

Speaking of Text

A WEEKLY EXPLORATION OF THE JEWISH BOOKSHELF



Reading Ourselves into Rabbinic Readings of Scripture

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How Do We Know This?: Midrash and the Fragmentation of Modern Judaism, by Jay Harris (SUNY Press, 1994)

Wherever Midrash is taught, we are trained in two schools of reading: Rabbi Yishmael's stuck to straightforward readings of the biblical texts; Rabbi Akiva's spun far-fetched interpretations, relying on the smallest of details.

This picture has been incredibly influential in Jewish life and discourse. Reactions are strong to both approaches. Many moderns are deeply uncomfortable with Rabbi Akiva's method that derives laws from a text that cannot, in good academic conscience, support them. They take comfort in the fact that, though his method was more influential in ancient Judaism, it was countered by that of sober, careful Rabbi Yishmael. In contrast, post-moderns revel in Rabbi Akiva's unselfconscious creativity, pitying the limited and unimaginative school of Rabbi Yishmael—the meaning of texts, after all, is more about the interpreter than the text itself.

That the two schools represent real disagreements in how to read the Bible is rarely questioned—which is surprising decades after the publication of Jay Harris's book. Harris demonstrates that the idea of these two schools, and their supposed methods, is absent from the Talmud itself. Indeed, the idea that there were two schools went almost entirely unnoticed until the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment. Since then, he shows, whenever a new sensitivity awakened as to how one should read texts, each generation recast the two schools in their own image, placing Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yishmael in opposition in order to play out their own anxieties about how to read our tradition.

It is true that different theologies and methods lie behind various works of Midrash, as explored by other scholars (most recently, Israel Azzan Yadin in *Scripture as Logos* and *Scripture and Tradition*). However, it has failed to penetrate the public discourse that these two schools have been retrojected onto sources for which they are ill-fitting.

Perhaps the “two schools” theory says more about us than it does about Midrash.

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נשא תשע"ח



Going to the Head of the Prayer Line

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Sharp elbows at shul extend beyond the kiddush table line and back into the sanctuary. Prayer—or giving honor to God—can be a competitive business. There are lots of reasons why this is so, and some of them even have to do with loving God. But *showing off* how we love God can get us into trouble. Against this background, let's consider Numbers, chapter 7, the concluding chapter of Parashat Naso.

At 89 verses, chapter 7 is a wall of words, built mostly from 12 near-identical blocks. Each block records the same gift brought by each of the 12 *nesi'im*—chieftains of the 12 Tribes of Israel—on 12 successive days to join in dedicating the Mishkan (Tabernacle) upon the inauguration of its service. On the first day, Nahshon ben Aminadav, *nasi* chieftain of the Tribe of Judah, brings a bowl, a basin, and a ladle, and a specific array of 21 animals for the Levites' sheepfold and pens. On the second day, Netanel ben Tzu'ar, *nasi* of the Tribe of Issachar, brings the same, as does Eliav ben Helon of Zevulun on the third day. While my increasingly terse telling about each day's gift is efficient and still clear, the Torah chooses to recount each gift with elaborate, repetitive precision.

The dignified procession of *nesi'im*, each stepping forward in turn to present their dedicatory offerings on their appointed days, seems the very model of serene, noncompetitive equality. Robert Alter (no relation) writes,

This passage is . . . a kind of epic inventory. Each of the tribes, here accorded absolutely equal status before the sanctuary without political hierarchy, brings exactly the same offering. One can readily imagine that the members of each tribe in the ancient audience of this text would be expected to relish the sumptuousness of its own tribal offering exactly equal to all the others, as it hears the passage read. (*The Five Books of Moses*, 716–717)

No sharp elbows here. Why else would the Torah tell of it thus, rather than in shorthand? The Torah does not quite answer this question, but it gives us clues. The Rabbis, characteristically, leap upon them.

First, while the *nesi'im* assemble their gifts on their own initiative (Num. 7:10), it is God who instructs Moshe to have them offered on 12 successive days. If God wants the presentation so evenly arranged, then the Torah rightly records it in discrete portions. But there are other hints. Of the 12 *nesi'im* involved, Nahshon, the giver on the first day, is the only one not recognized as a *nasi* in our passage. We know he is a *nasi* from last week's Parashat Bemidbar (1:16, 2:3), yet here he is named without his title (7:12). The commentator Hezekiah ben Manoah, known as the Hizkuni, points out: "Nahshon is not called *nasi* here so that his being first to offer the sacred gift would not go to his head, while all the others are called *nesi'im* because they humbled themselves in offering their gifts after his." Hizkuni recognizes that the *nesi'im* are dignified men deserving of (and possibly accustomed to) tribute, and that the opportunity to publicly honor God might play on their pride. So the Torah manages the chieftains' prestige with careful application of their honorifics.

