

**A Burning World, An Absent God:  
Midrash, Hermeneutics, and Relational Psychoanalysis**

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### **Abstract**

Psychological splitting, authoritarianism, literalism, and an emphasis on the direct experience of supernatural presence and mission — characteristics of fundamentalism — are on the rise. What practices and traditions can be utilized to oppose them? By studying and interpreting *midrash*, Jewish biblical commentary originating in late antiquity, the author explores this question. By researching both primary texts and secondary sources, it was found that the process of midrashic study 1) is a good example of a hermeneutic tradition, and 2) contains insights that can be applied to relational psychoanalysis and contemporary culture. In particular, four characteristics of midrash were identified: intertextuality, interpersonal engagement, the absence-presence dialectic, and the prohibition against idolatry. The author argues that the process of midrashic study can serve as an extended argument against and resistance to fundamentalist movements. Finally, through the hermeneutic concept of dialogue, the author responds to a recent critique of his work.

*Key words:* interpretation, relational, interpersonal, hermeneutics, fundamentalism, idolatry, Judaism

Support for this research was provided by the Russell-Shapiro family and the Kalsman Institute For Judaism and Health at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. William Cutter, Joel Rosenberg, Rob Crawford, Aryeh Cohen, Karen Cushman, and Edward E. Sampson provided much needed conceptual and editorial guidance.

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**“The distance that separates the text from the reader is the space  
in which the very evolution of the spirit is lodged.”  
— Ira Stone**

Only a few short years ago Peter Gilford and I (1999, 2000) thought that a shift was beginning to take place in the predominant way of being — what anthropologists refer to as the self — in the United States in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. We wrote that the self was shifting from an empty self (Cushman, 1990, 1995) to a multiple or decorated self, and this newly emerging self was reflected in many aspects of the social terrain.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As with any historical-cultural way of being, there are good and bad aspects of the multiple self. For instance, some recent psychoanalytic theories that feature multiplicity (see e.g., Bromberg, 1996; Mitchell, 1993; Stern, 1997) seem to be positive contributions to our social world. At the same time, another aspect of multiplicity, featuring an extreme relativism in combination with an instrumental scientism, has contributed to a superficial, ever-morphing self that fits well with the consumerist, bureaucratic requirements of the new century. Managed care, we argued, was just one of many destructive expressions of this new terrain.

But then something changed. A year or so after we published those two articles, the terrorist attack of 9/11 occurred, and that event — and especially the way the Bush administration interpreted and used that event — incited a combination of fear and rage that has become an important aspect of our social world. In the years following 9/11, revanchism, impulsivity, and polarized thinking have often overwhelmed thoughtfulness, self-reflection, and humility. One of George Bush’s major campaign slogans, “resoluteness,” eerily reminiscent of a prominent Nazi propaganda slogan, has proven itself to be the enemy of intellectual nuance. Vengeance, as the saying goes, is a kind of lazy mourning, and it does seem as though our country’s grief has been expeditiously — and for some, most profitably — displaced into hatred.

A pervasive suspicion and unresolved grief has undermined our country’s capacity to tolerate ambiguity, subtlety, and uncertainty. To varying degrees, this way of being has often been visible in American life, but the events of and the administration’s response to 9/11 have encouraged and sanctioned it. Especially among some segments of the population, this trend, at least for the moment, has challenged the anticipated shift toward the multiple self, moving the self in the direction of rigidity, authoritarianism, self-righteousness. This turn to the right reflects a shift — and if it continues, a significant shift — in current

understandings about truth, the good, authority, the meaning of difference, and the value of intellectual, critical activity. In religion, politics, even psychology, there seems to be a growing trend toward authoritarian, literalist, anti-intellectual, non-self-reflective, passive-receptive theories and processes. In religion, in particular, one sees a flight from the awareness of uncertainty, limitation, absence, and vulnerability into forms of mantic and mystical experiences linked to visions of presence and apocalypse. In other words, fundamentalisms of all sorts seem to be on the rise.

In this paper I describe and discuss *midrash*, a Jewish interpretive practice of Biblical commentary that originated in late antiquity. I argue that midrash 1) is a good example of an ontological hermeneutic tradition; 2) has characteristics in common with contemporary forms of relational psychoanalysis; and 3) embodies understandings, processes, and commitments antithetical to fundamentalist beliefs and practices.

Fundamentalist thinking, whether in the realm of religion, politics, or psychotherapy, usually clusters around several qualities (see e.g., Ali, 2002; Altemeyer, 1988; Ammerman, 1991; Barr, 1977; Carpenter, 1997; Edel, 1987; Marty & Appleby, 1993; Reichley, 1987; Strozier, 1994). Some of these qualities are:

- 1) a binary conception of reality;
- 2) authoritarian, literalist, hyperconcrete patterns of belief;
- 3) a sense of a divinely ordained, universal, immediate mission;

4) an intolerance of dissent.

This pattern culminates in a belief that the one, simple, unambiguous truth has been revealed, that it applies to all humans for all time, and that it emanates from a superhuman source whose will is made known and triumphant (either through direct communication with humans or direct intervention in human events). Fundamentalists have no need for human interpretation: the truth is perfect and complete in itself, needing no clarification or emendation. For them, interpretation will always, necessarily, be the enemy.

