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**Directing the Discourse:
Interpretation, Identity, and Institutional Diversification**

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Ultimately, it took the pressure of white, social liberalism to compel the American academy to respond to the fact that its normative canon was attuned almost entirely to the achievements and interests of the white, male, closeted Christian. From the middle of the 20th century forward, this led to the emergence of a range of institutional responses and approaches to pedagogical diversification – be it diversification of subject matter, of student body and faculty composition, or be it to formation in the Academy of a wide spectrum of interdisciplinary, racial/ethnic academic fields of study (e.g., African-American Studies, Latino/a Studies, etc.). This, in turn, initiated the current, ongoing, gradual revision of the boundaries that define both

education broadly writ and, more particularly, the various disciplines that comprise the humanities.

Indeed, the interdisciplinary field of study within which my academic and scholarly training is most squarely situated – Jewish Studies – emerged as one of these fields of study. As such, its very origins attest to it being both a product and a form of academic advocacy.¹ Jewish Studies challenges the normative disciplines to undertake responsibly that which, otherwise, they would do either poorly or not at all – incorporate a methodologically critical consideration of the contributions of Jewish civilization into their fundamental bodies of knowledge. To be a scholar of Jewish Studies in the American academy, therefore, is to carry forward a commitment to the difficult work of scholarly advocacy and diversification, all the while understanding that the space you occupy at the table is not so much one that was created willingly by the Academy as it is one that was justifiably demanded from the Academy.

In this respect, I feel fortunate to bring a specialized interest in Midrash to the vocational work I do as a Jewish Studies historian and biblical studies scholar – for reasons I will momentarily convey. The term Midrash refers to Jewish biblical interpretation – a religious practice that combines the study of Judaism’s textual tradition of biblical interpretation with the

¹ For surveys and analyses of the scholarly origins, impetuses, goals, development, nature, and methodological foundations of Jewish Studies as an interdisciplinary field of study, see Martin Goodman, “The Nature of Jewish Studies,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Studies*, ed. Martin Goodman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1-13; Zev Garber, *Methodology in the Academic Teaching of Judaism* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1987); Zev Garber, *Academic Approaches to Teaching Jewish Studies* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2000); Jacob Neusner, *Judaism in the American Humanities: Essays and Reflections* (Chico, California, Scholars Press, 1981); and, Jacob Neusner, *New Humanities and Academic Disciplines: The Case of Jewish Studies* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984).

dialogue and discourse of Judaism's oral tradition of biblical interpretation.² Midrash is a revelatory process and mode of Jewish praxis grounded in two sources of authority – 1) the authority of Torah as an eternal source of divine revelation for the Jewish People; and, 2) the divine authority of a Jewish community to empower a rabbi to interpret Torah on its behalf, in order to determine what God requires of it. In this manner, Midrash has played a crucial role throughout Jewish history, by facilitating for Jews the ability to discern religious meaning and communal purpose in the midst of the exilic unfolding of the Jewish historical experience. Midrash is, therefore, a distinctly Jewish hermeneutic – one that enables Jews to take any situation, and turn it over and over, in order to discern within it the authenticity of divine purpose and meaning.

It is in this capacity that I have come to rely upon my specialization in Midrash as a source of vocational fortitude as I do the work of a Jewish Studies biblical scholar teaching in primarily Christian theological contexts – contexts within which it is often necessary to have the means by which to re-discern for myself the authenticity of who I am, and to remind myself of the authenticity of what I both embody and represent.³

² For introductions and overviews of the hermeneutical assumptions, modes, and methods that undergird Midrash as a process of biblical interpretation, as well as for delineations of the scope and boundaries of Midrash as both a literary genre and a scholarly field of study within Jewish Studies, see Barry Holtz, "Midrash," in *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts*, ed. Barry Holtz (New York: Summit Books, 1984), 177-211; James Kugel, "Two Introductions to Midrash," in Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick, eds. *Midrash and Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 77-103; Jacob Neusner and Avery Peck, eds., *Encyclopedia of Midrash: Biblical Interpretation in Formative Judaism* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005); H.L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996); and, Rivka Ulmer, "The Boundaries of the Rabbinic Genre Midrash," in *Colloquium* 38/1 (2006), 59-73.