While Netanel ben Tzu'ar's gift on the second day is the same as Nahshon's on the first, the Rabbis pick up on a variation in the telling. Everett Fox's distinct translation best conveys the redundancy in the Hebrew: "On the second day, Netanel son of Tzu'ar, leader [*nasi*] of Yissakhar, *brought-(it)-near; he brought-near* [my italics] his near-offering." Fox is indicating that the Torah employs the verb *hikriv* ("offered" or "brought near") twice with Netanel, when for all the other *nesi'im*, it uses it but once. Remember, this passage is all about what Alter calls "verbatim repetition." Midrash Rabbah 13:15 asks,

Why is *hikriv* used in connection with Netanel? Because Reuven lodged a complaint when he saw that the tribe of Issachar was to make the second offering and not him: "It's enough that Judah [Nahshon's tribe] already precedes me in the marching order. But I should be able to make my offering according to birth order!"

A little explanatory context: in last week's parashah, we learned how the tribes were encamped around the Mishkan, and that the Tribe of Judah was placed by God in the vanguard. In our midrash, we see that Reuven has no choice but to accept Judah's priority position in that context, but he expects that his status as firstborn among Jacob's sons/tribes will be recognized in the dedication ceremony for the Mishkan. Note that, while we might expect the *nasi* of Reuven to advocate for his own honor, the midrash places the complaint in the mouth of Reuven himself. This cannot mean what it says, though, as Reuven, the man, is long dead. Reuven, here, must be the personification of the tribe, probably in the person of its *nasi*, Elitzur ben Shedei'ur. The pride of the entire tribe is carried by its *nasi*.

But the appeal fails. In the midrash, Moshe rebukes "Reuven," explaining that the order of the offerings is dictated by God, no less than the arrangement of the

camp. The offerings are made by Judah, then Issachar, then Zevulun, and only then firstborn Reuven. So much for pride of place. It goes further, taking a different tack. It's not an unassailable divine decree that puts Issachar before Reuven. Rather, Issachar demonstrates a piety that Reuven did not. He earns his place near the front of the line. How? We learn in the midrash that it is Issachar's *nasi* who has the idea to organize all of the *nesi'im* to offer a group gift in the first place. He prompts them to give. (In the first verses of our chapter, the *nesi'im* give gifts collectively before they bring the offerings on behalf of their respective tribes.)

The "absolutely equal status" of the respective tribes and their *nesi'im* in this inauguration ceremony, then, barely contains the resentments and rivalries among them behind the scenes. Over what do the *nesi'im* contend? Is it their honor? God's honor? The honor of honoring God? Yes.

Our passage calls to mind the disaster of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4. No one told Cain to make an offering to God. He did so spontaneously out of love and gratitude. Abel was inspired by Cain. Did he intend to one-up his brother with a more lavish offering? Cain thought so. (Troublingly,) God favored Abel's offering over Cain's. For Cain, the demotion and rejection were intolerable.

Honoring God—in the Torah, often through material gifts, in our experience, often in prayer—is a high-stakes matter. Earlier in Midrash Rabbah (13:6), we learn in a gorgeous passage that God's existential loneliness spurred God to create the world, and that, since Creation, God craved intimacy with humanity—a craving fully answered only with the establishment of the Mishkan. The procession of gifts from the *nesi'im* is like the procession of the bridal party at a wedding, weighted with love and longing. Those who perceive God's yearning love, of course, want to reciprocate and proclaim their love for the world to see. That urge to proclaim can sometimes yield preening displays and, other times, motivate ugliness, even violence. Rising above the quibbling heard in the midrash, Numbers 7 portrays a community of individuals united in their love for God, generously claiming no monopoly on it, and humble in disregarding human hierarchies as they stand equally before God.

Without diminishing the vitality and beauty of spontaneous prayer, the dedication of the Mishkan points to a benefit and a challenge in the imposed uniformity inherent in communal worship. When we observe another recite the same words in prayer we've said countless times before, may we strive to say appreciatively, "I hope to offer something just as lovely when my turn comes."

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