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March 2023

### Midrash Presentation

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

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#### Recommended Citation

Mirriam-Goldberg, Caryn, "Midrash Presentation" (2023). *Book Promotions*. 6.  
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Caryn will talk about Midrash, finding new meaning in our most sacred stories, and what she sees in the story of the Exodus about how we can cultivate more of the promised land in our lives.

Three readings:

- First few pages – symbolism of water and being poured at her father's feet.
- Desert/badlands running and remembering
- Naomi and Ruth

Little discussion:

## What is Midrash?

Midrash is the Hebrew tradition of re-interpreting and re-visioning our guiding myths and messages to foster greater meaning, freedom, and authenticity. This practice is rooted in the understanding that the Torah, a holy book in Judaism, “...is a tree of life, and a tree can stay alive only if it grows,” explains writer Alicia Ostriker. Grow your own Midrash through writing prompts and meditations that lead you into poetry, fiction, songs, and more, and in the process, find new branches and blossoms into who you are, how you live, and how you can help your community re-vision their stories.

**Definition:** Midrash means “searching out,” and although it usually applies to the bible, there is also a folk or narrative midrash based on one's personal theology, and experience living a life of faith. Folk or narrative midrash is a form of interpretation. There are three kinds of narrative midrash:

1. The literal, or *parshat*, which reflects on the plain, apparent, or ordinary meaning of a text that most people would catch from a casual reading;
2. *Drash*, which explores the stories between the lines or underneath the initial meaning, which also seeks to fill in backstory or additional meanings or the story inside the story by analyzing potential multiple meanings of words, storylines, and characters;
3. *Sod*, mystical interpretation based on reframing and re-visioning the text as a way to reflect on the nature of the sacred.

Alicia Ostriker, a poet and scholar who has written a great deal of contemporary Midrash, writes, “As with every writing process, midrash is a kind of diving deep and surfacing. You move from your ordinary analytical, rational mind into a more meditative state, then into the flow of creativity, and finally back to your ordinary consciousness.” Some also point to how the black letters in torah are the stories that have been told, and the white fire are the stories that have not been told and need to be uncovered, recovering, reclaimed, and often are the stories of women, girls, and others who've been marginalized.

**Roots:** Traditional midrash was written and compiled between the first and eleventh centuries to offer commentary on specific words, verses, or chapters in the Old Testament. In this tradition, an interpreter explores the meanings, implicit and explicit, in texts, using this exploration as a window into re-imagining the story inside or beyond the story to widen our perspective while, at the time time, examine particulars of what a word, even a vowel, can mean, and how such detailed tilting the particulars can lead to a deeper understanding of a text. Traditionally, there are two kinds of midrash – *Midrash Halakah*, and *Midrash Aggadah*. Midrash Halakah focused on clarifying laws, rules, and other protocols from the bible in light of the contemporary world. Along the way, this kind of Midrash creates and extends prayers, rituals, and even stories, and generally follows the two centuries following

the fall of the Temple in Jerusalem. *Midrash Aggadah* focuses on exploring words and verse within the bible with an eye toward cultivating greater reverence and love for holy books.

***In a Nutshell:*** Midrash is an interpretative act in relation to sacred texts. As part of the Jewish tradition, this act weaves together seemingly stagnant texts with changing lives, places, and people to make new meanings or understand old ones in more relevant ways.

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What does it mean to be wandering? What does it mean to find the promised land?

We are the Hebrews—all of us, regardless of our religious affiliation—and the journey of Exodus reflects our ongoing struggle as we're pulled between these two dueling aspects of the mind: ego and Spirit, Pharaoh and Moses. This makes Exodus as relevant today as it was 3,000 years ago, for the human mind has not changed. The Hebrews' journey, with its triumphs and failures, can cast a light to help guide us along our own paths. For like the Hebrews of Exodus, we have not yet reached the Promised Land. We are still en route, still in the process of making that journey. Perhaps now, with this midrash in hand, and with the help of Spirit, we can complete the journey together. - Bob Rosenthal, Tikkun

- We are doing both at once
- Where do you see glimpses of the promised land?
- What would it take to get there together in a sustained way?
- How are we enslaved or do we enslave others – in tiny ways (limiting them) or large ways?
- What does it mean to be wandering, “dwelling in uncertainty” (Pema Chodron)?
- How do we take care of ourselves for the journey?