of something new, something challenging, something unfamiliar, something that upsets the equilibrium of the status quo. The definition of a slave is the person who insists that every tomorrow be exactly like yesterday. That's why we needed to leave slavery to meet God. God is *michadesh*, the author of the new, the creator of beginnings, the shaper of souls.

What is the reward for cultivating a soul? Nothing material. No honors or accolades. Only what we call the deep sense of security we call redemption. Only the intimacy of love, the warmth of community, the confidence of integrity, a sense of abiding purpose, and the assurance that your life matters. Only the resilience to meet the inevitable failures and tragedies of life with courage and perspective. The Psalmist expressed it this way:

*Od yenuvun b'say-vah, d'shayneem v'ranaanim yehihyu*

*Li'hageed ki yashar Adonai, Tzuri v'lo avlatah bo.*

The righteous shall bloom like the palm tree, and thrive like a cedar of Lebanon,  
Planted in the house of the Lord, they flourish in the courts of God.  
In old age, they shall still be fruitful, full of life and renewal,  
And will testify that the Lord is just, my Rock in whom there is no wrong.

What are the rewards of cultivating a soul?

To live each day, up until one's last day, with ideals, inspiration and creativity intact.

To meet one's finitude, without bitterness or anger or regret, only gratitude for the gifts  
and blessings of life.

To possess a life well lived.

We Rabbis are strangers in a world that worships innovation, disruption,  
revolution. Ours is a wisdom that is old, rooted in the shared experience of generations of  
ancestors. And so we come and sit under the table, whisper gently:

This culture you've imbibed, these values you so prize, they're chickenfeed. They  
will not nourish you. You will starve. But there is something more substantial at hand,  
come and share it.

The images of success you aspire to -- they leave you naked and vulnerable  
against the cold disappointments of a harsh world. There is a wisdom that will warm and  
protect you, come and share it.

The way you've defined yourself, the path you've set for your life, has confined you, bent you over and made you small. It has lowered the horizons of your possibilities, limited your aspirations. You're bigger than this and better than this. You are no rooster. You are a soul, a *neshama*, you have divinity within you, and the promise of joys you have never tasted. Rise up now and celebrate.

### **Evaluation – “Words from Under the Table”**

While Brous employed Dialogue and PaRDeS (*Remez*) and Wenig primarily Attentive Imagination, Feinstein stays within the realm of PaRDeS and in particular, *Remez*: the use of metaphor, simile or allusion. Feinstein grounds his sermon in a Hasidic tale from Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav (18<sup>th</sup> C)<sup>125</sup> and weaves two primary metaphors throughout his sermon.

In Rabbi Nahman's tale, a young boy becomes convinced he is a rooster. His parents turn to the Rabbi only after consulting other experts to no avail: healers, therapists, doctors, and wizards. The Rabbi, much to the parent's chagrin, imitates the boy. He “took off his clothes, descended down under the table, began clucking like a rooster and eating rooster food.” The parents remark that now they have not just one but two roosters to look after. But oh, so slowly, the Rabbi befriends the boy convincing him that it would be better to be “roosters who dress like people” and eat like people. Finally, the Rabbi says, “My back hurts. Wouldn't it be better for us to stand and walk the world like people?” The boy agreed, came out from under the table and was cured.

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<sup>125</sup> He appears also as R. Nachman of Bratzlav

Feinstein then relates this story to his own pastoral practice, saying, “I have sat under the table with so many people who have forgotten who they are. They sit crumpled, bent over, under the table, under all the expectations and demands of life, naked and unprotected from the tragedies that come with adulthood, and starving from spiritual chicken feed fed them by contemporary culture.” He cites examples of congregants who come to him as a last resort, the exhausted mother at her wits end, the downsized corporate executive whose father just died. All of them come to him when they are in crisis and like the Rabbi in the tale, he meets them where they are: under the table. Both ‘under the table’ and ‘chickenfeed’ become the primary metaphors for the rest of the sermon. His primary point: a<sup>126</sup>ll that chickenfeed fed to us by contemporary culture affects the soul. It is the chickenfeed of acquisition, of smartphones and of climbing the corporate ladder. He writes, “They [people] are so busy winning, they didn’t notice they were lost. Now, there is an emptiness that no new acquisition, no vacation adventure, no makeover can satisfy.”

Feinstein wonders. “What am I supposed to say to them?” His world values are the opposite of the world’s obsession with change, innovation and all things new. His values are God’s values and therefore are permanent, eternal and lasting. He argues that “what is lost [here] is a wisdom that is old and unchanged. What is lost are ways of looking at the self and at life that cannot be conveyed in apps and tweets and instagrams.”

Feinstein notes that his ‘old books with old words’ teach that life is about growing the soul. He uses the story from Genesis of Jacob running from his brother Esau after

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<sup>126</sup> PaRDeS – *Remez*

stealing Esau's birthright. (Genesis 28:10-22) Jacob spends his first night alone sleeping on the ground with a stone for a pillow. While asleep, he has a vision of angels ascending and descending a ladder that reached to the heavens. Feinstein notes that this dream is interpreted by Hasidic master Yakov Yosef of Polnoye to mean that "the human being is a ladder planted on the earth with its top reaching heaven. Like the angels, the soul is always ascending or descending. The soul is either growing or shrinking. In the course of life, we nurture the soul or starve it."

Rabbi Feinstein's life's work is to crawl under that table and remind his people that they have a soul that needs nurturing. Just as he whispered to the boy-rooster, he whispers to those who come to him in crisis,

"I admire your success. I deeply respect your accomplishments. I do not begrudge for a moment your hard-earned material prosperity [... and] I respect your accomplishments. But it seems to me that the success you've been reaching for is too small, too ordinary, too superficial. The success you've earned leaves you starved for something deeper; because it leaves your soul undernourished and underfed. There is another way, another kind of success."

Citing Psalm 118:19-20, "Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD." Feinstein relates another story from the Rabbis of the Talmud who wondered when someone would make such a request to "open the gates of righteousness." They determined that when the soul ascends to heaven, it must first meet the angels who guard the gate. The angels ask, "What was your occupation in the world?" If the answer relates to power or fortune, the angels will say, "That's irrelevant here." But if the soul says that they protected the vulnerable or fed the hungry, then they may enter. "[For] you who opened your hand and your heart, and did

*hesed* [acts of kindness and love], these gates of God are open to you.”<sup>127</sup> Feinstein says that this midrash, at first appearance, seems to be about what happens to the soul when it goes to heaven. On second glance, it’s not about that at all, but about “a transposition of values that happens in the face of eternity. From the vantage of eternity, what really matters, what is success?”

The practice of *hesed* is the prescription for growing the soul. It is what Feinstein practiced under the table with the rooster-boy, it is what Jacob needed to learn after stealing his brother’s birthright, it is what anyone needs who is addicted, depressed, or lonely. He continues with a real-life application of the law of *hesed*, creating a modern-day Jacob in the form of a stuck-up young man on the day of his *Bat Mitzvah*. The young man, when he got up to give his required talk, said that he looked forward to being a real man with his own “Ferrari, a condo in [...] Maui, and a supermodel girlfriend.”<sup>128</sup> To which the preacher responds (and I paraphrase), “That’s all well and good but there’s another kind of success grounded in *hesed* but it takes courage to care for the other, to give in order to get; to sacrifice in order to gain.” Returning to his primary metaphors of rooster and chickenfeed he concludes,

This culture you’ve imbibed, these values you so prize, they’re chickenfeed. They will not nourish you. You will starve. But there is something more substantial at hand, come and share it. The images of success you aspire to -- they leave you naked and vulnerable against the cold disappointments of a harsh world. There is a wisdom that will warm and protect you, come and share it. The way you’ve defined yourself, the path you’ve set for your life, has confined you, bent you over and made you small. It has lowered the horizons of your possibilities, limited your aspirations. You’re bigger than this and better than this. You are no rooster. You are a soul, a *neshama*, you have divinity within you, and the promise of joys you have never tasted. Rise up now and celebrate.

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<sup>127</sup> Dialogue: Invite the reader/listener into the halakic narrative.

<sup>128</sup> Dialogue 7: Use brief stories to imagine a real-life application of the law.

The rest is all but chickenfeed.

Sasso's creative storytelling plus each of the sermons included here are excellent examples of Midrashic interpretation. As observed, Sasso's book and Wenig's sermon are examples of PaRDeS and attentive imagination as they created new narratives in answer to "What is missing here?" Brous's sermon relied heavily on Midrashic dialogue, and Feinstein used metaphor (*Remez* of PaRDeS) to engage his listeners. Together they show how Midrashic dialogue, attentive imagination and PaRDeS are used today. In the next chapter I will look at how Christians have employed Midrashic interpretation in their hermeneutics by giving three examples and applying the same evaluative criteria.

#### **Chapter 4: How Have Christians Employed Midrashic Interpretation, Imagination and PaRDeS in Their Hermeneutics? Three Examples.**

In previous chapters I examined how the Hebrew Bible is undervalued in the Christian pulpit today and proposed that Jewish interpretive methods could help both preacher and listener re-engage with the Hebrew Bible through the incorporation of Midrashic dialogue, attentive imagination and PaRDeS. After going in search of these three methods in the Jewish tradition of Biblical interpretation, and looking at modern uses from Jewish storytelling and the pulpit, I now turn to look for evidence of Midrashic interpretation in the Christian tradition using these resources:

- African American Preaching and Spirituals as Midrash – Examining multiple sources including the work of Luke A. Powery, *Dem Dry Bones: Preaching*,

*Death, and Hope*,<sup>129</sup> and Allen Dwight Callahan's and *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible*, among others.<sup>130</sup>

- Womanist Midrash – The work of Rev. Wilda Gafney and her book, *Womanist Midrash: a Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*.<sup>131</sup> Gafney expands the Midrashic exegetical process by applying her own unique lens of a black-female preacher to the stories about women found in the Hebrew Bible.
- The Sayings of the Desert Fathers as Midrash – Looking at the collection of *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*<sup>132</sup> along other sources, I'll search for Midrashic imagination in the words and stories from the fourth-century ascetic tradition. I will also look for parallels in John Cassian's four-fold method of reading scripture.

