Review Essay

Re-Reading the Rabbis, Rewriting Scripture: Three Theoretical Approaches to Midrash and Literature

Terence R. Wright
University of Newcastle upon Tyne


Midrash, as David Stern somewhat sceptically observed in his book, Midrash and Theory, was a “hot topic” in the 1980s, just as the “Bible as Literature” movement had excited interdisciplinary scholars of the previous decade (Stern 3-10). Along with Harold Fisch, Stern was himself a contributor to Midrash and Literature, a 1986 volume edited by Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick that made some fairly extravagant claims about the extent to which Western modes of reading and writing were historically modelled upon midrash. Fisch’s essay in that volume, now reworked into the separate chapters of his own book, New Stories for Old, recognizes the differences as well as the similarities between midrashim and novels. The two types of writing may, he argues, shed light on similar literary processes (e.g., “the way in which stories or hints of stories are generat-
ed by the art of interpretation”) but they are not the same. Midrash, however free and open, operates under constraints related to its function within a believing community for which the primary text has “unlimited authority” as revelation. Midrash always comes back with a “joy of recognition” to its primary text, rather than struggle, as Bloom would have it, to escape the anxiety of its influence (Hartman and Budick 228-232). His book, as we shall see, is equally cautious about employing the term midrash in relation to later imaginative employments of biblical material in the novel. But the comparison between midrash and literature continues to excite him as it does Kraemer and (to a lesser extent) Rojtman.

As this hints, one feature which unites all three works under review here is the attempt accurately to describe midrash in terms of modern literary theory. Betty Rojtman’s book, originally published in French in 1986, comes to midrash and kabbalah from the perspective of contemporary semiotic theory. David Kraemer brings to the Talmud a Reader-Response model derived from Stanley Fish, while Harold Fisch employs Bakhtinian ideas of the dialogical dynamics, the play of voices to be found in all texts. All three complain of the undertheorized, overintuitive methods prevalent within Jewish Studies. “This absence of methodological consciousness,” according to Kraemer, “has led to anemic results,” occasional flashes of insight being undermined by the “highly subjective” approaches involved (4). No one could accuse these three writers of being undertheorized; they all make their positions absolutely clear. They all succeed (to varying degrees) in shedding light upon the practice of reading midrash as/and literature. But they also leave a number of questions unanswered, questions which I will try to tease out, analyzing each in turn.

*  

The least convincing although most ambitious account of midrashic practice, in my view, is that provided by Betty Rojtman, whose semiotic analysis of deictics in midrashic texts (focusing on the demonstrative “this”) claims to uncover a “deep structure” which is in accordance with Kabbalah. This, as Moshe Idel points out in the preface, is the significance of her title, drawn “from a famous dictum about the nature of the primordial Torah as written on a background of white fire” which is “none other than the skin of God” (xi). Rojtman’s introduction makes much play with the paradox that the Torah, the divine message given to Moses, is both complete and yet still to be discovered, that the student of the Talmud can discover “an undeciphered, radically new meaning, whose reading was nev-