³ Both the uneasy and unequal relationship between Jewish Studies biblical scholarship and the dominant realm of Christian biblical studies (in both its normative and non-normative manifestations), and the corresponding, professional challenges Jewish biblical scholars confront, are rooted deeply in a long, prejudicial history of religious polemics. For a survey of the many dynamics that have influenced this relationship and shaped its problematic, academic context, see Paula Frederickson and Adele

It is in this spirit that I will utilize a four-part, midrashic framework to explore and discuss not only the challenges of my professional, pedagogical and scholarly realities as a Jewish Studies scholar, but also the challenging realities faced by all scholars of diversity who are marginalized within their normative academies and educational realms. In that this type of critical exploration is most often accomplished by means of personal victimization case studies and exemplifications of professional drive-by malfeasance, I would, instead, like to lift up for shared consideration one of the most positive, transformative pedagogical experiences I have had, in order to shed a different, but equally critical, light on how marginalized scholars of diversity can go about making sense of who they are and what they do, as they occupy their spaces at the tables of their respective academic, vocational contexts.

***P'SHAT* – MAKING IT PLAIN, KEEPING IT SIMPLE**

Midrash is grounded in a radically subjective, interpretive reading of the Torah – one that defies modern literary sensibilities, while simultaneously making natural sense to its practitioners. Nonetheless, the first step of the midrashic process is *p'shat* (Hebrew: “simple”) – a simple, straightforward reading of the biblical text that provides the opportunity to perceive

Reinhartz, *Jesus, Judaism and Christian Anti-Judaism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002). For an examination and exemplification of the reality of this relationship in a 19th century, academic context, see Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998). For examinations and exemplifications in an early and mid-20th century, academic context, see Susannah Heschel, “Nazifying Christian Theology: Walter Grundmann and the Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life,” in *Church History* 63 (1994), 587-605 and Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). For contemporary examinations and exemplifications, see Daniel Boyarin, “The Subversion of the Jews: Moses’ Veil and the Hermeneutics of Supersession,” in *Diacritics* 23/2 (1993), 16-35; Daniel Boyarin, “The Jews in Neo-Lutheran Interpretations of Paul,” in *Dialog* 35/3 (1996), 193-7; and, Alan Cooper, “Biblical Studies and Jewish Studies,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Studies*, ed. Martin Goodman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 14-35.

within its irregularities, contradictions and curiosities that might call for interpretive insight or clarification. Midrash begins, therefore, with the understanding that you have to see things plainly and simply for what they are, before you can go about trying to fix them.

For more than a decade, I taught a course on the Holocaust that was designed to fulfill the pedagogical mandates and curricular interests of both Jewish Studies and the Christian student of Religion and Theology. As such, it fostered a critically informed understanding of Jews and Judaism, by raising critical consciousness of the Holocaust as an issue of intrinsic importance to Christians, Christianity and Christian tradition.⁴ The course explored both theological anti-Judaism and its modern manifestation – ideological anti-Semitism – as historically inherent, functioning forces within both Christianity in general and white, European Christianity in particular.⁵ Within the framework of the course, a survey of the history of Christianity in Europe revealed how anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism came to be fundamentally rooted and embedded throughout the entire framework of white, European, Christian society.⁶ This created a cultural

⁴ For scholarly analyses of, and arguments for, the intrinsic, theological significance and relevance of the Holocaust for the historical and theological study of Christianity, as well as for the faith and practice of Christian tradition, see Richard Cohen, “The Holocaust is a Christian Issue: Christology Revisited,” in *Modern Believing: Church and Society* 41/7 (2006), 28-43; Michael Phayer, *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust, 1930-1965* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000); Carol Rittner, Stephen D. Smith and Irena Steinfeldt, eds., *The Holocaust and the Christian World* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc., 2000); Clark M. Williamson, *Has God Rejected His People?: Anti-Judaism in the Christian Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982); and, Clark M. Williamson and Ronald J. Allen, *Interpreting Difficult Texts: Anti-Judaism and Christian Preaching* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1989).