## **African American Preaching and Spirituals as Midrash**

As evidenced in the previous chapter, Jewish preaching is intimately linked to midrash. In fact, “the Jewish preacher is called the *darshan* – the one who employs the

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<sup>129</sup> Luke A Powery, *Dem Dry Bones: Preaching, Death, and Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012).

<sup>130</sup> Allen Dwight Callahan, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2006).

<sup>131</sup> Wilda C M Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox, 2017).

<sup>132</sup> Benedicta Ward, trans., *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection* (Trappist, KY: Cistercian Publications; Liturgical Press, 1975).

midrash.”<sup>133</sup> The *darshan* in both ancient and modern times is tasked with searching for the message behind the text by asking questions like, “Who or what is missing here?” and, “Is there a gap in the story?” As noted in previous chapters, the Rabbi or *Darshan* has the freedom to reimagine the text itself to bring forth the Divine spark that he or she believes is hidden between the lines of text that will speak directly to the lives of their congregants. African American preachers follow a similar Midrashic method of searching beyond the literal meaning of the text configuring the Bto appeal directly to the needs of their audience. Like their Jewish counterparts, the black preacher “is not bound by the literal or plain meaning of the words of text [rather], he or she creates interpretation and meanings that resonate with significance for the listeners.”<sup>134</sup>

In general, this Midrashic lens helps “the black preacher avoid dead, irrelevant formulations, no matter how normative they may have been in the past.”<sup>135</sup> Like Sagal, Carlyle Stewart in his book, *Joy Songs, Trumpet Blasts, and Hallelujah Shouts: Sermons in the African -American Preaching Tradition*, calls this hermeneutic of black preaching “imaginative insight.”<sup>136</sup> Like the Rabbis, “the black preacher finds an inexhaustible supply of meanings in the text that contains layers of significance just waiting to be mined.”<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Douglas B Sagal, “‘Imaginative Insight’: Midrash and African-American Preaching,” *Judaism* 50, no. 1 (2001): 3–16. *Darshan* is comprised of *d-r* and *sh* meaning “to search out”; see *Derash* in *PaRDeS*

<sup>134</sup> Sagal, 4.

<sup>135</sup> Sagal, 4.

<sup>136</sup> Carlyle F. Stewart, *Joy Songs, Trumpet Blasts, and Hallelujah Shouts!: Sermons in the African-American Preaching Tradition* (Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Company, 1997). 4.

<sup>137</sup> Sagal, 4.

An example of how a black preacher would transform a text, says Sagal in “Imaginative Insight,” is found in this re-interpretation of Genesis 43:11 which describes Jacob sending gifts to Joseph in Egypt saying, “carry down presents [...] a little balm, spices, myrrh, almonds, nuts and a little honey.”<sup>138</sup> The black preacher reinterprets this passage as referring to journeying through life with a “measure of compassion and love” served up in the form of a metaphor, “honey.” The preacher says,

Our family life needs a little honey, Husbands, wives, parents and children, need a little honey. So often in our family life the atmosphere is cold, strained and bitter. Many homes have all the facilities, furniture, appliances, televisions, automobiles, clothes and trips, but they are houses without honey. Honeyless homes are sad.<sup>139</sup>

African-American preachers also embrace *Peshat* (of PaRDeS) which in the Jewish tradition seeks to understand the text in its own context by asking the questions, “What is the straightforward interpretation?” or “What does the text actually say?” “The *peshat*- minded interpreter is bound by the rules of grammar and the confines of historical and scientific research.”<sup>140</sup> Just like the *darshan*, the black preacher, may begin a sermon looking at the text through the lens of *Peshat*, but then proceed on to imaginative insight.<sup>141</sup>

Furthermore, significant traditions within Judaism and African American Christianity both trace the practice of imaginative retelling back to an ancient tradition.

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<sup>138</sup> Genesis 43:11.

<sup>139</sup> Sagal, 6. Sagal is quoting African American preacher Sandy F. Ray’s *Journeying Through a Jungle* (Nashville: Broadman Press), 1979, p. 99.

<sup>140</sup> Sagal, 6.

<sup>141</sup> Sagal, 6.

Midrashic license in Jewish tradition can be traced all the way back to Sinai while Black imaginative retelling of scripture resides in the oral tradition of African culture where story, legend, and song were handed down from generation to generation originating with the ancestors or grandfathers in Africa, specifically from the *griot* “the living repository of history and tradition in the West African setting.” The *Griot* “recounted stories from the past in light of the present.”<sup>142</sup> So whether Jewish Midrashic methods or imaginative insight is employed, both the Jewish and Black preacher use the same tools to achieve the goal of the homiletic art which is “to reach the heart and will as much as the mind of the people.”<sup>143</sup>

An example of oral transmission for African diaspora culture resides within the tradition of black spirituals – folk songs first created during slavery. The lyrics of the spirituals function as midrash because, like Midrashic-Talmudic literature, they reimagine Biblical stories in light of slavery, oppression, death, and exile. Spirituals, argues Powery, are “musical sermons produced in the midst of death” and, therefore, are “a significant theological and cultural resource for contemporary preaching.”<sup>144</sup>

Likewise, Powery offers multiple ways that spirituals model good preaching: 1.) They let the past shed light on the present and are full of rich pedagogical wisdom. 2.) They encourage us to recall the pain, struggle and death of our ancestors and remember that pain must be lived through. 3.) Spirituals stand counter to the popular prosperity gospel

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<sup>142</sup> Allen Dwight Callahan, “Perspectives for a Study of African American Religion from the Valley of Dry Bones,” *Nova Religio* 7, no. 1 (July 2003): 44–59.

<sup>143</sup> Sagal, 10.

<sup>144</sup> Powery, “Haunting Echoes,” 9.

message by telling the truth about tragedy and death as part of the Gospel message and as part of God’s story and ours. They keep Christianity real and connected to the way it really is in the spiritual life for, says Powery, “there are no resurrections without crucifixions.”<sup>145</sup> 4.) The spirituals rightly show suffering and death as a lived communal experience because they include all the joy and sorrow of life. Spirituals also give us a collective memory that we all suffer at some point and that scars from the past can teach us today. Finally, 5.) Spirituals remind the pastor that preaching is a weighty vocation and that remembering for the community is the preacher’s duty. Simple prescriptions from the pulpit on how to live an easy life fall short here. Rather, the skilled preacher, is tasked with tackling the hard stuff and providing answers to life’s complexities. In short, “the spirituals challenge nonchalant, casual preaching in which nothing appears to be at stake except the newest and coolest illustration or technological trick.”<sup>146</sup>

One of many specific examples of spirituals as Midrash can be found in “When Israel was in Egypt’s Land” (or “Go Down Moses”), an interpretation of Exodus 8:1: “Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘go to Pharaoh and say to him, ‘Thus says the LORD: Let my people go, so that they may worship me.’ The lyrics which appear in more than fifty-nine hymnals according to Hymnary.org, are as follows:

1. When Israel was in Egypt's land,  
Let my people go,  
oppressed so hard they could not stand,  
Let my people go.
2. Refrain:  
Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt's land,  
tell old Pharaoh: Let my people go.

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<sup>145</sup> Powery, “Haunting Echoes,” 12.

<sup>146</sup> Powery, “Haunting Echoes for Homiletics,” 13-15.

3. The Lord told Moses what to do,  
Let my people go,  
to lead the Hebrew children through,  
Let my people go. [Refrain]
4. As Israel stood by the waterside,  
Let my people go,  
at God's command it did divide,  
Let my people go. [Refrain]
5. When they had reached the other shore,  
Let my people go,  
they let the song of triumph soar,  
Let my people go. [Refrain]
6. Lord, help us all from bondage flee,  
Let my people go,  
and let us all in Christ be free,  
Let my people go. [Refrain]  
(Psalter Hymnal, 1987)

According to Josephine Wright's article "Songs of Remembrance," "Go Down Moses" is one of the oldest spirituals from the sacred oral tradition of Christian African-American slaves. It is categorized as a "freedom song" and "many freedom songs contained encoded messages and double meanings."<sup>147</sup> For this example, Pharaoh represents the brutal overseer or slave master, Egypt represents American bondage, and the crossing of the Red Sea represented emancipation or freedom from that bondage. Israel represents enslaved African Americans and the other shore is a reference to the promised land (Canaan), the land of freedom, or heaven. The overarching Midrashic metaphor, I would argue, is the Red Sea which represents crossing over to freedom from bondage (verse 5). "Go Down Moses" in its entirety also exists as allegory for all people

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<sup>147</sup> Josephine Wright, "Songs of Remembrance," *The Journal of African American History* 91, no. 4 (2006): 413–24.

living in exile who have been forcefully removed from their motherland. In this spiritual, enslaved African-Americans saw a mirror image of themselves in the “condition of the Israelites in Egypt.”<sup>148</sup>

Comparing this spiritual to the Levels of Understanding found in PaRDeS is relatively simple. Those levels ask the interpreter:

1. Was the interpretation grounded in a verse of scripture? (*Peshat*) Yes, Exodus 8:1
2. Was metaphor, simile or allusion utilized? (*Remez*) Multiple metaphors were used as evidenced above like crossing the Red Sea as a metaphor and Pharaoh as a metaphor for the overseer.
3. “What is missing here? What are the gaps in the story?” And if applicable, was allegory applied? (*Derash*) The entire spiritual acts as an allegory for all people who have lost their motherland.
4. What does the passage tell us about the divine? (*Sod*) It is evident here that God is the liberator.

