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CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Midrash in Jewish Children's Literature*

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Abstract: The term *midrash* has a specific meaning and a broader one. Specifically, *midrash* refers to the post-Talmudic body of writings (post-500 C.E.) such as *Midrash Rabbah* and *Pirke de-Rabi Eliezer*. In broader terms, *midrash* has come to mean a Jewish story that explains, clarifies, or elaborates on an event or passage in the Torah.

There are many stories in midrashic sources that are appropriate and valuable to retell for children. A retelling of the story "Solomon and the Demon King," for instance, can captivate a fifth grader today who plays computer games and rides a skateboard, just as much as it did a *shtetl* boy who walked barefoot to *heder* and learned to chant Talmudic passages at age four.

Rabbinic stories are not old and outdated, but alive and timeless. Within these stories, children can find heroic individuals just as brave and daring as the current ones who sport masks and capes and fancy weaponry—people like Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai and Rabbi Akiva. But these rabbinic heroes provide something many of the television heroes do not—moral and ethical values as a basis for action.

**Based on a presentation at a session entitled "God, Midrash, and Legend in Jewish Children's Literature," held at the 28th Annual Convention of the Association of Jewish Libraries, June 22, 1993, New York City.*

A related paper from the same session—"Legend in Jewish Children's Literature," by Ellen Frankel—appeared in Judaica Librarianship vol. 8 (1994).

Definitions

The word *midrash* is derived from the Hebrew verb *darash*, which means "to search out," "to expound," "to examine." The broader meaning of *midrash* is explanations and discussions of passages from *Tanakh*, Mishnah, and Talmud.

The term *Tanakh* refers to the Five Books of Moses, the books of the Prophets, and the Writings, which include Psalms, Job, and Esther. The Mishnah is the Oral Law compiled by rabbis called Tannaim about 200 C.E. Mishnah is interpretation of the *Tanakh*.

The term Talmud was at one time synonymous with Gemara, which is rabbinical commentary on the Mishnah; the term Talmud now generally refers to both the Mishnah and the Gemara because they are printed together. There is a Babylonian Talmud and a Jerusalem Talmud.

Much of rabbinic commentary came about because it was difficult to make direct use of the Torah for daily living. The patterns of life had changed so much since the time of the Bible. The rabbis used a system of midrash, i.e., examination and explanation, to interpret the existing laws. The law which emerged found its place in the Mishnah.

There was also much narrative midrash from the rabbis in the Talmud and in other books. Narrative midrash includes sayings, legends, and popular stories. Besides the Talmud, Midrash was compiled in books such as *Midrash Rabbah*, which consists of companion books to the Five Books of Moses and to the Five Scrolls.

Works entitled *Mekilta* (as in *Mekilta de-Rabi Ishmael*) contain midrashim on the book of Exodus. *Sifra* has midrashim on Leviticus. *Sifre* contain midrashim on the

books of Numbers and Deuteronomy. *Pesiktot*, such as *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana*, have a connection to the festivals. These works date from 400 to 1400 C.E.

In our times, some people extend the term midrash even further than these classic sources. It has come to mean a Jewish story that explains, clarifies, or elaborates on an event or passage in the *Tanakh*. Therefore, you may include modern midrash in a broader definition of the term. The distinction between midrash and folklore is not always clear, especially for later midrashim—those written at a time when folklore was also being collected in volumes such as the *Ma'aseh Book* by Moses Gaster (1981). The word *midrash* in this paper, however, refers to classic midrash, that is, stories from the rabbis recorded up until about 1400 C.E.

A Personal Journey to Midrash

Now that I have defined the terms, I would like to tell of my own journey to midrash and the retelling of stories from midrash for children; of how I came to write the book *A Child's Book of Midrash* (Goldin, 1990). I hope that telling about my own journey will impart information about how I see the place of midrash in Jewish children's literature as a whole.

My journey into midrash began about 13 years ago. At that time, I could not have given a definition of the term and had no idea what the contents were of all the books I have described above.

