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Jewish Midrash in Jesuit Classrooms

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Abstract

Storytelling is of paramount importance in the Jewish tradition. The retelling of ancient stories by rabbinical sages is known as Midrash. This article examines Midrash on multiple levels. Topics include an analysis of how Midrash can serve as a case study for cultural change within higher education; how Midrash can assist with the process of creating a vision and mission statement for an institution; how stories from Midrash exemplify that components of the Jewish tradition of Midrash can serve as a fundamental component of the Jesuit classroom; and how to apply them in a Jesuit classroom setting.

Introduction

Judaism has a deep tradition of storytelling. Ancient tales from the Torah, the sacred book of Judaism, combine with contemporary stories and interpretations. One cannot escape storytelling in Judaism. It is, for Jews of all denominations, a mechanism to link us to previous and future generations by encouraging us to personalize and contemporize ancient texts. It is oral. It is written. It is in song. It is in prayer. It is in art. It is in the Jewish classroom. It is in the Jewish home. It is simply pervasive. The body of retellings of ancient stories, often called *Midrashim*, told by rabbinical sages, explores and explains passages in the Torah. Midrash (which can be a singular noun or a verb:) is a technique used to fill in the empty spaces in the stories, often offering profound and innovative interpretations of the text, and making Torah a living text.

For example, Jews are required to interpret the story of the Exodus from Egypt each year as if they were personally part of the story. This process of critical and creative thinking from the Jewish tradition differs from many traditions that favor divine recapitulation over struggling with the text. Judaism encourages questioning, probing,

analytical thinking, creativity, and recognizes that there is rarely one correct conclusion.

Although Midrash has, for the most part, been restricted to the halls of Jewish schools and synagogues, the techniques can be used powerfully in any classroom, even, and perhaps especially, in a Jesuit classroom. This paper uses Midrash to examine the story of the Exodus as a case study in leading for cultural change, and then connects the methodology to the Jesuit approach to teaching, which is based in the foundation of the Jesuit values of *magis* (being more), *cura personalis* (the whole person), and reflection in action.

Exodus as a Cultural Change Case Study

Let us begin with a story, as is so often done in Judaism. A child was born in dangerous times, placed in a basket by his sister, who set him afloat on the river Nile. She watched from the rushes as an Egyptian princess, who had no children of her own, pulled the boy from the river and named him Moses. This brave young girl then ran forward and told the princess that she knew of a nursemaid who could nurse the child for the princess. Thus begins the story of one of the greatest teachers of the Jewish tradition, the

person called Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses our teacher.

This is the beginning of a long saga that can be seen as one of the first case studies on leading cultural change. There are many elements and nuances that can be interpreted as powerful lessons in leadership throughout the entire story, some of which we will examine in detail. The method of doing this is called Midrash, the Jewish process of exegesis that links ideas across the many Jewish texts. The process starts as we notice idiosyncrasies in the text, which might be something inconsistent, something grammatically unique, a gap or extra word, or even a linguistic connection. The reader then assumes that there are no accidents or mistakes in Torah and digs deeper using “PaRDeS”, an acronym that stands for Plain or direct meaning; Hints, or allegoric meaning; Seek, looking for similar occurrences; and Secret, or the esoteric, mystical meaning. This entire process sets the stage for teaching analysis, synthesis, creative thinking, and brainstorming, as well as group process. Filling in these gaps in the text helps us fill in the gaps inside us, especially ones that can help us be holy.

The case study begins with the birth and growth of a leader who learned the meaning of cultural change through personal experience. He was born into one culture, but raised in two. He was raised as the son of an Egyptian princess; however his real mother was a poor Hebrew nurse-maid and slave. The pharaoh decreed that all Hebrew male children would be killed, but Moses’ mother Yocheved, a midwife, managed to hide his birth for several weeks. Then, in an act of great faith, placed him in a basket and set him in the Nile River near the Pharaoh’s palace. Moses’s sister watched as he floated towards the palace and was lifted from the water by an Egyptian princess. Rather than following Pharaoh’s law and killing the child, she claimed him as her own. Miriam, also a Hebrew slave, approached the princess and indicated that there was a nursemaid near-by who could suckle the baby. And so, in some miraculous twist of fate, Moses returned to his birth mother until he was weaned.