### **Womanist Midrash**

This section examines the work of Wilda Gafney who takes the idea of attentive imagination found in rabbinic interpretation and imaginative insight found in African-American preaching and melds them together to create something new. In her book, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*, Gafney refers to her new hermeneutic as Womanism or black feminism. She defines Womanist Midrash then as a set of reading practices anchored in the Rabbinical tradition that includes exegesis and biblical interpretation while intentionally including “non-Israelite

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<sup>148</sup> Wright, 415.

peoples and enslaved persons, especially women and girls.”<sup>149</sup> She continues, “Womanist midrash listens to and for their voices in and through the Hebrew Bible, while acknowledging that often the text does not speak, or even intend to speak, to or for them, let alone hear them.”<sup>150</sup>

As noted in the previous section, imaginative insight is a type of African-American indigenous midrash that, like rabbinic midrash, “includes a profound concern never to misrepresent the biblical text” but still strives to make what is implicit explicit.<sup>151</sup> In her book, Gafney calls this creative space her ‘sanctified imagination’ and will often use the phrase, “In my sanctified imagination...,” while preaching to signify that she is moving away from the Biblical text and crossing over into Midrash.<sup>152</sup> Then, using this method, she fills in missing details, back stories, detailed descriptions of the scene and characters, and so on. This is similar to reader-response criticism which recognizes that the meaning of the text may not originate from or be solely located in the text and that the reader has a part to play by bringing their own interpretive framework (or life experience) to the text with them.<sup>153</sup>

In *Womanist Midrash*, Gafney asks the following questions of the text to determine what details are missing that need to be filled in with the use of sanctified imagination. I

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<sup>149</sup> Wilda C M Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox, 2017). 3.

<sup>150</sup> Gafney, 3.

<sup>151</sup> Gafney, 3.

<sup>152</sup> Note, the use of the term “sanctified imagination” is a typical feature in many streams of Black preaching.

<sup>153</sup> Gafney, 2-4.

have adapted her list to show what questions a feminist hermeneutic would bring to the text, followed by a womanist view in the second set of questions. First the feminist hermeneutic:

1. Who is speaking or not speaking?
2. Where are the women in the scene? What are their names?
3. When women speak in the scripture, whose interest do they serve?
4. What are the power dynamics in the story?
5. Who are the dominant characters in the story and what are the ethical implications of the story when read from that perspective?

Now the womanist hermeneutic:

1. What are the ethical implications of previous interpretations of this text on black women today?
2. How have black women historically related to this story?
3. How does this text function as informative scripture for black women if it does at all?
4. Who is God in the text?
5. Is God here invested in the flourishing of black women, their families, and their world?<sup>154</sup>

An example of using sanctified imagination can be found in Gafney's treatment of the story of Bathsheba. She asks and then answers the following Midrashic questions of 2 Samuel 11:2-5:

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<sup>154</sup> Gafney, 8. My adaptation of her list.

*It happened, late one afternoon, when David rose from his couch and was walking about on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful. David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, 'This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite.' So David sent messengers to fetch her, and she came to him, and he lay with her. (Now she was purifying herself after her period.) Then she returned to her house. The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, 'I am pregnant.'*

1. What do we know about Bathsheba from the text? The text above states only that she is the daughter of *Eliam* and is very beautiful. From reading the whole story beyond Chapter 11, we gather that she is also “the victim, wife, mother of Solomon, then survivor of David.”<sup>155</sup> Her name, *Bat-Sheba*, can also be translated to mean, “daughter of an oath” Gafney also states that Bathsheba is the ninth woman to be linked intimately to the King.
2. Then, using a close reading of the text, she asks, “What was her ethnicity?” The origin of Bathsheba’s father is obscured in the text, perhaps on purpose to hide her non-Israelite heritage. Gafney builds a case for three ethnic possibilities: Hittite, Israelite or a combination of the two. She notes that after David has sex with Bathsheba that the text says that she was purifying herself after her period which could indicate that she was an Israelite woman or at least born of an Israelite mother who would have taught her this ritual. In that case, David has acted against Bathsheba, his community and his God by violating Bathsheba, a possible Israelite.<sup>156</sup>
3. “What is the power dynamic?” David has the power to send for Bathseba, have sex with her and then keep her by having Bathsheba’s husband killed. Gafney states that this was against his own strategic interests since the husband of Bathsheba is a key

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<sup>155</sup> Gafney, 8.

<sup>156</sup> Gafney, 213

officer in David's Hittite strike force. Now David has violated not only Bathsheba's honor, his God, the standard of his community, but also the standard of his fighting men. Yet, the power dynamic is maddeningly still in his favor.

4. "Was it consensual or was it rape?" Gafney views the violation of Bathsheba's body as rape even though the vocabulary used in the Biblical text is ambiguous.<sup>157</sup> So why is she taken by David? The text implies that her beauty is the cause. The fact that she is married and therefore sexually unavailable in no way protects her from David's lust. The Hebrew here uses the verb *l-q-ch* meaning 'to take' but this verb, says Gafney, is normally used with a married woman as the object of the taking. The irony here is that the verb's object now signifies the violation of a marriage by David.<sup>158</sup>
5. "What are the Ethical implications?" Over time Rabbinic and Christian interpreters have implied that Bathsheba went to David voluntarily and that her beauty was the cause of her adultery. Ethically, this implies that the woman did something to entice David and is therefore at fault. Bathsheba is not allowed to name the crime against her or seek restitution. She has no option but to make the best out of a situation that she has no control over. In a similar way, African-American women have experienced the same taking during enslavement.

This is just a brief example of how Gafney dissects the text and imagines a life for Bathsheba between the lines, so to speak. Gafney goes on to apply her sanctified imagination to the entire story of Bathsheba, giving Bathsheba feelings, a voice and choices that she lacks in the original text. Her work allows women in particular to place themselves in the text by bringing their own experiences of disenfranchisement to the

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<sup>157</sup> Gafney, 214

<sup>158</sup> Gafney, 212-214

table, but it also teaches the any listener, male or female, black or white, can use their imagination to find themselves in the text.

### **The Sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers as Midrash**

In this section I will search for Midrashic imagination, PaRDeS and dialogue in the words of wisdom originating from the desert fathers and mothers of Egypt. I will also look for parallels in the work of one of those desert fathers, John Cassian.

Desert Fathers and Mothers were ascetics who lived during a formative period in Christian History often referred to as the “desert tradition” that flourished from the late third century through the late seventh century, CE. Searching for the simplicity and the communal nature of the earliest Christian communities, thousands of men and women left the erudite, anxious and materialistic society of the Roman Empire and went to live in the deserts of Arabia, Egypt, Palestine and Syria. While some fled for political or economic reasons, the primary motive was to seek experience of God and purification of life. Some lived as hermits while others formed loosely connected groups united by work and prayer. The remainder lived in formally organized monastic communities (segregated by sex) and led by a single wise teacher called Abba (father) or Amma (mother).<sup>159</sup> While living arrangements varied, these desert monks and nuns were guided by the same fundamental values. Their goal was to experience God’s presence in each moment, “through a disciplined pattern of prayer, reflection on scripture, and labor.”<sup>160</sup> Eventually,

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<sup>159</sup> Benedicta Ward, trans., *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection* (Trappist, KY: Cistercian Publications ; Liturgical Press, 1975). xviii.

<sup>160</sup> David G. R. Keller, *Oasis of Wisdom: The Worlds of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2005). xviii.

the word got out and many non-monastics traveled on pilgrimage to the desert in search for these wise men and women to seek guidance and spiritual wisdom. Later the desert tradition would influence the formation of Celtic and Benedictine monasticism in the West as well as monasticism in the Eastern Orthodox churches.<sup>161</sup>

The great center of this activity was found in Egypt. In 394 C.E. a group of monks from Palestine visited the Egyptian desert to see these communities for themselves. They visited eleven sites and engaged with the most well-known of the desert elders. Their visit is recorded in *The History of Monastic Life in Egypt*. Other sources of desert wisdom that survive include *The Life of Anthony* by Athanasius of Alexandria, the *Lausiac History* by Palladius and *Conferences* by John Cassian. A collection of stories and sayings from the desert mothers, called the *Materikon*, also existed but survives only as a partial edition today.<sup>162</sup>

In his book *Oasis of Wisdom*, David Keller identifies seven themes among these writings. Of which I will focus on the following three from Anthony the Great:

1. The Cell: an environment for seeing God and one's true self.
2. Praxis: the ascetic disciplines that form, nourish, and guard the soul.
3. Humility: the embodiment of the love of God through love of neighbor.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Keller, xv-xvi.

<sup>162</sup> David Keller, xvi.

<sup>163</sup> The seven themes are: 1.) Sunrise to Sunrise: the prayerful rhythm of daily life. 2.) The Cell: an environment for seeing God and one's true self. 3.) Patience: learning not to run from God or self. 4.) Praxis: the ascetic disciplines that form, nourish, and guard the soul. 5.) Labor and Time: the sanctification of work, time, and community life. 6.) Solitude and Silence: letting go of self and being present to God, self, and others and 7.) Humility: the embodiment of the love of God through love of neighbor.

