





DAVID MEYER

# **GOD, CHECKMATE!**

## **MIDRASHIC HERMENEUTICS AS THEOLOGICAL MEDIUM**





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« He who commits Aggadah to writing  
has no share in the world to come;  
he who expounds Aggadah will be burnt;  
and he who listens will receive no rewards »  
Yerushalmi, Shabbat 79b.  
Quoted in Be'er Ha-Golah, Sixth Well, Chapter IV.

ובת קול אל מסתתר  
תתפוצץ פתאום מן הדממה  
"איכה?"

« The heavenly voice of the concealed God  
Bursts suddenly, out of the silent stillness  
"Where are you!?" »  
From Hayyim Nahman Bialik, The Pool.

נשחק במלים  
מה צלול העולם במשחק החדש  
לא אז, ולא עכשיו  
לא אמת, ולא כזב

« We shall play with words  
How lucid the world appear in this new game  
Not then, not now  
Not true, not false »  
From Leah Goldberg, The poem I didn't Write...



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stand at the heart of this book is certainly the result of their midrashic curiosity.

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1. Commentary to Deuteronomy 21,18 in: Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 71a; Sifre Devarim, Ki Tissa, Piska 220; Midrash Tanhuma Devarim 21.

2. Deuteronomy 21,18.



## Preface

# Midrash: A Rabbinic Chess Game

This book aims at being a *davar akher* on Midrash. Yet, *davar akher*, the classical rhetorical formula found in so many midrashic texts to introduce a new interpretation on any particular verse or word from Scripture, is not its topic. Its topic is neither Midrash *per se*, nor another academic endeavour to survey aspects of midrashic literature. No theory of Midrash, descriptive of the genre or of its method of inquiry or of its structures will be found in the forthcoming pages. If this book aims at being a *davar akher*, it is because it proposes readings of very specific midrashic texts, each one taken as an independent unit, in a way that is rarely, if not ever, performed in classical academic or rabbinic writings.

Central to the approach that will be presented and pursued in the following pages is the idea that hermeneutics embedded in midrashic texts is a medium to covertly express daring and powerful theological ideas.<sup>1</sup> “Midrash”, “hermeneutics” and “theology” could be thought of as the « three cord strands not easily broken » evoked by Kohelet,<sup>2</sup> a robust cord built by the sages, not to interpret the biblical text but to use its verses and

1. As will be further explained in the first chapter of this book, devoted to the theoretical framework standing at the core of our research, the relationship we wish to establish between midrashic hermeneutics and theology is very different from the perspectives followed by Michael Fishbane in either *Jewish Hermeneutical Theology* (2015) and *Sacred Attunement* (2008).

2. Ecclesiastes 4,12.

its words – the sages mental horizon and tool-box –, to express what the Bible did not or could not overtly say.

To refine our perspective, it is towards a powerful image that we borrow from one of Stefan Zweig novels, that we wish to compare Midrash to, in order to clarify the central proposition of this book. Let us think of Midrash as a “Royal Game”,<sup>3</sup> as Zweig thought about chess:

« But are we not already guilty of an insulting limitation in calling chess a game? Isn't it also a science, an art, hovering between these two categories as Mohamed's coffin hovered between heaven and earth? Isn't it a unique bond between every pair of opponents, ancien and yet eternally new; mechanical in its framework and yet only functioning through use of imagination; confined in geometrically fixed space and at the same time released from confinement by its permutations [...] and nevertheless demonstrably more durable in its true nature and existence than any books or creative works? Isn't it the only game that belongs to all people and all times? And who knows whether God put it on earth to kill boredom, to sharpen the wits or to lift the spirits? Where is its beginning and where its end? »<sup>4</sup>

Is it blasphemous to compare Midrash to chess, to a game, and even more so to a confined battlefield where “opponents” are literally fighting? Or, is the comparaison, while audacious in itself, captures something very intuitive about the essence of Midrash that, otherwise, would be difficult to describe and express, in more academic terms?

While the latter proposition is clearly the choice we make, let us analyse further some of the metaphors induced by the

3. The novel, *The Royal Game* (or *Chess Novella* as the German title has it), was written by Zweig in 1941 as the author was living in Brazil.

4. Zweig 2000, p. 7.

comparison we are proposing. Four important ideas are found in Zweig's understanding of chess. Each one needs to be briefly explored so as to envisage how these can reflect important realities of Midrash.