In this story, three women colluded to save a child. The Midrashic method would have us ask why a princess is bathing in the Nile when she has

an ornate palace bath? Why would she defy Pharaoh and declare that this slave child is hers? Why would she hand this child to another young slave to be nursed? Finally, why would she then accept the weaned Moses back into the palace and raise him as her own?

The Jewish tradition holds that these were the first of many miracles that shaped Moses. Without these women taking profound risks, he would have died. The same women continue to strongly influence Moses as he grows. They shape his thinking and hence his choices. Women who risked their lives to save him would teach him to stand up for what he believed in, for what is right. They would teach him that individuals can be effective change agents. They would teach him to be aware of opportunities that “float by” and to act on them. These three women, in essence, created the environment that birthed a leader, by showing him the truth of the disparate cultures around him.

At some point, the contrast between these two cultures became so strongly divergent that Moses was forced to choose one over the other, or to leave both behind. He left Egypt and walked into a yet another new culture, and learned to adapt by trying to hide from his true self. He became a shepherd for a Yisro, a priest from another culture and married a daughter of this tribe.

Enter the story of the burning bush, one of the most analyzed and expounded on images in Torah. We are told in Exodus 3:1 that Moses was shepherding Yisro’s sheep when he saw the flames in a bush, but not consuming it. He said “I will turn from my course and see the marvelous sight – why does the bush not burn?” We see Moses stopping to notice something unusual that was not readily obvious. It was clear that the bush was burning, but he had to look closer to notice that it was not being consumed. Moses turned from his path only after he took time to notice the unusual event. Then he took perhaps three steps towards the bush (Midrash), choosing to walk in a new direction, to leave the known and predictable path behind, follow his curiosity and take a risk. Only at this point, after this active choice to change, was Moses able to hear Hashem call out to him, and start on his personal spiritual leadership

journey. And with this personal self-discovery, the process of the redemption from Egypt begins.

There are several leadership lessons in this phase of the story. Moses had to notice that something was miraculous, and then he had to change his course, veer from his path, to investigate. This could be considered a plain meaning and is perhaps the first and most powerful element of leading for cultural change.

We are told to notice what is unusual, acknowledge what needs addressing, change course and commit to a new course of action, regardless of personal preference. Was Moses tired and thirsty and more concerned with getting the sheep back to camp when he saw the bush? Did he have a plan for the rest of the day? Probably. Turning aside took great courage, fortitude, self-sacrifice, and openness to new experiences, the traits a great leader needs in order to change a culture.

Another Midrash goes further, playing with the linguistic link between “flame” (lavah) or “fire” and a “heart (lev) of fire”. Something burns within Moses, and needs to burn within leaders of change, that is not easily quenched. His memories of the Egyptian cruelty and the slavery imposed on the Jews drove Moses and would not let him rest in his role as shepherd. However, having passion is often not enough. We see that it was only after Moses “turned aside,” that he was able to leave behind his own anger, his limited view of what needed to be done, and the fears that drove him into the desert, and face the challenge put before him. Only after he acknowledged and embraced his true purpose and authentic self was he able to lead the change.

However, Moses was not willing to just take directions and head off to Egypt. He actually argued with Hashem, asking for G-d’s name, so he could tell pharaoh who sent him. Moses wanted to know that he was not the “lone ranger”, the individual maverick on this journey. He instinctively knew that he alone could not change the world, or a culture. This is something that can only be done in partnership with G-d and the people themselves. His first step was to reunite with his family and his roots, and to have his brother join him on this task. In this model, leadership is shared between the priestly Aaron

and Moses the prophet. Leadership cannot be simply a vision; it must be grounded in ethical action. Together they stood before the Pharaoh to demand “let my people go.” When this did not work, Hashem sent plagues until at last Pharaoh relented and the nation of Israelites fled Egypt.