Known as ‘The Father of Monks,’ Anthony was born in Egypt around 251 CE to peasant farmers who were practicing Christians. After hearing the words of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, “...’If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’” (Mt 19:21 with parallel in Lk 18:22), Anthony devoted himself to a life of asceticism and chose to be mentored by a hermit near his village. In 285 CE it is said that he went into the desert to live in solitude, where he remained until his death at the age of one hundred and five except for two brief trips to Alexandria.<sup>164</sup> (His age varies in other sources.) His autobiography was written posthumously by his friend Athanasius of Alexandria, and Athanasius’ *Life of Anthony* would influence Christian monasticism throughout the world.<sup>165</sup>

Despite his longing for solitude, Anthony became famous as the desert monastic movement grew as evidenced by the travelers and other ascetics that approached him seeking a word of wisdom or advice. One such saying from Abba Anthony falls under the category of Praxis and expounds on the meaning of Matthew 19:2 (above). Here, the young monk that Anthony engages with has not fully embraced the ascetic discipline of detachment. Detachment in its monastic form is the “spiritual capacity to focus on all things, material and other, without attachment.”<sup>166</sup>

A brother renounced the world and gave his goods to the poor, but he kept back a little for his personal expenses. He went to see Abba Anthony. When he told him this,

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<sup>164</sup> Anthony’s age varies among resources.

<sup>165</sup> Ward, 5.

<sup>166</sup> John Chryssavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (Bloomington, Ind: World Wisdom, Inc, 2008). 69.

the old man said to him, ‘If you want to be a monk, go into the village, buy some meat, cover your naked body with it and come here like that.’ The brother did so, and the dogs and birds tore at his flesh. When he came back the old man asked him whether he had followed his advice. He showed him his wounded body, and Saint Anthony said, ‘Those who renounce the world but want to keep something for themselves are torn in this way by demons who make war on them.’<sup>167</sup>

In “keeping back” a portion of his wealth for his personal expenses, the young monk remains attached to his own physical comfort and in so doing rejects this ascetic discipline that forms, nourishes, and guards the soul. This makes him vulnerable to demons as noted by Abba Anthony. In this illustration, note that Anthony expands upon a close reading of Matthew 19:2 and applies Jesus’ directive to the young monk’s current life situation. This is like Midrashic dialogue found in Halakic writings where the rabbis used brief stories to imagine a real-life application of the law. It also includes the use of simile – where Anthony suggests that the young monk’s “keeping back” a portion of his wealth is like covering the body with raw meat and waiting for animals (demons) to tear apart the flesh.

This second teaching falls under the theme of humility in all things.

One day some old men came to see Abba Anthony. In the midst of them was Abba Joseph. Wanting to test them, the old man suggested a text from the Scriptures, and, beginning with the youngest, he asked them what it meant. Each gave his opinion as he was able. But to each one the old man said, ‘You have not understood it.’ Last of all he said to Abba Joseph, ‘How would you explain this saying?’ and he replied, ‘I don’t know.’ Then Abba Anthony said, ‘Indeed, Abba Joseph has found the way, for he has said: “I do not know.”’<sup>168</sup>

Here Abba Anthony again uses dialogue to draw out a real-life application of an ascetic virtue, humility. We see Abba Joseph, in his reply, modeling humility by giving a simple answer to Abba Anthony, saying, “I don’t know,” rather than allowing his ego to

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<sup>167</sup> Ward, 5.

<sup>168</sup> Ward, 4.

“suppose” what the answer may be. Unfortunately, we do not know the text from Scripture that this passage is illuminating. (Possibly Micah 6:8 but humility as a Biblical theme runs throughout the Hebrew Bible and Greek New Testament.)

This third saying falls under the theme of the cell.

He said also, just as fish die if they stay too long out of water, so the monks who loiter outside their cells or pass their time with men of the world lose the intensity of inner peace. So like a fish going towards the sea, we must hurry to reach our cell, for fear that if we delay outside we will lose our interior watchfulness.<sup>169</sup>

For the desert monks, the cell was an environment for seeing God and one’s true self. Seclusion was the way that monks maintained inner peace. Without the spiritual discipline of solitary living, implies Anthony, the monk’s ability to connect with God and maintain peace dissipates. Anthony uses the metaphor of a fish out of water to get his point across. The cell is like oxygenated water to the monk. It is necessary for survival.

Note that the sayings of the desert fathers and mothers, like the wisdom sayings of the Rabbis, rely heavily on metaphor, simile, and story to get their point across. Yet, most, including Anthony’s sayings, do not correlate with the Rabbinical interpretive methods found under Attentive Imagination because they do not show evidence of a meticulous reading of the Biblical text nor do they call out contradictions, irregularities, or difficulties. However, the sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers do correlate with the writings of the *Talmud* in that they are concerned with preserving community and clarifying the right *praxis* of the ascetic disciplines. Also, like the Talmud, the collections of sayings from the desert tradition house wisdom statements as well as ethical advice.

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<sup>169</sup> Ward, 5.

To find additional parallels between the Rabbis and the ascetics of the Egyptian desert, we turn now to another famous Desert Father, John Cassian, and the ascetic discipline of prayer.

John Cassian was the 5<sup>th</sup> Century monastic writer and theologian whose monastic reforms influenced the development of Western asceticism. Biographers have little data concerning Cassian's personal life, but what is generally agreed upon was that John Cassian lived between 360 and 435 CE and fled his monastic home in Scetis, Egypt during the Origenist Controversy of 400.<sup>170</sup> Cassian was a devotee of Origen (c. 185-254), the early Christian scholar and ascetic. At the invitation of Bishop Castor of Apt, Cassian found himself in the region of Gaul in what is now Marseilles, France where Bishop Castor sought Cassian's help with what could only be called "monastic mayhem".<sup>171</sup> John Cassian's primary works, the *Twelve Books of John Cassian on the Institutes of the Coenobium and the Remedies for the Eight Principle Faults* and *The Conferences of the Elders* (hereafter referred to as the *Institutes* and *Conferences*), were written to address needed monastic reforms in Gaul. They also form his legacy.

As for the state of communal life in the Gaullist monasteries, Cassian encountered discord and strife. To quote a consolidated list of these issues from the *Institutes* compiled in Columba Stewart's *Cassian the Monk*:

Cassian sees monasticism in Gaul as a poorly organized and undisciplined way of life that substitutes individual preference for traditional rules (*Inst.* 2.3.4-5, 4-16.3), and he relates with horror that a young monk 'in this region' openly rebelled against the commands of his senior (*Inst.* 12.28).

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<sup>170</sup> William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). 14.

<sup>171</sup> A. M. Casiday, *Saint John Cassian on Prayer* (Oxford: SLG Press, 2006), 1.

Cassian finds anarchy in the liturgy: there is no universal system of psalmody (*Inst.* 2.1-3.1), the monks are sloppy and indecorous when praying in common (*Inst.* 2.7.1 and 3), and they go back to bed after morning office (*Inst.* 3.5.1). He parodies the Gaulish monks who keep their valuables under lock and key, wear signet rings, and need whole wardrobes in which to store their possessions.<sup>172</sup>

Cassian wrote the *Institutes* as a reply to Castor and as “a critique of the native monastic traditions in Gaul associated with Martin of Tours.”<sup>173</sup> Cassian wrote his *Conferences*, on the other hand, to then correct the training of the inner man and the perfection of the heart through unceasing prayer.<sup>174</sup> It is in Cassian’s *Conferences* that we find parallels to the ancient Rabbis’ attentive imagination, dialogue and PaRDeS.

Like the ancient Rabbis, Cassian grounded his teachings in a deep reading of scripture. He encouraged the monks to take an imaginative role with scripture and to view the study and memorization of text as a partnership between text, the reader, and God. For Cassian, scripture had various levels of meaning “to be discovered or realized by the reader in accordance with the level of his or her spiritual maturity.”<sup>175</sup> Cassian and other medieval writers after him often describe the activity of deep reading in metaphors. The reader, tastes the words of Scripture as they are pronounced and lets them rest on the palate of the heart, before chewing the text thoroughly and digesting it. In this way, monks were to “proceed toward interpretation and personal appropriation.”<sup>176</sup> This type

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<sup>172</sup> Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 17.

<sup>173</sup> Stewart, 17.

<sup>174</sup> Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 31.

<sup>175</sup> Duncan Robertson, “Lectio Divina and Literary Criticism: From John Cassian to Stanley Fish,” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 46, no. 1 (2011). 88.

<sup>176</sup> Robertson, 87.

of devotional reading is known today by its Latin name, *lectio divina* or divine reading and mirrors the Rabbinical practice of attentive imagination where a meticulous reading of the text is employed.

Cassian learned this method from Origen and practiced it in the Egyptian desert. He believed that if the monks of Gaul could devote themselves “assiduously to prayer and reading,” in turn, the monks would learn to speak to God and hear God speaking to them.<sup>177</sup> It should be noted here that Cassian modeled Origen’s training and, like Origen, brought philological and Greek literary-critical skills to the study of the Bible and his reforms in Gaul.<sup>178</sup> For example, Cassian leaned heavily on allegory to explain “this means that” when encountering difficult or contradictory texts. This practice is also found in the PaRDeS and was employed heavily (along with the use of dialogue) by the Rabbis.<sup>179</sup> Both dialogue and allegory are found in Greek rhetorical and literary-critical methods, a full history of which is beyond the scope of this paper. It should be duly noted, however, that the Rabbis, like Origen, were trained in these methods, as all

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<sup>177</sup> Robertson, 89.