- For Zweig, chess more than a game, is best described as an art or a science, whose essence hovers somewhere between heaven and earth. Not entirely divine and not completely human, the “Royal Game”, in the skills it demands, both creative and calculated – as art and science combined can be – is imbued with an aura of its own. Midrash, for its part, in the rigorous and yet creative ways by which the midrashist strings together verses and different parts of Scripture into a seamless whole,<sup>5</sup> thus expressing and creating his own message, is indeed hovering between heaven, that is the verses of Scripture and their accepted divine origin, and earth, that is the fruit of midrashic work, product of a midrashist, rooted in a specific socio-historical context.
- Chess is also for Zweig, a game where a bond between opponents, ancient and eternally new is being played. Ancient strategies, old tricks, known and studied by the current players are yet eternally renewed and reinvented. In the midrashic world, the ancient and the new also meet, in a tug-of-war kind of reality. The ancient element is first and foremost the quotes, the verses from Scripture.

5. Stern 1996, pp. 57-58. This midrashic activity is known as *Harizah*, reflecting the act of “stringing together” verses from Torah.. While the term of *Harizah* is often limited to the description of the « hermeneutical bridge, [...] being the technical term for the rules of exegesis according to which the preacher connects the opening and closing verses » (Stern 2004, p. 129), that is for the *Petihta* literary form of certain midrashim, we use it here in wider context, as indicative of the midrashic activity in general as the original midrash from which the term is coined clearly indicates. See: Son of Songs Rabbah 1:10/2 (Vilna edition).

These are set in stone, written in a context of their own and evoking a message of their own. The new, is the midrashist. He seeks to take possession of the “old” and uproot the words and the verses from their ancient context to create new ideas and to serve his own purpose. The verses offer resistance.<sup>6</sup> The midrashist must deploy skills and conviction to win and to emerge victorious. But the “ancient” and the “new” opponents are also, respectively, the midrashist and the reader. The midrashist, opponent of the “ancient quotes”, suddenly turns into an “ancient” writer in his own right, who composed, in his time, an oral and/or a written text. A midrash that is now left in the hands of an always contemporary reader who, while learning to decipher the hermeneutics of the midrashist, that is entering the ancient world of the midrashist, also strives to find new relevance and new meanings in the text that now becomes his. There is always a double tug-of-war in midrash!

- Chess is also described by Zweig as a mechanical and confined framework, yet open to the infinite. And so is Midrash. It functions with a very limited framework: That of the existing verses from the Bible. Yet, the hermeneutical creativity of the midrashist, by opening up the words and verses to new horizons,<sup>7</sup> reaching infinity. Building on Zweig’s intuition, Cordozo has succeeded in best describing the true nature of the transformation from limitation to infinite:

« Let us never forget: He who knows all the rules is not necessarily a great player. What makes him a formidable opponent

6. About midrash and the task of the midrashist, Banon wrote: « His port of departure is the biblical text, whose resistance [to the attempt at appropriation] he takes seriously ». Banon 1987, p. 120.

7. For an understanding of the ever renewed horizons of midrashic activity, see: Banon 1987, pp. 120-121.



is his ability to use these rules to unleash an outburst of creativity, which emerges only because of the “unbearable” limitations ». <sup>8</sup>

In the same way, Midrash, because of the limitations of its Scriptural frame, a limitation that we could qualify as “unbearable”, requires both the midrashist and the reader of Midrash to unleash his own creativity. An unbridled creativity of the midrashist-interpreter that sees the Bible grow with its readers. <sup>9</sup>

— And finally, the fourth and concluding remark of Zweig. What is the ultimate purpose of chess: kill boredom, or sharpening the wits and lifting up the spirit? Any reader of midrash would know that no boredom is ever possible while engaged in studying the text! Amusingly, about the midrashic collection on the book of Psalms, the following anecdote is told:

« One time, [Rabbi Yishmael bar Yosse] saw [Rabbi Chiya] in the bathhouse and [the latter] did not humble himself before him. He said [to Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Nassi]: “Is this your student that have have been praising?. I saw him in the bathhouse and he did not humble himself before me”. He said to him: “Why did you not humble yourself before him?” Rabbi Chiya answered: “I was looking and the homilies/*aggadot* on the book of Psalms“ ». <sup>10</sup>

Clearly, Rabbi Chiya was so taken and engulfed by his study of Midrash, that even the presence of a master to which defer-

8. Cordozo 2019, p. 388.

9. We are referring here to the famous teaching of Pope Gregory the Great: « And because each of the Saint advances in Holy Writ as far as this same Holy Writ progresses in him ». Gray 1990, p. 68.