From this point on, the story contains odd turns. We are told that G-d hardened Pharaoh’s heart against the Israelites, but we are not told why, or what this means. Again, we look to the Midrash. Maimonides, one of the greatest Jewish Spanish philosophers, suggests that Pharaoh did not use his free will to turn away from sin and hence was not allowed the gift of repentance. Perhaps hardening of the heart provides humans an opportunity to use free will rather than our own flawed decision-making. If we are told what to do, if we are forced to change with a threat of pain or suffering, then we have not made a decision. If we use our anger to make a decision, we choose poorly. If our actions are predetermined, or if our brains are wired in such a way that we follow the path of least resistance, we have not acted as a human with free will. If G-d hardens our heart we must either choose based on anger, fear, assimilation, or rise to the challenge of choosing wisely and uniquely.

Perhaps G-d was giving Pharaoh an opportunity to be a great leader, to choose wisely rather than from a heart filled with anger and fear. Midrash reminds us that it is this ability to choose freely that defines us as human beings, but we have to realize that there are consequences to our actions. For this, we need to be capable of honest self-evaluation, introspection, reflection and change. Throughout this story we see this theme repeated: given a choice, will Moses, Pharaoh, and the Hebrew nation lean towards evil or towards good?

Finally, after a Passover dinner, when the angel of death passed over the homes of the Israelites, the nation left Egypt and encountered the Red Sea. It is here where we discover the true difficulty involved in changing a culture. When we read the text carefully, we find yet again that Hashem has set this up, telling Moses where to camp and sending the Egyptian army after the Israelites. Moses told the people to stand firm and Hashem would fight for them. But the people were still living with the mindsets of slave and victim. They

could not see any alternative but death. They stood and cried out that it would be better to have stayed slaves than to die at the edge of the sea. Moses called to Hashem for help, but Hashem asked, “Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on. Raise your staff and split the sea.” Notice that the sea was not split first. The people must first choose to act, and walk forward. A Midrashic Jewish reading of this story emphasizes order: move on first, then the sea will split, just as Moses had to move toward the bush before he heard the voice of G-d.

The story of Nashon, who was the son of Amminadab and a descendant of Judah, similarly examines this order as a fundamental component of Exodus. Nashon understood the true meaning of G-d’s words. He walked into the sea until the water was up to his nose. When he took that next step, about to drown, the water split and a clear path opened before him. An allegorical interpretation notes that the water split around each individual, meaning that each person had to have the courage to walk into the waters before they split, teaching us that each of us has to act first before we can be helped. It takes this act of commitment and bravery to open the sea, or the gateway, to the new culture. This was the first step from slavery to freedom. We will see this theme repeated throughout the Torah: act then hear; act then believe; act and G-d will be there.

Once on the other side, Miriam the prophetess took her timbrel and all the women followed her with tambourines, dancing circle dances, and singing Miriam’s song. This story has many meanings. Miriam is a prophetess in her own right, who understands the meaning of the many miracles. Miriam sang her song of thanksgiving in the present tense, demonstrating her high level of faith and trust in G-d. We are told that the women danced in circles, an indication that the dance led to a higher level of consciousness. Many scholars link this story to Kabbalistic notions of the creation of the universe, and the circle universe that preceded the universe we now live in.

These are stories from the Midrash, not the Torah, created by reading between the lines, and based on the allegorical and mystical readings of the story. The allegorical meaning teaches us that cultures cannot just be led towards a change, they

must be engaged in it, choose it, and commit to it. Leaders cannot enforce new rules, bark out new commands, rather, they must create an environment in which leaders from within the group can and must step up. The mystical teaches us that cultures are not changed by miracles from the outside, but from inner choice, miracles of change on the inside of individuals. Only after we commit to the internal miracle are we able to see an external miracle.

The story continues on to Sinai and the receiving of Torah, which is simultaneously awe-inspiring and terrifying. The people battled their fears as they tried to believe in a G-d they could see, but who has provided for them and saved them. They ask that Moses go up the mountain, which is described in ways that mirror an active volcano, and receive G-d’s message. While Moses is gone, the Israelites move from faith to fear. With Moses they slipped backwards into a slavery mindset, and the men built a golden calf to worship. Only after Moses returns and the people feel the power of his, and G-d’s, anger, were they able to receive Torah. This is another indication that it will be difficult to shift a culture of slavery to a culture of freedom. In fact, as we see later, no one from this generation of slaves is allowed to enter the Promised Land.