<sup>178</sup> Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 13. Origen, prolific in Hebrew and Greek, wrote commentaries on virtually every book of the Bible. He observed that there were hazards in reading the Bible literally, “noting the Bible’s anthropomorphisms, historical inaccuracies and internal contradictions. He insisted that the Bible must be interpreted in a way “worthy of God”. This led him to interpret problematic texts allegorically, seeing beneath the literal surface a many-layered density and rich symbolism. Origen’s fondness for allegory would influence later monastic writers, who repeated his interpretations and drew inspiration” from his literary-critical methods.” These methods of greatly influenced Cassian.

<sup>179</sup> Note that Jewish writers were using allegory concurrent with if not earlier than the Greeks.

educated elites were at the time. The same system of Roman pedagogy influenced Cassian and his preferred manner of reading scripture, *Lectio divina*.<sup>180</sup>

*Lectio divina*, or Cassian's four-fold method of reading scripture, moves through a process of reception, experience, interpretation, and consequent activity and therefore goes beyond the act of reading as we conceive of it today. Our present notion of reading scripture corresponds only to the first stage of that four-fold process, *lectio*.<sup>181</sup> *Lectio* corresponds to *Peshat* in PaRDes and requires an intensity of concentration as the text is read and re-read in its context. Here the monk is looking at the literal or straightforward interpretation of the text. The second phase, meditation or *meditatio*, includes for Cassian speaking and reciting the text repeatedly until the text is memorized. This enables the monk to use scripture as repetitive prayer while at work or at rest. The goal here, through repetition and memorization, is to move toward the third phase of *Lectio Divina*, *oratio* or prayer, using the memorized text. Finally, the monk would move beyond the text and into the final stage of *contemplatio* or contemplation. In these later two phases of *lectio divina*, prayer and *contemplation*, the reader lifts their eyes from the text and engages in a personal, active, affective, and intellectual appropriation of it. Having now appropriated the passage, the monk was encouraged to use their imagination and abridge or modify the text or to even add to it for their own use.<sup>182</sup> In this way, Cassian's four-fold process uses an attentive imagination similar to that found in both Halakic and Haggadic writings.

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<sup>180</sup> Burton Visotzky, *Aphrodite and the Rabbis: How the Jews Adapted Roman Culture to Create Judaism We Know It* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2016). 102-103.

<sup>181</sup> Robertson, 90.

<sup>182</sup> Robertson, 90.

Additionally, as noted above and like the Rabbis, Cassian used dialogue to clarify issues or problems confronting the individual monk or the community. With a cast of three characters, including Cassian himself, his friend and long-time companion Germanus, and the desert father or Abba that is being questioned, Cassian sets the stage for a question and answer session like those found in Halakic writings. Each follows a pattern: Cassian sets the stage for the question and answer session, Germanus poses a spiritual question (or multiple questions) throughout each conference, and the Abba being interviewed answers the questions applying the wisdom of the desert fathers.

Now that we found evidence of Midrashic interpretation in the Christian tradition in the form of African American Spirituals, Womanist Midrash, and the sayings of the Desert Fathers, I turn now to incorporating Midrashic hermeneutics into my own sermons.

### **Chapter 5: Three Original Sermons: Incorporating PaRDeS**

This chapter will consist of three original sermons that utilize some of the interpretive methods found in dialogue, attentive imagination, or PaRDeS. Special attention will be paid to *Derash* which asks, “What is missing here?” or “What are the gaps in the story?” The goal for each sermon will be to make the Hebrew Bible more accessible to my congregants by sparking their imagination and encouraging them to “read the Bible with question marks” (Rabbi Sandy Sasso). My intent is to look closely at the Patriarchs, Isaac, Rebekah, and Jacob followed by a portion of the Joseph saga. The series of three sermons were preached as follows:

Proper 9 A – July 5, 2020 – Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67  
Pray, Wait, Watch: Courtship as metaphor for spiritual discernment

Proper 10 A – July 12, 2020 – Genesis 25:19-34  
Rebekah's Regret

Proper 15 A – August 16, 2020 – Genesis 45:1-15  
Park Your Power: An alternative reading of Joseph's reconciliation with his brothers.

I will then evaluate my Preaching by asking the following questions:

- What specific elements of the Jewish Levels of Understanding and *PaRDeS* were incorporated in the sermon? How were they utilized?
- Did the sermon preach? Did it work?
- What did I learn from the sermon?
- How would I revise the sermon based on the experience of delivering it?

### **Proper 9 A – Pray, Wait, Watch: Courtship as Metaphor for Spiritual Discernment**

St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Marco Island, FL  
July 5, 2020  
Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67

We will stay with the Old Testament reading from Genesis today. Genesis for me is the best book in the Bible. It grounds everything else and reads like a soap opera – full of high drama and trickery. If you can, read all of Chapter 24 when you get home today because the abbreviated version in your bulletin leaves out some of the good stuff.

If I had a title for this sermon, it would be *The Strange Courtship of Isaac and Rebekah*, strange because Isaac is absent from the courting. He has a surrogate instead, a stand in, who brokers the deal. Can you imagine your father or mother sending a servant to find your spouse? That would be strange now and it was strange then too.

But before we go deep into this strangeness, take a moment to remember your own courtship. Maybe the result, years later, was disappointing but I am not referring to disappointment. No, I am referring to new love. Think of that person. What do you remember feeling at the time? Wonder? A strange sensation like butterflies fluttering around in your stomach? How about being oddly self-conscious? Visualize it. On the girl's part there is flipping of the hair, and on the boy's part, a lot of looking down and shuffling of the feet. Every move seems awkward as you try to figure out why this new person in your life turns you inside out.

And then there is the problem of the big question. No not, "Will you marry me?" No, that's a question for later. The (capital B) BIG question is, "Is this the one?" or, "Is this thing we have between us right and good and true?"

I remember my own courtship. At 22, I met my sweetheart for the first time at the University of Hawaii in a training session for the Peace Corps. I found myself sitting on the floor in that training room – next to this long tall drink of water (with legs to match) named Dwight. That was the start of the crush-to-end-all-crushes, but it took me a whole year to get his attention. He was oblivious until our mutual friend Joanne brokered a deal much like the servant did in Isaac and Rebekah's case. But instead of saying to the intended like Abraham's servant does, "Please give me a little water from your jar to drink," Joanne said, "Dwight, you big lug, Jessica is gaga over you. Now get on with it man!"

Odd thing was, there was no first date in this courtship – no ice cream after the movie, because there was no movie theater and we were living and teaching on separate islands in the Marshall Island (North Pacific). Dwight had to hop a ride on a Japanese

fishing boat to see me. Sounds romantic, doesn't it? Sounds like a strange courtship to me but as it turns out, it was right and good and true and it's been a wonderful 28 years come August 1<sup>st</sup>. And that brings me to my point. How do we know when something is right and good and true? How do we know we're going down the right path in life, with the right person? How do you know you are going down the right path period?

Somehow Rebekah knew. Not only did she willingly go with Abraham's servant, but later in the passage, the Hebrew implies that when she raised her eyes and saw Isaac for the first time – walking across the field toward her – that she literally fell off her camel at the sight of him. The English translation says she 'alighted' from her camel, which eliminates the humor from the passage. She didn't alight, she fell off in her DELIGHT, as she said to the servant, "Who is that man walking through the field toward us?" Yes, Rebekah knew, this is the one, and somehow the servant that Isaac's father Abraham sent to find a wife for his son knew it too. The servant knew that this was right and good and true.<sup>183</sup>

Let's back up a bit in this courtship and remember where we've been with Isaac, his father Abraham and his mother Sarah.<sup>184</sup> Recollect with me, that Isaac's name means laughter, and he was given that name at birth because he was an unexpected gift in Sarah's old age. The prospect of nursing a child at eighty made her laugh so hard she had to name him Isaac. But, unlike his name, not all of Isaac's life was joyful. The scenes we

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<sup>183</sup> Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (W. W. Norton and Company, 2004). 117-126.

<sup>184</sup> Sarah died in the previous chapter of Genesis at the ripe old age of 127 and perhaps that's why Abraham sent his servant on this courtship errand, maybe he did not want to be alone. Yet, Genesis goes on to say that Abraham remarried immediately and had more children.

encounter just prior to Chapter 24 are traumatic.<sup>185</sup> First, we have the casting out into the desert of Hagar and her son Ishmael. Imagine being Isaac and watching your playmate and half-brother being shunned. A little while later, there is the strangeness of the near sacrifice of Isaac by his own father Abraham. (I don't know about you, but something tells me that this is NOT a well-functioning family.) Fast forward and now Isaac is a young man and ready to marry but instead of sending Isaac to take a look, so to speak, Abraham sends his servant. It's just strange.

I'm convinced, however, that in this story the one to watch is not Isaac, who is absent, nor Rebekah. It is the servant. The servant who goes unnamed all the way through this passage but is given a name elsewhere in Rabbinic commentary that of Eliezer.<sup>186</sup> A name that literally means "God's helper." Notice that Eliezer here is worried; worried about what will happen to him if he returns without a match for Isaac. We know this because we have his prayer right here in Genesis.

O LORD, please grant me success today. Let the girl to whom I say, "Please offer your jar that I may drink," say in return, "Drink, and I will water your camels," let her be the one. (My paraphrase Gen 24:12-14)

With that, Eliezer turns his worry into prayer. "Grant me success today," he says, and that is when he spies Rebekah at the well at nightfall, when all the women came to draw water for their families and livestock. Upon seeing Rebekah, Eliezer again does

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<sup>185</sup> "Commentary on Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67 by Kathryn M. Schifferdecker," accessed August 7, 2020, [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3281](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3281).

<sup>186</sup> Eliezer is named in multiple places as Abraham's servant. See *The Book of Legends Sefer Ha-Aggadah: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash*, 28:130 and 34:19 as examples.

something we should notice. Genesis says, “And the man was staring at her, keeping silent, to know whether the Lord had granted success to his journey.” (Gen 24:21) Ahh, there is a pattern of discernment here. First Eliezer prays for the Lord to guide his actions, then he is silent as he waits and then watches for God to act.