⁵ For a compelling and groundbreaking examination of the theologically anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic sentiments and tendencies inherent in all forms of Christianity and Christian tradition, as well as their particularly destructive and tragic manifestations within the historical and social contexts of white, European and white, American Christianity, see Kelly Brown Douglas, *What's Faith Got To Do With It?: Black Bodies/Christian Souls* (New York: Orbis Books, 2005).

⁶ For useful and informative overviews of the history of anti-Judaism, anti-Semitism, and the Holocaust, see Yehuda Bauer, *A History of the Holocaust* (Danbury, CT: Franklin Watts, 2001); Paula Frederickson and Adele Reinhartz, *Jesus, Judaism and Christian Anti-Judaism* (Louisville: Westminster

context within which the image of the Jew was so fully and innately dehumanized that it ultimately enabled its Christian citizenry to ignore any sense of moral dissonance or ethical discomfort, as it either participated actively in the terrors of the Holocaust, or stood idly by as bystanders while the genocidal events unfolded before their eyes.⁷

I began the course by examining the anti-Judaism that is intrinsic to the New Testament – a subject of fundamental importance to the course, but also a challenging, unsettling one for Christian students unaccustomed to assuming such a critical mindset and historically-oriented stance towards the scriptural text.⁸ One year, one of my biblical studies colleagues – a white, male, Christian, professor of the New Testament – expressed both his interest in and familiarity with the subject, so I invited him to guest-lecture about it. He accepted willingly, and suggested

John Knox, 2002); Marvin Perry and Frederick M. Schweitzer, *Antisemitism: Myth and Hate From Antiquity to the Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Michael Phayer, *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust, 1930-1965* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000); Carol Rittner, Stephen D. Smith and Irena Steinfeldt, eds., *The Holocaust and the Christian World* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc., 2000); Rosemary Radford Reuther, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Crossroad, 1974); and, Richard L. Rubenstein and John K. Roth, *Approaches to Auschwitz: The Holocaust and Its Legacy* (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

⁷ See Victoria J. Barnett, *Bystanders: Conscience and Complicity During the Holocaust* (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, 2000) for a compelling study and analysis of the phenomenon of the Bystander Effect as exemplified during the events of the Holocaust.

⁸ For excellent resources and explorations of the anti-Judaism intrinsic to the New Testament, see Kelly Brown Douglas, *What's Faith Got To Do With It?: Black Bodies/Christian Souls* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005), 39-61; Marvin Perry and Frederick M. Schweitzer, *Antisemitism: Myth and Hate From Antiquity to the Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 1-42; Adele Reinhartz, "The New Testament and Anti-Judaism," in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 25 (1988), 524-37; and, John T. Townsend, "The New Testament, the Early Church, and Anti-Semitism," in *From Ancient Israel to Modern Judaism: Intellect in Quest of Understanding*, eds. Jacob Neusner, E. Frenchis and Nahum Sarna (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 171-86. For explorations of manifestations of anti-Judaism in New Testament scholarship, see Daniel Boyarin, "The Subversion of the Jews: Moses' Veil and the Hermeneutics of Supersession," in *Diacritics* 23/2 (1993), 16-35; Daniel Boyarin, "The Jews in Neo-Lutheran Interpretations of Paul," in *Dialog* 35/3 (1996), 193-7; and, Tania Oldenhege, *Parables for Our Time: Rereading New Testament Scholarship After the Holocaust* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

that we meet beforehand to discuss his lecture. I was impressed by his preparatory initiative and effort, and then, a few days later, I was thrilled with the results. The students responded positively to his lecture in all respects. They accepted his ideas willingly, followed his complicated textual analyses with astonishingly apparent ease, and expressed their admiration that he took what appeared to them to be such great interest in the subject. Simply put, I could neither have asked nor expected more from this colleague. By the end of his lecture, most of the students could express a conviction in the veracity of New Testament anti-Judaism, which paved the way for what was to become the most successful and fulfilling pedagogical experience I had teaching the course to date.

