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Writing the Tree of Life: Midrash to Re-vision Our Lives

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Writing the Tree of Life: Midrash to Re-vision Our Lives

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.

This workshop begins with participants introducing themselves through a brief sharing of a guiding message in their lives (an example of mini-Midrash) before a brief presentation and discussion on Midrash with examples in and beyond its Jewish roots, and background on Midrash's relationship to re-visioning myths and messages.

The middle of the workshop will be devoted to the experiential with a guided meditation that leads to a Midrash writing exercise, then sharing either in small groups or the whole group (depending on size).

The ending 20+ minutes of the workshop will focus on applications for Midrash writing in various communities, including how such writing can help communities better understand themselves, their issues and/or goals, and most of all, the stories guiding them. We'll also look at possibilities for Midrash writing as a personal practice, and an ample handout will include practices participants can do on their own, with friends, and even adapt to different venues and populations.

that the stories that tell us who we are and how to live aren't complete until we bring our own art and understandings to them.

Midrash is Hebrew for "searching out," and writing Midrash is writing
"Torah is black fire written on white fire. Through midrash, we can imagine the unsaid, the white fire. We can read between the lines." Alicia

Yet Torah is a Tree of Life, and a tree can stay alive only if it grows. '

White Fire **The Art of Writing Midrash**

*Let yourself experience this story as if it is happening right now,
not to a mere fictional being, but to you. Then, start to write.*

by [Alicia Ostriker](#)

Imagine that you are Eve. You have just had an interesting conversation with a talking serpent who insists that God doesn't want you to eat the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil because doing so would make you godlike. Observing the tree, you decide that the attractive fruit must be good to eat and capable of making a person wise. You reach forth your hand, take the fruit, and eat. What do you feel at that moment? What are you thinking?

Imagine that you are Jacob. You are alone at night in the Negev Desert. Your family is on one side of the Jabbok river and you are on the other, worrying. In the morning you will be meeting your brother Esau. You haven't seen him for twenty years, not since you cheated him out of your father's blessing and he threatened to kill you. Suddenly a man appears from nowhere and leaps on you, throwing you to the ground. He wrestles with you all night. He dislocates your hip. Neither of you wins. As the sky lightens, he says, "Let me go, for dawn is coming." What are you feeling at that moment? What do you see? What is it that you realize in the moment before saying, "I will not let you go unless you bless me"?

There are so many things the narratives of Torah don't tell us. This is where midrash comes in. According to tradition, Torah is not words alone. Torah is black fire written on white fire. Through midrash, we can imagine the unsaid, the white fire. We can read between the lines.

To write midrash requires no special knowledge of the Bible and no extraordinary writing skill. You may be amazed by what you find yourself writing. The crucial factor is that you find a character or a situation that rings bells for you, that gets you excited in some way. I call this process finding a hot spot.

Maybe you are a romantic, and you want to imagine the first meeting of Adam and Eve, or of Jacob and his beloved Rachel. Maybe you're a rebel, and you like the idea of eating that apple. Maybe you are a teacher, and you empathize with the difficulties Moses has with the Israelites in the wilderness after they leave Egypt. If you are facing some frightening changes in your life, you might write a midrash reflecting on why it was so hard for the Israelites to accept their new way of life after leaving Egypt (see Exodus 16 and 17).

Think of all the puzzles midrash can solve. Why did Lot's wife look back? Why did Joseph play so many tricks on his brothers instead of revealing his identity right away? Why did God harden Pharaoh's heart? Why did Samson let Delilah give him that haircut? What made Ruth decide to leave her own family and land to cleave to her mother-in-law Naomi, saying, "Whither thou goest, I will go"? For that matter, what made her sister-in-law Orpah decide not to go along with Naomi?

Questions, questions, questions. Potentially, every character and every situation in the Bible might turn out to be a hot spot for you at some time or other in your life. The Bible is what I call "the collective dream of the Jewish people," filled with birth and death, heartache and solace, triumph and loss, fear and hope — every imaginable human emotion. And just as each character in a person's dream represents some aspect of the dreamer, we can discover connections of all kinds between our own lives and those of biblical personalities.

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.

In preparing to write, find a place where you will not be interrupted and make yourself comfortable and relaxed. Give yourself a limited amount of time; use a timer to tell you when to stop (looking at your watch is not allowed). You can use pen or pencil and paper, or a typewriter or your laptop — whatever makes you feel most at ease. Begin with your hot spot. Re-read the story or the passage. Notice your own responses. Does the story make you feel joyful, angry, sad, puzzled, proud? Does it remind you of

something in your own experience? What has been left unsaid by the text?