Pray, wait, watch.

While romance is missing in this courtship, discernment is not. And what is discernment? Discernment is the ability to judge something well. Spiritual discernment, on the other hand, is (and I quote), “realizing that everyday events are the means by which God tries to reach us.”<sup>187</sup> So how do we know that those events or the people that enter our lives are right and good and true? Well, one word, discernment, and Eliezer gives us the pattern to follow as he prays, and waits, and watches.

Spiritual discernment is just that: praying, waiting, and watching for God to act in your life. Spiritual discernment is courtship – not with your beloved (certainly that is one type of courtship) but with the Beloved and, here is the best part, God is courting you in return. But what does that mean that God is courting you? It means that there is a divine force actively working in this world for your good. And this beautiful, yet strange, story of courtship gives us a window into how God works for each and every one of us. Yet, Eliezer, God’s helper, reminds us that there is something God needs of us. It is the attentiveness that comes from praying, waiting, and watching. This week try to follow the example of Eliezer, pray, wait, and watch as the Divine courts you.

[END]

## **Evaluation**

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<sup>187</sup> Margaret Guenther and Alan Jones, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction*, Sixth Printing edition (Cambridge, Mass: Cowley Publications, 1992). ix.

### **What specific elements of the Jewish Levels of Understanding were incorporated in the sermon? How were they utilized?**

This sermon was written utilizing: *Derash*, *Remez* and *Sod* of *PaRDeS*. *Derash* asked, “What is missing here?” *Remez* asked, “Is there a primary metaphor that can be used to heighten understanding?” And *Sod* asked, “What does the passage tell us about the divine?” The missing element (*Derash*) comes in the form of Abraham’s servant who goes unnamed in the text. However, from Rabbinic commentary and an earlier passage in Genesis (15:2), we know that his name is Eliezer (or in Hebrew, “God’s helper”). In my re-telling, Eliezer becomes the primary character to watch (rather than Isaac or Rebekah) as he teaches us about spiritual discernment grounded in praying, waiting and watching for God to act. Additionally, the sermon uses courtship as a guiding metaphor for spiritual discernment (*Remez*) and *Sod* which asked, “What does the passage tell us about the divine?” I spoke to this in the conclusion of the sermon, saying that God is actively courting each of us.

### **Did the sermon preach? Did it work?**

This sermon worked. It was well received, and listeners commented that the refrain of “pray, wait, and watch” was helpful in their own prayer life and discernment. Another listener commented that she actively courted God through prayer but never thought of God as courting her in return.

### **What did I learn from the sermon?**

As I did for all three sermons, I spent a great deal of time scouring Rabbinic commentary in the form of *The Book of Legends: Sefer Ha-Aggadah, Legends from the Talmud and Midrash*. This masterful piece of work is indexed, allowing the user to quickly locate commentary on Biblical characters. I learned that there is very little on

Eliezer, besides his name which the Rabbis thought was an important addition to this story. In the preparation of this sermon (and thesis) I found a valuable resource in the form of *The Book of Legends* that I will use again and again in my sermon preparation.

### **How would I revise the sermon based on the experience of delivering it?**

If I were to preach this sermon again, I'd develop the character of Eliezer even further, giving him more agency. Perhaps a first-person account directly from Eliezer would be a possibility.

### **Proper 10 A – Rebekah's One Regret**

St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Marco Island, FL  
July 12, 2020  
Genesis 25:19-34

Good Morning!

Long ago, around the second century, in the Mediterranean basin, Jews formed rabbinical schools to promote the study of Torah and to train young rabbis. The type of Biblical interpretation that came out of those schools is called *Midrash*. *Midrash* in Hebrew means “to study” but when applied to scripture it means to perform a deep reading of the text. In their deep reading, the rabbis asked, “Where are the gaps in the story?” After a deep reading, the Rabbis would use their imaginations to craft new stories and sayings that explained the gaps. What you will experience today is a *Midrash* that I wrote about Genesis 25, Rebekah's relationship with her husband Isaac and their twin boys, Jacob, and Esau.

So, where is the gap in the story? There are two big gaps that I see. First, I seriously doubt Jacob's ability to trick his own father, Isaac, without Isaac being in on the

scheme. Secondly, Rebekah in the original story seems to feel no guilt over the split between her sons. In my imagination, Rebekah tells us her story and fills in the gaps. She begins...

I am Rebekah, wife of Isaac, daughter of Bethuel, and I have one regret. His name is Esau. To let you in on the family drama, my sons, Jacob and Esau, never got along. Sibling rivalry does not even begin to describe the boys' toxic relationship. They were never close like my brother Laban's twins. Those twins were inseparable. Today fully grown, they still think each other's thoughts and finished each other's sentences but not my twins. Esau and Jacob were different from birth; the first entering the world covered with red hair, the second soft as a newborn lamb. The midwife told me that the younger, Jacob, was gripping the heel of his older brother as they made their grand appearance which meant they would always struggle. I refused to believe that nonsense at the time, yet I was never without a certain sense of unease when it came to my sons.

And oh, how I remember the pain they caused me. I wanted so to die when I carried them in my womb. The two of them must have fought ten battles as they wrestled for dominance. I often thought, "Why me? After twenty barren years, why are these two fighting to the point of taking my life?" The pain was so spectacular that I went to inquire of the Lord as to why this was so. Instead of feeling his soothing presence, He presented me with an Oracle, "Two nations – in your womb, two peoples from your loins shall issue. People over people shall prevail, the elder the younger's slave."<sup>188</sup> This Oracle coupled with the foretelling of that silly midwife, did nothing to calm my anxiety.

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<sup>188</sup> Alter, Robert. *The Five Books of Moses*, 127-132.

As the twins grew one loved playing in the dirt, the other with my cooking bowls. If they attempted to play together, Jacob always wanted what Esau had which resulted in a bitter feud each time. Their father Isaac complained that the boys were disrupting not just his peace, but that of the entire camp. All in all, it was not easy living in a tented compound with a pair of boys who knew no limits.

I guess now that I am in the mood for reflection, that my one regret is that I did not protect Esau from Jacob. The oracle, depending on how the Hebrew is spoken, can have two meanings for “the elder, the younger’s slave.” Either “the elder shall serve the younger,” or, “the elder, the younger shall serve.” So, either Esau serves Jacob or Jacob serves Esau. After Jacob stole Esau’s birthright, I assumed that the Oracle was right. Jacob had the confidence to lead and make decisions. Esau, on the other hand, was all about hunting. He cared nothing for his birthright as firstborn son. So be it.

But then we went too far. After the birthright episode Isaac and I conspired together to ensure that Jacob would also receive Isaac’s blessing. I think the gossip mill says otherwise. They say that on my own I tricked my elderly husband by dressing Jacob up as his brother and sending him into the tent but that is not the case. We arrived at that plan together, Isaac and I. Think about it. How else could Jacob trick his father into giving him Esau’s blessing? The man might be blind, but he is not stupid. He knows each son by sound, movement, and smell. So of course, Isaac was in on it. What else could we have done?<sup>189</sup>

I often wonder why my family is like this. Both boys are grown adults now, yet jealousy and fear on Jacob’s part and stubbornness on Esau’s part keep them, well... far

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<sup>189</sup> Zucker, David J. “The Deceiver Deceived: Rereading Genesis 27.” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (January 2011): 46–58.

apart. Now mind you, each boy did very well for himself. They are equals in that respect but still Jacob steadfastly avoids crossing Esau's land because he fears his brother's murderous rage. They are like two countries in a silent war.

So, I need your opinion. Did Isaac and I cause this split by conspiring to have Jacob inherit? Or perhaps as parents, we turned a blind eye (all too often) to the boys' infighting? Or maybe this has everything to do with birth order and that Oracle. "Two nations – in your womb, two peoples from your loins shall issue. People over people shall prevail, the elder the younger's slave."<sup>190</sup> While you are ruminating over my part in all of this and forming your opinion, I will say one thing. It is evident to me now what that Oracle means. Esau the elder did not live as his younger brother's slave. Rather it was the reverse. It was Jacob's fear that kept him enslaved to his older brother. In fact, Jacob lived in fear of his brother's rage throughout most of his life until he was forced to cross his brother's land with his men and meet Esau face-to face on the road. Jacob was certain that his brother would kill him, but instead, his brother welcomed him.

I wonder where you see fear ruling your life like it did Jacob's. Is there a way for you to name that fear before God and ask for resolution or reconciliation? Is there a way to meet that person or situation on the road, face-to-face?

[END]

## **Evaluation**

**What specific elements of the Jewish Levels of Understanding were incorporated in the sermon? How were they utilized?**

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<sup>190</sup> Alter, Robert. *The Five Books of Moses*, 127-132.

In this sermon I asked the question from *Derash of PaRDeS*, “Where is the gap in the story?” and then used attentive imagination to form a new narrative. The gap in the story is the duping of Isaac; a tale that does not hold up to scrutiny. For example, why would Rebekah who we assume had a good relationship with her husband participate in deceiving the same? While Genesis clearly states that, “Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game, but Rebekah loved Jacob,” (25:28) this does not go far enough to explain why Rebekah would try to manipulate Isaac. Furthermore, why would Isaac allow himself to be duped? Despite blindness, wouldn’t any father know their son by sound or smell? I think so. Here I explain the duping of Isaac by enlisting Isaac as Rebekah’s co-conspirator. In this scenario, they both consider Jacob to be the son who should inherit.

