



The Midrashic Mind: Learning to Think Like Chazal

Simi Peters

Course Goals

- (1) To help teachers arrive at an understanding of Midrash Aggada and its place on the Jewish bookshelf
- (2) To give teachers skills necessary for analyzing Midrash Aggada.
- (3) To encourage the use of Midrash Aggada in the classroom by providing teachers with pedagogical tools for the teaching of Midrash.

Throughout, the course will be based on in-depth readings of texts, moving from text to theory. The goal is to model a discovery approach, with implications for classroom practice. We will explore the pedagogical implications of what we have learned, including techniques for teaching Midrash, with a special focus on the process of study and the use of critical thinking skills.

Course Requirements and Grading

This course has been structured so that each unit builds on the ones that precede it. Unlike information-based courses, this course is largely methodological. Since we are learning techniques and tools for midrash study, it is important that students **complete all the assignments, including the exercises in each unit.**

A new unit will be posted each week, and students have up to 3 weeks from when the unit is first posted to complete it. After that, students will not be allowed to submit assignments.

Based on past experience, I strongly urge you to keep up with the pace of the course, as the work tends to pile up very quickly, making it harder to complete the course successfully. Please contact me to discuss any special problems.

At a minimum, students are required to meet with me once via Zoom, beginning from week 5 of the course (November 20th, 2022).

In addition to the mandatory Zoom meeting, I am available for additional meetings by appointment. To schedule an appointment, please email me at writingsimi@gmail.com. I am happy to meet with any student on a one-on-one basis to discuss the course and teaching Midrash generally. Feel free to contact me.

The grading scale reflects the nature of this course, as follows:

Automated questions account for 10% of the final grade.

The in-person Zoom meeting account for 5% of the final grade

Questionnaires and blog entries account for 50% of the final grade.

The final assignment accounts for 35% of the final grade.

Study Units

Unit 1: HaMashal: In this unit we'll explore the *mashal* (midrashic parable) and how to read it. Among the questions we will consider is why the midrashic authors choose the parable form for commentary on the biblical text.

Unit 2: The Midrashic Story: This unit will present a systematic analysis of a midrashic story. [Synchronous Zoom lesson]

Unit 3: Defining Midrash Aggada: This unit will explore the question "What is Midrash Aggada?" We will discuss how midrashic and mishnaic style differ, as well as the similarities and differences between Midrash Halacha and Midrash Aggada. To complete the process of definition, we will note the difference between Aggada and Midrash Aggada, and between Midrash and *parshanut haMikra*. Among the topics that will be addressed is whether Midrash Aggada is interpretive or homiletical.

Unit 4: Is It True? Truth and Factuality in Midrash: This unit will address the factuality of midrash and its implications for the authority of midrashic literature. The primary text for this unit is Rambam's *Hakdama le'Perek Helek*, with some additional sources.

Unit 5: Tools for Understanding the Midrashic Story: This unit will model interpretive techniques for understanding a range of midrashic stories.

Unit 6: The Biblical Verse in Midrash: This unit will explain how Chazal use biblical verses in Midrash Aggada. Did they have a concept of *peshuto shel mikra*?

Unit 7: The Same or Different? This unit will discuss how to relate to, and analyze, different versions of the "same" midrash.

Unit 8: How Chazal Use Biblical Stories to Interpret Biblical Stories: This unit will explore midrashim that draw parallels between seemingly unrelated biblical stories. We will develop interpretive strategies for understanding texts of this type. [Synchronous Zoom lesson]

Unit 9: Exploring a Philosophical Midrash: This unit addresses homiletical midrashim and the ways in which they differ from the more interpretive midrashim seen in earlier units.

Unit 10: "Rewriting" the Biblical Text? This unit will explore a seemingly radical interpretation of a familiar text. We will explore what motivates midrashim of this type and what we can learn from them.

Unit 11: Midrash as Parshanut This unit will discuss the interpretive role of midrash in Tanach study.

Unit 12: Learning Midrash from Rashi (and Other Sources): This unit will explore how Rashi's commentary on Torah can function as a window onto the larger body of midrashic literature. We'll also discover how broadening our understanding of Rashi's sources can help us better understand Rashi. Finally, we'll discuss other sources that can be used to build a larger midrashic repertoire.

Bibliography

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Berman, Joshua, *Ani Maamin: Bible Criticism, Historical Truth, and the Thirteen Principles of Faith*, Maggid Press, Jerusalem, 2020.

Boyarin, Daniel, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington (1990)

Handelman, Susan, *Slayers of Moses*, (Chapters 2-3), State University of New York Press, Albany (1982)

Peters, Simi, *Learning to Read Midrash*, Urim Publications, Jerusalem, 2004.

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