I was living in the Northwest at the time. A member of my writing group had written a modern tale about Noah's Ark which I thought was delightful. The animals, paired off of course, take a cruise and Noah is the cruise director.

One night, the author of this version of Noah's Ark came to a meeting with a "bad

review" from a Jewish publication. She wanted my advice on the review because I was the only Jewish member of the group. The reviewer had asked why a publisher would publish a book like this one when there was so much wonderful midrash from our rich heritage that was not being mined and retold for children.

That reviewer planted something in my head. I was curious. What midrash was she talking about? If I was not even sure of that, maybe there was a need, as she had said, to mine our own past.

At the same time, I became a member of an inspiring minyan in Vancouver, B.C., where the rabbi and lay leaders often told stories from sources with which I was unfamiliar. They quoted rabbis I had never heard of, both Talmudic and Hasidic. I was beginning to realize that there was a wealth of stories in my own heritage that I did not know, even though I had gone to after-school Hebrew classes from third grade through high school.

Being a storyteller with a growing hunger for legends from my own tradition, my curiosity was intense but vague. I did not know how to go about the search. I was isolated in a small Northwestern town, Bellingham, WA, which had one synagogue with a very small library. There was a set of Talmud there. I remember looking at it often, wondering how I could gain entry into this imposing set of volumes.

I felt somehow that locked up in there, and in other books that I did not know, were great stories, stories that said something about life, free will, God, prayer, love. I wanted very much to retell these stories for children, thus making them accessible, and at the same time learning these stories for myself.

A few years later, I went to my first CAJE conference (Conference on Alternatives in Jewish Education) and met Arthur Kurzweil of Jason Aronson Publishers. He led a workshop on writing Jewish children's books and was looking for people to write for Jason Aronson.

I felt a real connection to Arthur because I had recently read a chapter that he had written in Danny Siegel's (1982) book *Gym Shoes and Irises*, which influenced my thinking very much. The chapter is called "I Can't Read Much Hebrew, I Can't Read Much Aramaic, I Never Went to Yeshivah, But I Study Talmud Every Chance I Get." This article gives specific directions on how to "break into" Talmud using English trans-

lations and indexes; it has a fine bibliography and methodology section. It inspired me to try.

It was after submitting various stories to Arthur, stories I had been working on about Jewish holidays, and then running into him in New York at a Jewish Heritage Book Fair, that we finally agreed on my doing a proposal for a book of midrash for children. Now my work began—wading through books to find the stories that I wanted to retell.

Arthur gave me much advice on searching out the stories. It was also at this time that I moved back to the East Coast. Almost immediately, I met a woman who was to be very helpful to me: Sondra Botnick, who owned a Jewish bookstore in Springfield, MA, near my home.

I told Sondra about my project, and together we searched through the volumes in her bookstore. Secondary sources like *The Midrash Says* (Weissman, 1980) and *Our Sages Showed the Way* (Segal, 1982) were invaluable. Written for the Orthodox market, they cited where the stories came from in the Talmud, *Midrash Rabbah*, etc. I was able to find many of these primary sources in the university library near my home.

Then I decided that it was very important to trace the stories back to their primary sources whenever possible before retelling them. I wanted to see how the rabbis had

told these classic stories before examining how secondary sources had treated them.

As I waded through all this material, I made note of stories which I felt had a strong plot that children could understand and identify with, that would intrigue them, draw them in. As I had suspected, there was a wealth of these stories that were appropriate for children, and each time I found one, I felt like an explorer making a discovery. I was also delighted that I had made my way into the "sea" of Talmud and midrash, that I was able to find my way about—even though it was only a beginning and I was using sources in English translation, not the Hebrew original.

Midrash for the New American Generation

In studying midrash, I felt a sense of closeness to the generations before me—those Jews who had studied and valued these books so, and who sometimes died for them. I did not want all this literature to be lost to the new American Jewish generation, my son and daughter's generation, who watch "Lois and Clark" on television and read comic books about Batman and the Punisher. I felt a sadness that these children, my own included, were not aware of the wonderful stories from our own tradition, about our own superheroes.