A second gap exists in the form of Esau. Esau is viewed negatively in Genesis and in rabbinic commentary because he sold his birthright and married outside of Judaism. Yet, in the end Esau is the one that opens his arms to his brother and fosters reconciliation. This sermon asked, “Why is that?” and reverses the negative perception of Esau by ending with Esau and Jacob’s reunion and with Rebekah calling Esau, “The better man.”

### **Did the sermon preach? Did it work?**

In my opinion, this sermon did not work on many levels. For example, it lacked a central teaching point that could be pulled all the way through the sermon. It also left my listeners confused saying, “I didn’t realize that Isaac was in on it too,” and, “Why mess with a tale that already works?” Additionally, as I delivered the sermon, I grew weary of Rebekah’s voice and upon reflection noted that she needed to be in dialogue with another member of the family.

### **What did I learn from the sermon?**

I learned that not every gap in a story makes good Midrash. While the gap in this story was easily identifiable (i.e., there must be a reason why Rebekah would conspire with Jacob to dupe Isaac) that doesn't mean that a retelling of the story that addresses those gaps will work for the congregation. Indeed, changing the story too much confuses the listener. Another key learning from the writing of this sermon was that forming a new narrative around a scripture passage using attentive imagination is easier if the story is not well fleshed out. Rebekah's story throughout Genesis, for example, is well developed, especially for a female character. Again, the takeaway here is to do Midrash with those scenes or characters that are not given any voice in the passage.

### **How would I revise the sermon based on the experience of delivering it?**

First, I would isolate one scene rather than creating a diatribe utilizing only Rebekah's voice. A better passage perhaps would be Esau's selling of his birthright because in that scene he has no real voice. Since this scene also lacks detail, it would be a better choice in my opinion for the application of attentive imagination.. A second possibility would be to rewrite the sermon putting the parents, Rebekah and Isaac in conversation regarding Jacob and Esau's relationship. I would also delete the introduction on Midrash and deliver the sermon as straight story. Furthermore, I would pull the theme of "regret" all the way through the sermon and ask the question of the listener, "What would God have us do with all of our regrets?" (Answer: reconcile those regrets like Jacob and Esau.)

### **Proper 15 A – Park Your Power: An Alternative Reading of Joseph's Reconciliation with His Brothers**

St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Marco Island, FL  
August 16, 2020  
Genesis 45:1-15

This week I ran across a phrase that I love, "Park your power."<sup>191</sup> Hold on to that phrase as we move through both the reading from Genesis and the Gospel of Matthew this morning.

One of my least favorite things to do is to shop for shoes. I'd rather order online from Zappos.com and return ten boxes at the UPS store, than spend an hour in a shoe store wondering where all the size 9's went. Shoe stores just put me in a rotten mood and I was in one of those moods when I went shoe shopping not long ago. I pulled into the parking lot of DSW. I found a parking space up front, went in, and miracle upon miracles, found a pair of size 9's.

Boy, I was having a great day until I came out and found a big fat ticket on my car. "What in tarnation is going on here?" I thought. The ticket said I parked in a handicap space. "NO I DID NOT," my indignant self said as I got out my iPhone and started taking pictures for proof. Sure, I had two tires resting on the blue striped unload zone, but the paint was faded. It is not my fault that somebody did not paint the lines. I am NOT paying this ticket. I am going to dispute this in traffic court.

My Court day came, and I took my pictures to show to the judge. I printed them out nice and large. I sat in traffic court for over an hour waiting for things to start when suddenly the clerk shouted, "All rise," and here comes the judge. But the judge didn't

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<sup>191</sup> "Commentary on Proper 15A by Eric Fistler and Rob McCoy," Pulpit Fiction, accessed August 17, 2020, <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/proper15a>.

walk toward the stand.....he rolled.....in a wheelchair. By this point, I am sweating bullets. “Of all the judges in the world,” I thought, “And I get this one?”

Finally, my name was called, and I stood.

“Mrs. Babcock,” said the judge, “People like me need those handicap spots. What do you have to say for yourself?”

“Um....Sorry Sir,” I said with a tremor in my voice.

“Fine. Step outside and pay the cashier,” he said.

And that is exactly what I did.

Later I thought, “I was such a jerk.” I was angry when I got that ticket. Indignant too. I convinced myself that I did not deserve the ticket when I was over the line in so many ways. You see, I did not park my power. What does that mean? Well, we all have our own sense of power. The need to manipulate a situation or throw our weight around so that things come out in our favor. In this case, I did not use my power appropriately. I should have ‘parked my power.’

Joseph could learn from this too. Often this passage from Genesis is preached from the pulpit as an example of what reconciliation and forgiveness is all about. “Look at how forgiving Joseph is,” the preacher says. “Look at how hard he works to put his own feelings aside and reconcile with his brothers.” But does he really? Let’s remember his story together.

Of course, you know the story of Joseph and his many-colored coat and you probably remember the scene where Joseph’s brothers throw him into a pit and leave him there to die. But what drove his brothers to commit such a crime? And why do they hate their younger brother so? I’ll tell you why. Joseph was their father’s pet, and as a result,

he was spoiled rotten and showered with gifts. One of those gifts was his coat of many colors – which Joseph flaunted by wearing everywhere. He never took it off. Joseph also had a bad habit of tattling on his brothers, running straight to Old Jacob with any ‘new’ news of his brothers’ exploits. And then what about those dreams? Joseph never stopped talking about his dreams and he had a penchant for interpreting those dreams at the dinner table. One dream pushed his brothers over the line. In that dream Joseph stands over his brothers as “Mr. Big” as they grovel for mercy at his feet. So, I ask you, were the brothers justified?

The good news is that after being thrown into the pit, Joseph lives. The bad news is, he was sold into slavery. But as you know, things worked out pretty well for Joseph despite his being enslaved because he somehow made it into Pharaoh’s household as a servant and eventually becomes his Head of Agriculture. Why is that significant? One word. FAMINE. You see, Egypt has all the stored grain in the area which puts Joseph in charge of the food supply making him an extremely powerful man.

Joseph should park his power and reconcile with his brothers but instead, he uses his power to retaliate. He toys with them, at one point hiding some silver in a backpack hoping to bring charges of espionage against his own kin, at another point holding one brother hostage. Joseph plays a harmful cat-and-mouse game before attempting to reconcile or forgive. What does that say about Joseph? That’s right, he needs to learn to ‘park his power.’

We have a similar thread running through the lesson from Matthew today and, much to our surprise, Jesus is the one that needs to ‘park his power.’ In this story, we encounter an angry, indignant Jesus who, not once but twice, is rude. First with the

Pharisees by calling them the ‘blind leading the blind’ and then with the Canaanite woman by calling her a ‘dog.’ It is very hard to get past Jesus being a jerk until we read on and notice this verse, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” (Mt 15:24) Ah ha...at this point in his ministry Jesus views himself only as the Messiah for his own people. Therefore, this is a pivotal point in Matthew as Jesus’ ministry goes beyond serving his own people to serving the world. The Canaanite woman represents the world. She is ‘the other’ in the story. And notice that Jesus’ ministry does not grow, and he doesn’t grow, until he learned to park it. Just like Joseph who was never going to get to that point of true forgiveness and reconciliation until he put himself, and all of his power aside. To let God in, both men had to park it.

If Jesus and Joseph can park their power. Surely, we can too. What would the world look like if we learned this lesson? Politics would change, people would change, relationships would change – all for the better.

As you move into your week, watch out for your own power struggles. Are there times when you should “park your power?”

[END]

## **Evaluation**

**What specific elements of the Jewish Levels of Understanding were incorporated in the sermon? How were they utilized?**

In this sermon, I focused again on *Derash* or, “What is missing here?” by doing a deep reading of the entire Joseph saga as well as related commentaries. I then compared those with the assigned reading from Genesis. These helped me determine that a true picture of Joseph was absent from the lectionary reading which only reinforced an image

of Joseph as childhood hero. Yet that is not the case. Joseph, although well-loved as a Biblical character, is just as tricky and conniving as his father Jacob. I chose, therefore, to retell the story showing Joseph as a fallible individual who could change by learning to “park his power.”

### **Did the sermon preach? Did it work?**

Yes, this sermon worked for my listeners. Several commented that the practice of “parking your power” would stay with them for quite some time. Others said that I gave Joseph a new dimension different from what they were familiar with (which is sadly Broadway’s *Joseph and the Technicolored Dreamcoat* and not the Genesis account).

### **What did I learn from the sermon?**

I found that a deep reading of the Hebrew Scriptures should always include Rabbinic commentary. Doing so exposed a new side of Joseph’s character which made him less hero-like and more relatable to people in the pew.

### **How would I revise the sermon based on the experience of delivering it?**

I was pleased with my delivery of this sermon, however an alternate sermon would be to simply stick with the Joseph saga and not compare Joseph’ cat and mouse game to Jesus’ rudeness in the assigned Gospel reading from Matthew.

## **Chapter 6: Evaluation and Summary of Learnings**

### **Chapter by Chapter Evaluation**

The purpose of this project was to investigate ancient Jewish methods of Biblical interpretation including: Midrashic dialogue, imagination and PaRDeS and then apply those methods with an eye toward *Derash* of PaRDeS in the pulpit in order to encourage

congregants to embrace a new yet ancient way of engaging with and learning from scripture. As stated at the beginning of this thesis, these interpretive methods invite the reader into a literal, ethical and spiritual reading of the scripture while engaging the reader's imagination.

Every chapter in this thesis could evolve into a full-blown thesis itself. That said, many times I felt that I was skating on the surface of something very deep. If asked what in each chapter piqued my curiosity, I would give the following overview of key learnings.