Moses climbed the mountain again, and this time the people did wait and have faith. We know that this time it was the women, who did not help in building the golden calf, who were able to keep the people comforted. Women were the ones who comforted frightened children at the Passover dinner and now comforted and calmed the Israelites as they waited for Moses to return. Finally Moses returned and related the commandments. The Israelites upon hearing the commandments said “we will do and we will hear” (Exodus 24:7). Again we find the theme that action that leads to change. We are taught that often we must move forward rather than wait for everyone to come to consensus. There are times that we must act before we know the exact path; often clarity comes from the process itself. We must invest ourselves in the change without knowing the exact outcome. At Sinai, we were given the laws that tie us together as a nation, the vision, and mission statement (see below). These will only become clear as we live them.

There are many other stories that we could discuss, but for the purposes of this paper we will jump ahead to the book of Numbers. In this part of the story Moses sent twelve spies into the Promised Land, asking them to report back on the agriculture and the lay of the land. Ten of the twelve came back terrified, reporting that the land was full of large armies and fortified cities. The two final spies, Joshua and Caleb, had a different report. They said the land was rich and that the Hebrew people could follow G-d's command and move into the land. Unfortunately the words of the 10 spies (in Hebrew *meraglim* which can mean traitors) swayed the entire Israelite nation. The people refused to go into Israel, crying that they would die, and that it would be better if they had stayed slaves in Egypt. G-d heard this and declared that the people had sinned because they believed the lies, the *lashon hara* or evil tongue, of the ten traitors, rather than the truth spoken by Joshua and Caleb. G-d sent the Israelites back into the desert to live there on manna for 40 years until the generation that had been slaves died out, and the younger generation was ready to embrace freedom.

On the surface, this seems to be the story of failed change and poor leadership. However, this is only another chapter in the story, one more step on the way to change, and a story rich with Midrashic interpretation. We learn that the voices of ten people can sway a nation, even if, or especially if, the words spoken play on the fears of people. We learn that the truth might not be a powerful enough message for those who are fearful. We see this today in our political ads and arguments. We are told to be afraid of change, to be afraid of different opinions, to be afraid of the unknown. Each of us must still fight this urge to be a safe "slave" so that we can live the oft times frightening life of freedom.

The Jewish nation was a family of slaves who witnessed the miracles of the splitting of the sea, the giving of Torah, the gifts of food and water in the desert, as well as miraculous healings and prophecies. But they were still slaves in their hearts, frightened of the world, frightened of standing up and taking risks. In some ways, their hearts were hard, just as Pharaoh's was; they could not find their own free will and make a decision that was not based in fear or anger. They may

have walked away from the place of slavery, but they brought the minds of slaves with them. Through Midrash we discover the matching bookends of the Pharaoh and the slaves. We learn that we cannot be freed if we bring our hard hearts of captivity with us into the new land. If we think like slaves, we will behave like slaves.

So what happened to these slaves who could give birth to freedom, but were not able to embrace it themselves? G-d saw that the people had not learned to listen to the truth, and were still swayed by lies. And in this moment we learn that the most harmful sin is that of listening to lies, to the "evil tongue" or gossip. We learn that it takes courage and an open heart to walk into freedom, to hear a truth that is frightening and might not comfort us. We learn not to give up; and in fact, with Moses' leadership, the next generation comes back to this same hill and walks into the land, led by Joshua the spy, now the visionary, who spoke the truth.

Vision and Mission Statement

Perhaps the most powerful and important tool in this cultural change was a clear vision and mission that everyone remembered and repeated until it was embedded in the daily workings of the culture. Throughout history, leaders have used this method by having subjects praise them and chant words of praise, such as "long live the queen," or use special salutes or salutations. This case study uses a more mission-direct method that has been highly effective for 4000 years: the twice-daily Jewish Shema and V'ahavta prayers (Deuteronomy 6:4-9). The prayers have three parts.

The first is said aloud:

Hear, Israel, the Lord is our G-d, the Lord is one.

The next part is whispered:

Blessed be the name of Hashem's glorious kingdom forever and ever.