They did not know the exciting story about Rabbi Johanan Ben Zakkai, who escaped the besieged city of Jerusalem in a coffin carried by his own students. Or of Rabbi Akiva, who continued to teach Torah despite the harsh Roman laws forbidding it. These rabbinic heroes provided something that I knew was missing from what my son and daughter were reading and seeing—religious, moral, and ethical values that are a basis for action.

I knew that a story like "Solomon and the Demon King," with its tension and drama, with the play of good and evil, would captivate a fifth grader who plays computer games and rollerblades, just as much as it captivated a *shtetl* boy who walked barefoot to *heder* and learned to chant Talmudic passages at age four.

I probably felt much like the children's book reviewer who wrote the review of my friend's Noah's Ark book—I felt a sense of loss about what was missing in Jewish children's literature, now that I had a better idea of what there was to miss.

While doing all this research I discovered that practically all the material I was reading

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was written for the Orthodox market. I found that very little was being written for children like my own who did not go to Jewish Day School. I knew that part of what I wanted to do was to retell these stories so that anyone could understand them and relate to them, while keeping as close to the original stories as I could. I also made a special effort to include stories about women and to keep the God language in the book non-gender-specific. In other words, I tried not to use *he* or *she* when referring to God.

The more stories I read, the more I felt that these stories which the rabbis had told were timeless and universal. People all over the world have struggled with the same issues and questions, such as: Why is there evil in the world? Why does it seem that sometimes evil gets rewarded and good does not? How much free will do we have, and how much of our lives is ruled by destiny? What part do we, as individuals, play in the scheme of things? How do we know God exists? The stories discuss themes and subjects such as love, beauty, personal sacrifice, charity, and miracles—values and behaviors that occur in every culture.

After much research, I collected about 150 midrashim that were candidates for this book. Many of the stories were very brief in the original versions—perhaps just a paragraph in the Talmud. In order to enlarge on these stories and create more depth in the settings and characterizations, I researched the places and people of the sto-

ries, using *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, *The Encyclopedia of Talmudic Sages* (Bader, 1988) and other sources. In this way, I was able to add detail and depth to the stories—to fill them out.

I have continued to retell midrashim. In February 1994 Viking published *The Passover Journey: A Seder Companion*, which retells the Exodus story, intertwining midrash and the biblical book of Exodus. I shall also be doing another collection of stories for Jason Aronson Publishers, called *Creating Angels: Stories of Tzedakah* (charity), which is scheduled for publication in winter 1996. This collection will be broader in scope than *A Child's Book of Midrash*, as it will include retellings of hasidic stories and folktales, not only stories from midrash.

I believe that there is an important place for retellings of classic midrashim in Jewish children's literature, as well as a place for modern tales—such as my friend's version of Noah's Ark. By reading the retellings, today's children will be exposed to wonderful religious stories about faith, God, morals, ethics—stories that are so needed in our modern world. And our children will not be, as I was, unaware that stories like these exist by the thousands in our own rich heritage.

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Barbara Diamond Goldin is a children's book author, as well as a teacher of writing and literature. Her first picture book, Just Enough Is Plenty: A Hanukkah Tale, received a National Jewish Book Award in 1989. Her other Jewish holiday books are The World's Birthday: A Rosh Hashanah Story, Cakes and Miracles: A Purim Tale, Night Lights: A Sukkot Story, The Magician's Visit: A Passover Tale, and The Passover Journey: A Seder Companion. It is for her work A Child's Book of Midrash: 52 Stories from the Sages (Jason Aronson, 1990) that she was invited to present this paper. Ms. Goldin received the AJL Sydney Taylor Book Award for Cakes and Miracles in 1992 (see acceptance letter in Judaica Librarianship, vol. 8 [1994]).