Now, close the book and close your eyes. Imagine your character at the time of the story. Picture the scene, notice the details. What is your character thinking and feeling? Let these thoughts and feelings develop and crystallize in your mind. Let yourself experience this story as if it is happening right now, not to a mere fictional being, but to you. When the situation is alive for you, you can set your timer and start to write.

But write what? Here are some ways you can turn the gaps in the story into midrash.

1. **Monologue.** Using the first-person singular I (of course, you can change your age, your gender, and your circumstances), write what the biblical text leaves out — the unspoken thoughts and feelings of your character while events are happening. Use phrases such as "I want..." and "I need...." Give yourself three minutes. At the end, there might be a revelation — something you never understood before. Use phrases such as "suddenly I see..." and "now I understand...."
2. **Memory.** Again using the first-person singular, imagine that it is now years after the story took place. You are telling your version to someone else—a family member, a child, or perhaps to God. You have never told this to anyone, and you have three minutes. Does everything seem different in retrospect? How have you changed since the story took place, and who are you now? You might use the phrases "I remember..." and "I wish...."
3. **Dialogue.** Many people don't realize they have a flair for dialogue until they find themselves writing it. Dialogue can be either serious or comic. In a humorous way, try writing the conversation between Moses and Zipporah when Moses comes back from the Burning Bush and attempts to relate what he's seen. For something serious, try writing the dialogue between Moses and God after God informs Moses that he may not enter the Promised Land. This scene might take a little longer. Give yourself five minutes.
4. **Imaginary Dialogue.** Invent an unrecorded encounter that might have happened between two biblical characters. What did Isaac say to Sarah after he returned home from Mount Moriah after his near-death experience? How did Sarah respond? What if Queen Esther met ex-Queen Vashti in the palace gardens? Would they exchange stories about what a dope King Ahasuerus was? Two minutes for this one.
5. **Interview.** A representative of the media does a Q-and-A. "So tell me, Lot's wife, just why did you turn around?" "Well, Jonah, that must have been quite an experience, living for three days in a whale's belly. Would you like to tell our studio audience something about it?" No time limit on this. Just go until the inspiration runs out.
6. **Third-person narrative.** The story is told by a nonparticipant, who may be an unidentified narrator or a minor character who witnesses the main action. For example, a soldier in David's army might describe the episode in I Samuel 24 in which David foregoes the chance to kill Saul, or a courtier might detail the summit meeting between Solomon and Sheba, or Job's wife might tell his story from her point of view. Narrative uses description and vivid detail to enrich our sense of reality, so give yourself up to ten minutes for this one.

I am often asked why I impose time limits. The reason is that such restrictions put you into a creative tizzy; they short-circuit your usual, rational, predictable responses and let you access deeper layers of spontaneous feeling and consciousness. When I tell participants in a midrash workshop that they have three minutes to complete an assignment, they always groan — and then they do it, astonishing themselves and each other by the depth and power of what they have written. Another piece of advice: write in a modern style, and let your people talk as naturally as you do. Avoid archaic language, such as "thee" and "thou." Remember, when the tales of Torah were new, the characters spoke the language of

the people in their own time. If you do the same, you are much more likely to realize new insights and discover new meaning.

Writing with a study partner can be even more illuminating than writing solo. Together, you can choose a text, share your comments and ideas, and then move into the silence of creating. When the time you have decided on is up, read your midrashim to each other, and smile with wonder. This process can be just as effective in a larger group with a workshop leader.

Some Jews feel that we have no right to modernize the genre of traditional midrash, which has its own rules stemming from talmudic times. Yet Torah is a Tree of Life, and a tree can stay alive only if it grows. So it is with all tradition — it stays alive by growing and changing. To reinterpret Torah is to add new twigs and leaves to the Tree of Life, which is why we have the saying that there is always another interpretation. To write midrash is to offer another interpretation, with the understanding that no single interpretation can ever be final and complete. Writing midrash requires a readiness to respond and imagine, and to accept surprises. Turn it and turn it, our sages said of Torah, for everything is in it — including, of course, our own lives.

Alicia Ostriker is a poet, critic, and midrashist. Twice a finalist for the National Book Award for poetry, she is also the author of Feminist Revision and the Bible and The Nakedness of the Fathers: Biblical Visions and Re-visions. A professor of English at Rutgers University, she teaches midrash workshops for the Institute for Contemporary Midrash.