10. Bereshit Rabbah 33:3.

ence should have shown, was forgotten. Midrash is indeed an excellent literary tool to be absorbed in and to kill boredom. Yet, Midrash is also much more than this. As we will detail later on in this book, Midrash can also be seen and understood as a « repository of Jewish Theology and of a Jewish Theology of History », <sup>11</sup> a divine and human textual encounter in which both God and man seek consolation: « The Midrash is a vast Post-Biblical Bible written on the margin of the Bible to account for the suffering of God and man in their efforts to reclaim and uplift an unfinished and emerging world ». <sup>12</sup>

## **The Experience of Teaching Midrash and the Importance of Theological Thinking**

While the sketch of a comparison between Midrash and the “Royal Game” is rather unorthodox and somehow foreign to the classical canons of academic works in the field, it definitely did provide fertile ground for the structure and content of the yearly classes on Midrash I have been privileged to teach, for many years, at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, as part of the Cardinal Bea Centre for Judaic Studies. In many ways this book emerged from these classes.

First, the spirit of my teaching of Midrash at the heart of the Catholic intellectual and theological world, forced me to adopt a particular twist to the goal of such classes. Simply put, the idea was never to transform my Christian students (many of whom already ordained priests and well acquainted with Hebrew) into midrashic scholars. Rather, the classes aimed at offering to the students a taste of what authentic Jewish learning is about, Mid-

11. Slonimsky 1956, pp. 236-237.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 238.

rash being one of its classical modalities of expression.<sup>13</sup> It is the spirit of an experience of study from within, halfway between the demands of academic integrity and rigour, and the flexibility and infinite creativity of rabbinic study that matured the project of this book.

Second, and on a more practical level, the years of teaching have provided me with vast material, spanning across diverse midrashic collections, that I was able to study in depth and detail. Teaching midrashic material to students curious about Judaism and rabbinic hermeneutics, open to the discovery of slightly “exotic” texts, possessing a commanding knowledge of the Bible and having scriptural and theological knowledge rooted in their own Christian traditions, forced me to dissect the midrashic hermeneutics in unprecedented ways, in minute detail, articulating every step of the midrashic development, so that it could be explained and transmitted in clear and unequivocal ways. Refusing to assume that my students would intuitively understand the midrashic way of thinking, proved to be a very unique and valuable exercise, whose benefit will, hopefully, be reflected in the pages of this book.

Lastly, teaching Midrash within the walls of the spiritual and theological environment of the Pontifical Gregorian University, has also led me to reconsider a certain rabbinic reluctance, if not deeply rooted timidity, towards the very concept of theology, at least in the sense of a structured set of propositions and beliefs.<sup>14</sup> Yet, far from absent from classical rabbinic

13. The importance of reaching beyond the concepts, including the concept of “study” or “learning” has been very powerfully evoked by Chilton: « The problem any Christian has in understanding Judaism, however, is not just that “Torah” does not mean “law”. “Study” also does not mean “study”, nor “worship” means “worship” ». Chilton 1998, p. 45. Hence the need in the work performed by the Cardinal Bea Centre for Judaic Studies, to expose the students to the experience of Jewish study from within.

14. For an exposition of the classical considerations regarding the possibility of existence of a Jewish theology, see: Spero 1976, pp. 54-57.

literature, Jewish theology is in fact so central to Judaism itself that the need to explicitly formulate dogmas never arose. As Schechter noted:

« The old Rabbis seem to have thought that the true health of a religion is to have a theology without being aware of it. [...] With God as a reality, revelation as a fact, the Torah as a rule of life and the hope of redemption as a most vivid expectation, they [the Rabbis] felt no need for formulating their dogmas into a creed – which is repeated – not because we *believe* but that we *may believe* ». <sup>15</sup>

Fully aware of the existence of an authentic Jewish theology, unafraid of the controversial nature of the term and of the topic in rabbinic circles, aided and encouraged by the unbridled theological impetus of my students and colleagues, I have approached Midrash with an open intellectual mind, searching for expressions of theological discourses buried deep in the hermeneutical structure of the texts.

In truth, the belief that theological messages could be at the same time present and yet concealed in Rabbinic writings, also stems from a personal experience and exposure to daring rabbinic thinking. While unrelated to the actual study of Midrash, or to my teaching activities, one particular teaching from André Neher,<sup>16</sup> a key figure of the *École de Paris de la Pensée Juive*<sup>17</sup> after the war, left a profound impact on many. In particular, his reflexions on the silent and the revealed in the Bible and in particular on the silence of the prologue of the book of Job, are key to my own search for concealed theology. Reflecting on the dialogue between God and the Satan, Neher wrote:

15. Schechter 1961, p. 12.

16. 1914-1988.

17. Banon 2013, pp. 687-692. Meyer 2013, pp. 692-694.