### **Chapter 1: Framing the Problem**

Much of the subject in this chapter was addressed in my seminary preaching curriculum. I recall being coached to avoid supersessionism and triumphalism from the pulpit at all costs but never felt the need to delve deeper into the problem until sitting in an advanced preaching class offered in this Doctor of Ministry program. That day, the professor asked the class to list the 'blocks' that keep preachers from preaching the Hebrew Scriptures. Those blocks became the first chapter of this paper. Reviewing that list (supersessionism, triumphalism, the myth of inaccessibility, etc.) was a helpful exercise as was my review of the history of supersessionism in, "How Did We Get Here?" Yet, I still felt that I lacked a framework for countering these blocks in my own sermons. This is where the discovery of Krister Stendhal's guiding hermeneutical questions came in handy. Stendahl advocated that preachers should: 1.) Leave room for holy envy when studying any tradition that is not our own, 2.) Be aware of scripture that is used to proof-text by asking, "Has this verse grown legs and walked out of its context?" 3.) Read the Hebrew Bible as being about "us" as opposed to "me" in that it depicts a

covenantal relationship between humankind (us) and God rather than God and the individual and finally, 4.) Recognize that Christianity is a religious construct. Stendahl reminds us that Christianity, as we know it, had not yet formed in Jesus' day. Jesus was after all a Jew and to understand Jesus is to understand his Bible, the Hebrew Scriptures.

## **Chapter 2: *Halakah* and *Haggadah***

In this chapter I gained an understanding of the depth and breadth of the term *Midrash*. Like other seminary-trained preachers, my education focused only on the Christian interpretation of scripture from Origen through Luther and beyond. Yet, while Origen and others were doing Biblical interpretation with a Christian hermeneutic, the Rabbis were also hard at work interpreting the TaNaKh with their own hermeneutical lens. By looking closely at *Halakic* and *Haggadic* writings, I uncovered a beautiful yet ancient framework for interpreting scripture that includes the use of dialogue, attentive imagination, and PaRDeS. These methods of interpretation were then compiled into a grid for use in evaluating 1.) my own preaching and 2.) contemporary Jewish sermons.

Not only was writing this chapter my first adventure with the Babylonian Talmud, but it also marked a watershed event in my own learning because I encountered a world where the Rabbis felt free to retell, or reimagine scripture – both law and legend – for the benefit of their listeners. While this rabbinic practice may seem to stand counter to Stendhal's second point (be aware of scripture that walks out of its context) this Jewish hermeneutic remains faithful to scripture in that it elucidates rather than misuses scripture to prove a doctrinal point. Simply put, Midrashic dialogue, attentive imagination and

PaRDeS are not proof texting.<sup>192</sup> Additionally, Jewish interpretation raises an important question about whether historical criticism, that is so obsessed with keeping a text in its context, is really the best hermeneutic and homiletic approach to the text.

After writing this chapter, I continue to wonder why this framework is not taught in Christian seminaries. Doing so would promote ecumenism, break down the myth of inaccessibility, and foster Christian self-understanding.

### **Chapter 3: Midrashic Interpretation in Jewish Preaching and Storytelling Today**

In this chapter, I went in search of examples of Midrashic sermons from contemporary Rabbis. I will admit that these were hard to find. I listened to sermon after sermon only to find that not all Rabbis incorporate Midrash routinely. Instead I took a different route and focused on well-known Rabbis from Newsweek's bi-annual list of the Top 50 Most Influential Rabbis and then reached out by email to request a sample sermon if one could not be found online that included Midrash. The result is that all three of these sermons in this Chapter utilize these interpretive approaches but in different ways which speaks to the richness of Jewish Biblical Interpretation. As noted in my evaluation of those sermons, Sharon Brous gives an excellent example of a deep reading of scripture and the use of dialogue. Margaret Moers Wenig gives an example of the use of *Derash*, asking, "What is missing here?" and constructing a new story around the daughters of Israel and their participation in the Exodus story. Finally, Ed Feinstein uses multiple metaphors (*Remez*) to draw the audience into his sermon. All in all, these sermon samples show that these practices are alive and well in contemporary Jewish

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<sup>192</sup> The Merriam Webster dictionary defines proof text or proof texting as "a Scriptural passage adduced as proof for a theological doctrine, belief, or principle."

preaching. They also serve as examples of applied Midrash that I can continue to model in my own preaching.

#### **Chapter 4: How Have Christians Employed Midrashic Interpretation, Imagination and PaRDeS in their Hermeneutics?**

If asked to choose a favorite word and phrase from this project that inspired me the most, the word would be *darshan*, the Hebrew for preacher, and the phrase would be “sanctified imagination.” As noted earlier, the *darshan* is the one who employs the midrash and therefore is tasked with searching for meaning behind the text by asking questions like: “Who or what is missing here?” The *darshan* is also adept at employing attentive imagination and the Levels of Jewish Understanding (PaRDeS) to make the scripture come alive. They are not limited to the literal or plain meaning of the text but rather build on the original foundation by creating new insights that resonate with the lives of their listeners. But this begs the question, “Have we, in the white Protestant pulpit, lost our ability to be the *darshan*?” Or perhaps, like this preacher, never felt free to employ imaginative insight like the *darshan* until now.

As noted in the first Chapter, there is a lot at stake if we do not take steps to address the church’s long-standing problem with supersessionism. Being the *darshan* in the pulpit is one way to correct this problem since the *darshan* is charged with using imagination to make the Hebrew Scriptures culturally accessible. Additionally, it puts the Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament on equal footing in the minds of our congregants as the preacher models this new (yet ancient) way of reading and interpreting scripture. Lastly, being the *darshan* and encouraging the congregation to use their sanctified imaginations can counter two gross misperceptions that have their roots in

supersessionism. First, that the Hebrew Scriptures are old and obsolete. Second, that Jesus can be understood without the Hebrew Scriptures. Note that without understanding the Hebrew Scriptures to be Jesus' Bible, we have no window into how Jesus interpreted scripture himself. He was the *darshan*, and his use of parable, allusion, and metaphor, to name a few, flow directly out of these Jewish interpretive methods that the rabbinical schools would eventually codify. Therefore, to understand Jesus as a rabbi and how he would have taught, debated, and engaged with his listeners is directly linked to his Jewishness. In this way, Christianity is dependent upon the Hebrew Bible for its own self-understanding.

### **Chapter 5: Three Original Sermons Incorporating *Derash***

After critiquing Jewish sermons that included dialogue, attentive imagination and PaRDeS, the stakes were high for this preacher's own Midrashic-style sermons. Especially since two of the three examples from our contemporary Rabbis were written for Yom Kippur, a high holy day, and are therefore much longer than a typical Shabbat (Sabbath) message. In my writing and re-writing of my own Midrashic-style sermons I realized just how much work it takes to incorporate these Jewish Interpretive Methods. If I'm honest, it required much more of a deep reading than I am accustomed to as I rush to produce Sunday's sermon while administering a busy parish. Yet, the practice of close reading and of asking, "What is missing here?" (*Derash*) bore great fruit as I grew accustomed to using my new-found sanctified imagination. This chapter taught me that I can be the *darshan* in the pulpit and in so doing I can help my congregation remove those supersessionist blocks discussed in the first chapter of this thesis.

### **Summary – Six Implications for Christian Preaching**

In Summary, there are six implications for Christian preaching that became readily apparent over the course of this project:

- First and foremost, Christian preachers can counter supersessionism by incorporating dialogue, attentive imagination, and the Jewish Levels of Understanding (PaRDeS) into their sermon preparation and delivery.
- Forms of interpretation like Jewish Midrash can be found in ancient and contemporary Christian settings. Therefore, the Christian preacher should not hesitate to embrace this method of interpretation if plenty of room is left for what Stendahl calls “holy envy.” To put it more bluntly, in using Jewish interpretive methods, we are not grabbing hold of something that is not ours. Rather, we are reclaiming an interpretive process that has often gone missing in Christian hermeneutics and homiletics.
- Giving the gift of sanctified imagination to our congregants when preaching from the Hebrew Scriptures is one way to invite the congregation into a literal, ethical and spiritual reading of the text that counters the myth of inaccessibility.
- There is something to be gained from reading, studying, and inwardly digesting the Hebrew Scriptures within its own milieu that prevents the text from growing legs and walking out of its context.
- There is much to be learned from the early sages and the study of the two streams of Jewish interpretation, *Halakah* and *Haggadah*. These sources are rich in storytelling and storytelling is key when relating any text to current life situations. These stories should be handled with care, however, since we are not and cannot be Jewish.

- And finally, the exploration of the Hebrew Scriptures using Jewish Interpretive Methods gives us a window into the life of Jesus the Jew. After all, Jesus was a *darshan* and echoes of these interpretive methods can be heard throughout his teachings.

## **Appendix 1: The Shema**

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:4–9)

If you will only heed his every commandment that I am commanding you today—loving the LORD your God, and serving him with all your heart and with all your soul— then he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, and you will gather in your grain, your wine, and your oil; and he will give grass in your fields for your livestock, and you will eat your fill. Take care, or you will be seduced into turning away, serving other gods and worshipping them, for then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you and he will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain and the land will yield no fruit; then you will perish quickly from the good land that the LORD is giving you.

You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land that the LORD swore to your ancestors to give them, as long as the heavens are above the earth. (Deuteronomy 11:13-21)

The LORD said to Moses: Speak to the Israelites, and tell them to make fringes on the corners of their garments throughout their generations and to put a blue cord on the fringe at each corner. You have the fringe so that, when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of the LORD and do them, and not follow the lust of your own heart and your own eyes. So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and you shall be holy to your God. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am the LORD your God. Numbers 15:37-41

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