The final part is recited aloud:

And you shall love the lord your G-d with all your heart and with all your soul and

with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be in your heart. And you shall teach them diligently to your children, and you shall speak of them when you sit at home and when you walk along the way, and when you lie down and when you rise up. And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

The elements that follow this recitation detail the good that will come from following the commandments and the danger that comes with being led astray with a wandering heart or mind. It ends with the words “I am H’shem your G-d who led you out of Egypt to be your G-d,” which in very few words encapsulates the entire Exodus experience.

There are several elements that make this an effective and powerful mission statement. The vision statement is repeated at both the beginning and at the end of the recitation. Some words are said aloud, and others said privately, whispered, by each individual in the room. The middle part of the prayer instructs everyone on how to share and remember this vision: at home, on travels, with our children, at the end and beginning of each day, and by posting them prominently on our doorposts. The practice of “laying tefillin” (meaning to guard or protect)—temporarily attaching small boxes which hold this prayer to the head and hand during morning prayers—is a physical enactment of the words “bind them as a sign on your hand. . . . be frontlets between your eyes.”

This vision statement is not printed up and packed away, or buried on some bulletin board. Rather it is repeated, taught, worn, used to adorn, and discussed. Through these actions the words become embedded in daily life, and are in essence a living vision statement that helped move the Jewish culture and religion from slavery to freedom, and have kept a nation connected in a global Diasporas, across time, space, and brutal attempts at annihilation.

Midrash and Jesuit Education

What do these case studies, these stories, these Midrashim, these prayers have to do with Jesuit Education? How can Judaism provide a support for Jesuit values, philosophy, and education? Similar to Judaism, the Jesuits have a long and rich history of valuing education, analytics, and contemplative discussion. We see the Jesuit philosophy emerge in 1548 and culminate in today’s 28 Jesuit colleges and universities and 46 high schools in the United States alone. All Jesuit institutions emphasize the values of *magis*, *cura personalis* and the notion of reflection in action.

Magis translates as “better” in Latin. Within the context of Ignatian philosophy, it is interpreted as doing more for G-d and therefore for oneself and others. In the same vein, Midrash, the rabbinical interpretations of the Torah, are meant to provide the opportunity for discussion of holy texts through which we can better understand ourselves, others, and G-d. This interaction can be expanded to include the Jewish notion of *Tikkun Olam*, a phrase that means that humanity has a shared responsibility to heal or repair the world. While this is not a biblical or rabbinic law, actions that heal the world lead to social harmony and social justice.

Cura personalis translates as “care for the entire person.” Within the Jesuit educational tradition, this concept has expanded to reflect the significance of recognizing, caring for, and nurturing the relationship between educators and students. Similarly, Midrash is the rabbis’ effective attempt to recognize, care and nurture the relationship between the Torah (the educator) and its students (the Jews). The text *Pirkei Avot*, Chapters of the Father, is a compilation of ethical teachings from the period of 180 to 220 C.E (Mishnaic Tractate Avot), during which tractates of the Mishnah were redacted by Rabbi Yehudah “ha Nasi,” again through a Midrashic process. These teachings teach us how to act ethically in ways that provide care for ourselves and for those around us. One of the most famous teachings is attributed to Hillel and sums up the notion of *Cura personalis* quite well: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, who am I? If not now, when? If not me, who?” (Avot 1:14) Hillel is asking the Jewish people to

be self-reflective in ways that make us better individuals, to act in ways that bring us closer to G-d, as well as ways that help our community. He is also pushing us beyond our excuses and self-imposed limits, teaching us that each small individual action is vital in the process of "Tikkun Olam."