As the day passed, however, and I reflected upon my colleague's lecture, I began to feel a sense of remorse – one that grew only deeper and more persistent over time. I came to realize that, however pleased I was with the outcome of my colleague's lecture, I was also lamenting a disconcerting aspect of my professional reality it had compelled me to confront. How was it that in one, 90 minute lecture my colleague had seemingly mastered the teaching of a subject that, in spite of my advanced degree, my appropriately specialized training, and my ten plus years of teaching experience, I often still encountered as a pedagogical challenge?

LAMAH NE'EMAR – IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM, ASKING THE DIFFICULT QUESTION

The second step of the midrashic process is *lamah ne'emar* – (Hebrew: “Why does the Torah say this?”). Inevitably, the straightforward reading of the biblical text reveals an anomaly of some sort – an aspect of the text that is problematic in some manner or curious for some reason. This step of the midrashic process identifies the problem, and calls it out by asking the difficult question – “Why does the Torah say this?” To ask this question is to confront and

challenge the divine nature of the Torah. It is to look to God and to demand an understanding of how or why something like this could possibly be the case.

How was it possibly the case that my colleague had such initial success teaching a subject with which I still sometimes struggled? If anything, given my years of experience teaching the subject, my specialized training as a Jewish Studies biblical scholar, and my essential investment and interest in the subject as a Jew, should not the opposite prove to be the case? Why were students more inclined to question, resist, suspect, and, at times, even deny the authority and veracity of my instruction on this subject, while accepting so easily and readily the authority and veracity of my colleague's instruction with virtually no indications of resistance, hesitancy, suspicion or disbelief?

***D'RASH* – IDENTIFYING THE INSIGHTS, MAKING THE CONNECTIONS**

The third step in the midrashic process is *d'rash* (Hebrew: “investigation”). To *d'rash* is to employ midrashic modes and methods of biblical interpretation, in order to discern unique, unexpected scriptural meaning that can provide a solution to the concern or question at hand. Thus, to *d'rash* is to identify the insights required to make the necessary connections.

As I shared my concern with other marginalized colleagues in the Academy of Religion – both Jew and non-Jew alike – I gained clarity and insight, along with a dose of futility. Simply put, my colleague's pedagogical embodiment trumped mine. That is, his status as a white, male, Christian biblical professor bestowed him automatically with an unmerited degree of pedagogical authority that I could not command as a white, male, Jewish biblical professor – not

even within the context of my Jewish Studies classroom.⁹ This unmerited authority was by no means benign or inconsequential. It enabled a reality within which he could guest-lecture to my Holocaust course and immediately assume a level of pedagogical credibility, authority and authenticity somehow greater than my own, simply by displaying a level of interest in and familiarity with what, in all frankness, is generally dismissed by most normative biblical scholars either as an erroneous, problematic “Jewish” perspective, or as a particular “Jewish Studies” academic issue of trivial relevance and immaterial value.

Within the Academy, the surreal reality is such that if the supposedly “correct” – that is, normative – bodies say the factually correct – that is, non-normative – things, they have the power both to assume the very non-normative identity and to hijack the very non-normative academic discourse of those who are marginalized. Male scholars need only talk a bit about women to display “pioneering, feminist insight.” White scholars need only mention W.E.B. DuBois to show “impressive, African-American scholarly expertise.” A mere dash of white, western academic Buddhism somehow adds a whole lot of “authentically Asian” scholarly flavor.