Midrash is an interpretive act, seeking the answers to religious questions (both practical and theological) by plumbing the meaning of the words of the [Torah](#). (In the [Bible](#), the root d-r-sh is used to mean inquiring into any matter, including occasionally to seek out God’s word.) Midrash responds to contemporary problems and crafts new stories, making connections between new Jewish realities and the unchanging biblical text.

Midrash falls into two categories. When the subject is law and religious [practice](#) (*halakhah*), it is called *midrash halakhah*. *Midrash aggadah*, on the other hand, interprets biblical narrative, exploring questions of [ethics](#) or [theology](#), or creating homilies and parables based on the text. (Aggadah means “telling”; any midrash which is not halakhic falls into this category.)

[Midrash Halakhah](#)

It is often difficult to determine, simply from reading the biblical text, what Jewish law would be in practice. The text of the [Torah](#) is often general or ambiguous when presenting laws. Midrash halakhah attempts to clarify or extend a law beyond the conditions assumed in the Bible, and to make connections between current practice and the biblical text. It made possible the creation and acceptance of new liturgies and rituals which de facto replaced sacrificial worship after the fall of the [Second Temple](#), and the maintenance of continuity by linking those practices to the words of the Torah.

Midrash halakhah from the two centuries following the fall of the Temple was collected in three books—the [Mekhilta on Exodus](#), the [Sifra on Leviticus](#), and the [Sifrei on Numbers and Deuteronomy](#)—known as the tannaitic midrashim. (The tannaim were the rabbis from the time of the Mishnah, edited in approximately 200 C.E.)

[Midrash Aggadah](#)

The type of midrash most commonly referred to (as in, “There is a midrash which says...”) is from the

collections of midrash aggadah, most of which were compiled between about 200 and 1000 C.E. (Many midrashim circulated orally before then). Midrash aggadah may begin its exploration with any word or verse in the Bible. There are many different methods of interpretation and exposition.

Written by rabbis both steeped in Bible and absorbed by the Jewish questions of their time, works of midrash aggadah often occupy the meeting ground between reverence and love for the wording of the fixed text of the Torah, and theological creativity. Midrashic writings thus often yield [religious insights](#) that have made Torah directly applicable to later Jewish realities, especially the concerns of its authors. Some of what midrash aggadah yields is insight into the burning, sometimes time-bound questions of those who wrote it. Still, the interpretations produced often have more universal and timeless application to our, or any, generation.

In addition to works devoted to midrashic compilations, midrash aggadah also appears throughout the two [Talmuds](#). [Midrash Rabbah](#), the "Great Midrash," is the name of the collections linked to the five books of the Torah and the "Five Scrolls" ([Esther](#), [Song of Songs](#), [Ruth](#), [Lamentations](#), and [Ecclesiastes](#)) read on holidays. Some of these works read like verse-by-verse commentaries. Others may have originated in sermons linked to the weekly [Shabbat](#) Torah reading.

Writing a Midrash

A scholarly midrash is beyond the Biblical knowledge of most of us, but there is also a folk midrash, a narrative midrash. The narrative midrash is more dependent on one's personal theology and one's personal experience with living a life of faith.

Midrash is the Hebrew for "searching out."

A narrative midrash is a method of exegesis, or interpretation. It is a homiletic method of biblical interpretation in which the text is explained differently from its literal meaning (or *_peshat_*). The nature of midrash is explained by the image of a hammer, which splits the rock of torah into many pieces.

There are basically three kinds of narrative midrashim:

- 1) the literal, or *pashat*, which is **commentary on the "plain" meaning of the text** (i.e., the meaning that would be obtained from a casual reading - where the fundamentalists stop);
- 2) *drash*, which **spins out the stories "between the lines,"** and which is interpretative and looks for deeper meanings -- by attempting to fill in where Scripture leaves out details, by analyzing possible multiple meanings of the words.
- 3) *sod*, the mystical type of interpretation, **reframing the text**, where one looks for meanings that might reflect on the life and the mind of God and in which one seems to be able to abandon the textbase and fly off into the stratosphere.

As a group exercise, a narrative midrash is best done by a small group, 3 - 6 people. Each group is given the same pericope (scripture passage). In each group, a "scribe" is selected, to record the group's midrash. Reference materials are allowed, but not required for this endeavor.