Another tenet of Ignatian educational tradition is the concept of reflection in action. According to Nowacek and Mountin, reflection in action stems from the cycle of experience, reflection, action, and evaluation "that can be traced back to the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius and that is a distinguishing characteristic of Jesuit education."¹ Midrash follows the same cycle of experience (the story), reflection (the rabbinical commentary), action (the interpretation of the rabbinical commentary), and evaluation (how does this Midrash apply to the current situation). Midrash aligns seamlessly within the context of Jesuit education and values and allows us to draw conclusions about leading for cultural change with a Jesuit perspective from a Midrash story/text. We find yet another famous saying attributed to Rabbi Tarfon that also addresses this notion of reflection in action: "It is not incumbent upon you to complete the work, but neither are you at liberty to desist from it" (Avot 2:21). This is interpreted in the Jewish tradition to mean that we are obligated to continue to learn, to reflect and to act, and to focus on "Tikkun Olam" healing the world, even though we will probably never see the task completed. Fulfilling this obligation brings us closer to Hashem.

Finally, these Ignatian values are expressed through a pedagogy that comprises learning through Context (who), Experience (what), Reflection (why/how), Action, (what next) and Evaluation (how well).² This cycle is understood as representing a process rather than a prescriptive teaching methodology. Again, we can easily align this process with that of Jewish Midrash.

Biblical exegesis must begin with an understanding of the context of the text. Who is involved? When did this event take place in relationship to other passages? The experience, what happens in the narrative, is a vital element. We can read this using PaRDes, moving from the literal to the mystical. The process then takes reflection. What do we

know from other texts? How does this passage reflect others and in what ways it is unique? Our action is the Midrash itself, the interpretation that expands our understanding, challenges our opinions, and brings forth deeper questions. Evaluation in the Jewish tradition suggests that Midrash does not lead to resolution, but does help us continue to interact and struggle with the text.

Classroom Application

Faculty can use these exogenesis techniques in any classroom to help students develop critical and creative thinking skills, as well as the ability to question, explore texts for deeper meanings, compare and contrast ideas, articulate the importance of linguistic variations, and synthesize ideas. Utilizing text in this way supports students in understanding the underlying issues and meanings of history events, rhetorical arguments, and political maneuvering.

For example, when students are reading arguments, for or against a policy, they can explore the results of similar policies in the past, and look for common themes that cross time, as well as culture or geographical location. Students might explore the rhetorical arguments looking for metaphorical mistakes and implicit assumptions that intimate realities that are not actually true.

Midrash requires curiosity and cognitive courage. Midrash teaches us that we can take a risk and re-interpret events from a current perspective, while still understanding them through an historical lens. The Midrashic method demonstrates there is never one right answer, but rather numerous perspectives and ways of dealing with issues, and that there is power in being open to the various points of view. We learn that the best answers come from a combination of perspectives, and that the majority's opinion is not the only solution, nor necessarily the best.

Conclusion

Using parts of the Exodus as a case study for cultural change, we can explore the power of Midrash in action. This process challenges the faculty and students to evaluate the story from a literal perspective, to then reflect on the deeper meaning, and finally to delve into the mystic

meanings. From these analysis students can suggest new ways to apply the lessons in their careers and personal lives. The story is told from a literal reading, then reflections on the deeper meaning are added, and finally, actions are suggested and evaluated. As such, we can see the usefulness of the Jewish Midrashic tradition in a Jesuit classroom. Not only can we learn about cultural change and leadership, but we can see how ancient tales can be used by faculty in any classroom across cultures and religions as a means to educate, create discussion, and provoke thought and growth.

More importantly, we can see the power of the Midrashic process as a tool in a Jesuit classroom. Students can challenge personal perspectives, find new meanings in old stories and recitations, and explore common memes and cultural themes in order to find guidance for future decisions. This continual cycle of curiosity, investigation, reflection, interpretation, and articulation aligns with the Jesuit educational methods, and helps prepare students for an unknown and clearly challenging future. ¹

Notes

¹ R. Nowacek and S. Mountin, "Reflection in Action, Reflection in Action: A Signature Ignatian Pedagogy for the 21st Century," in *Exploring More Signature Pedagogies: Approaches to Teaching Disciplinary Habits of Mind*, eds. Nancy L. Chick, Aeron Haynie and Regan A R Gurung (Sterling, Va.: Stylus Publishing, 2012) 129-142.

² St. Louis University Reinert Center for Transformative Teaching and Learning, "Ignatian Pedagogy Overview," accessed November 26, 2014, <http://www.slu.edu/ctl/resources/teaching-tips-and-resources/ignatian-pedagogy>.