The illogical, paradoxical reality faculty of diversity confront as they assume their spaces at their respective tables in the Academy is one within which the mere “scent” of an

⁹ For excellent, insightful examinations and analyses of the problematic issues of scholarly embodiment and authority that arise when gender, race, ethnicity and religion overlap in the realm of biblical studies, see Daniel Boyarin, “The Subversion of the Jews: Moses’ Veil and the Hermeneutics of Supersession,” in *Diacritics* 23/2 (1993), 16-35; Daniel Boyarin, “The Jews in Neo-Lutheran Interpretations of Paul,” in *Dialog* 35/3 (1996), 193-7; Richard Cohen, “The Holocaust is a Christian Issue: Christology Revisited,” in *Modern Believing: Church and Society* 47/1 (2006), 28-43; Shawn M. Copeland, “Collegiality as a Moral and Ethic Practice,” in *Practice What You Preach: Virtue, Ethics and Power in the Lives of Pastoral Ministers and Their Congregations*, ed. James F. Keenan and Joseph Kotva (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 315-22; Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998); and, Tania Oldenhage, *Parables for Our Time: Rereading New Testament Scholarship After the Holocaust* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

appropriated, marginalized identity somehow smells much sweeter than the “stench” of marginalized authenticity. Be they friend or foe, their normative colleagues sometimes need only brush lightly against the surfaces of their non-normative discourse, faith, history, and identity, in order to assume fully their non-normative voice of authority. In this respect, if it is impossible to do away with the actual presence of marginalized faculty of diversity at the table, the force and identity of their presence can still be appropriated and lifted elsewhere, leaving behind often little more than a benign and empty shell sitting in their seat.

SOD – DISCERNING DIVINE AUTHENTICITY, DIRECTING THE DISCOURSE.

The fourth, and final, step of the midrashic process is *sod* (Hebrew: “secret”) – the process of discerning even deeper, eternal meaning from the scriptural text. Jewish tradition emphasizes that God *handed over* the Torah to the Jewish People to serve as an eternal source of divine authority and instruction. That is, God relinquished the Torah entirely to the Jewish People and empowered them with the means of Midrash, in order to discern what God commands them to do so as to foster a Jewish historical experience distinguished eternally by divine authenticity, meaning and purpose.

Ultimately, what does it mean to work in vocational contexts where both the hunger to learn the authentic and the drive to search for the root causes of difficult issues can be satiated with mere aroma and flavor? This reality is such that effective, creative, mutually beneficial alliances with normative societal partners continue to be a vital and important necessity, however rare they might be. At the same time, given that the primary inclination of normative society is to align in order to appropriate, coalitions of this nature for the marginalized teacher and scholar

can easily – and often do – become too close for comfort. Unfair as it might be, therefore, the imperative and burden both to compel and to ensure the mutually productive formation of these alliances is primarily the responsibility and challenge of non-normative scholars of diversity alone.

Marginalized scholars of diversity, who tend to think beneficially in terms of the mutuality of community simply by the very nature and reality of who they are, must be able to see beyond the immediacy of their individualized, solitary, vocational realities, in order to perceive the potential for divine authenticity that might exist within any given alliance. Little did I realize the full magnitude of the value that would result from the invitation to guest-lecture to my course on the Holocaust that I extended to my white, male, Christian, New Testament colleague; how vitally incumbent it now is upon me to strive to perceive comparable normative alliance opportunities that hold a similar potential for mutuality of benefit as they arise in the future.

This reality means, however, that marginalized faculty must also never lose sight of the central, crucial counterbalancing importance of working together to form non-normative alliances. It is imperative that faculty of diversity within the Academy continue to put forth the effort required to empower and entrust each other, so as to master more fully the authenticity of both their individual and shared vocational domains. The challenges and difficulties involved are by no means unfamiliar terrain.

In fact, the dictates of the midrashic framework align well with what is required of faculty of diversity, in order to form mutually beneficial, non-normative alliances and to situate them at the very center of the reality they occupy on the margins of education within the Academy: 1) the steadfast commitment to stay in earnest, genuine dialogue – that is, to remain or

return to the table of common discourse no matter how difficult and unsettling it will often prove to be; 2) the fortitude required to identify common problems and to ask the difficult questions of themselves and each other; and, 3) the creativity necessary to work in new ways, to identify new insights, and to make new connections. Ultimately, the authenticity of the domain that faculty of diversity share in common on the margins of the Academy will be determined by the degree of authenticity with which they are able to share constructively both their particular experiences and their respective spaces at the academic table.