### **Hermeneutics As Political Resistance**

To my mind the most philosophically sound opposition to fundamentalism is ontological hermeneutics, a branch of what some have referred to as the interpretive turn (see e. g., Hiley, Bohman, & Shusterman, 1991). Hermeneutics features ideas such as the belief that

- a. human being is historical and perspectival;
- b. historical traditions are “inescapably” moral traditions;
- c. therefore human action, explicitly or implicitly, revolves around trying to determine and then act in accordance with the good;
- d. however, human perception is problematic, and therefore the most central and primordial human activity is interpretation;
- e. interpretation is inevitably and inextricably entangled with history, language, culture, and power;
- f. humans not only interpret actions and speech but also texts;
- g. texts can embody truths;
- h. there can be more than one truth in a text;
- i. to explore the truths in a text one must actively engage with the text — when attempting to determine the good, disengagement and the reliance on objectivist “method” is bound to fail;

- j. in order to actively engage with and interpret the text one must turn to other texts, and contextualize those texts, in order to interpret the original text;
- k. the concept of “dialogue” is thought to be an interpersonal process through which two or more persons recognize their differences, develop the capacity to place their own opinions and moral understandings into question by contextualizing them, comparing them to the understandings of others, seeing the limitations of their own beliefs, and then modifying or changing them accordingly.

Hermeneuticists value historical vision, engaged process, intellectual honesty and self-reflection. But they don't furnish a ready-made, detailed moral code that can be used to resist the coercions and seductions of one's time and place. Instead, they recognize the constitutive power of historical traditions, and by implication encourage us to plumb the depths of the traditions into which we have been thrown at birth — respecting, exploring, questioning, historically situating, critiquing, and modifying them. Each of us lives at a point of intersecting traditions, and hermeneuticists suggest that it is our job as humans to sift through those traditions and choose ways of living that fit with our best, evolving, understandings of the good.

### **Midrash**

Recently, after an absence of 35 years, I have returned to studying a type of Jewish storytelling called midrash (see e.g., Holtz, 1984; Stern, 1991). Midrashim (plural) are found in three types of rabbinic literary collection: legal, homiletical, and exegetical. They were developed first in

oral traditions in the centuries surrounding the beginning of the Common Era and then slowly compiled and committed to writing in stages. The first major collection and redaction of post-biblical Jewish law, the Mishnah, was finished toward the end of the second century C.E., and was organized according to subject categories.

Biblical exegesis or commentary is composed of various types of rabbinic stories, conversations, and debates organized by chapter and verse of the biblical texts they attempt to understand and explain.

Although Judaic scholars date the compilation and redaction of the first wave of biblical commentary during the years 400-650 C.E. (see e.g., Holtz, 1984, p. 188), midrash continues to be written and published to this day. The two sets of midrashim discussed in detail in this article are found, respectively, in a first wave compilation, Genesis Rabbah (commentary on Genesis, 400-650 C.E.), and a third wave, Exodus Rabbah (commentary on Exodus, 900-1000 C.E.).

I have noticed that there are points in common between hermeneutic ideas about interpretation, historical traditions, and the good, and some of the concepts and processes that inhere in midrashic interpretive traditions.<sup>2</sup> Of course, it goes without saying that some

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<sup>2</sup> There were other Jewish literary genres in late antiquity, such as those found in Qumranic, prophetic, and mystical traditions, as well as the Christian Gospels, that do not follow the above hermeneutic practices. They emphasize the possibility of a direct communion with God, especially during ecstatic states of

similarities between a culture in late antiquity and early 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. society do not — and cannot — mean that the two societies are alike, or that the authors of, say, *Genesis Rabbah*, understood the self, literary work, or fundamental life questions in the same ways we do today. Michel Foucault (e.g., 1977), for one, often noted that historical eras are marked by disjunction and difference. However, similarities among cultural artifacts and sociopolitical ideas or structures are not impossible, just unlikely, and reflect somewhat different functions and meanings.

Although hermeneuticists are fond of discussing the history of their movement, they make little or no mention of midrashic traditions, either as ongoing interpretive practices or a body of interpretive theory. And yet, careful examination of midrashic texts and later iterations of Jewish biblical commentary indicates that some forms of Jewish midrashic tradition are among humankind's better examples of an ongoing, self-consciously interpretive hermeneutic tradition.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, I found some of the central moral understandings and commitments featured and especially enacted in the everyday process of studying midrash to be valuable today, faced as the United States is

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prophetic possession and apocalyptic visions. They are distinguished by the belief that there is only one truth — certain, complete, and perfect — in the text (Stern, 1996, p. 23)

<sup>3</sup> This is an assertion commonly accepted by several contemporary Judaic scholars. See e.g., Boyarin (1990), Fishbane (1993), Goldenberg (1984), Ochs and Levene (2002), Rojtman (1998), Rosenberg (1987, 1989, in press), Stern (1991, 1996).

with the ever-increasing power of right-wing fundamentalist movements. I have come to realize that some midrashic practices can be understood, among other things, as the opposite of fundamentalist practices, as are hermeneutic practices. The two aims of this article are to encourage a more fitting recognition of Jewish interpretive practice as an early ontological hermeneutic tradition<sup>4</sup> and to apply some of its insights to relational psychoanalysis in particular and contemporary politics in general. Midrash in late antiquity was a literary form and social practice that, among other things, struggled with the meaning of God's absence in the world both as a power that intervenes and as an immanent, intimate presence in the experiential lives of believers. As such, midrashic practices may serve as an encouragement for current attempts to create meaning in a world struggling with similar absences.

Recently, I have come to realize this paper follows a late 20<sup>th</sup> century movement composed of postmodernists and Judaic scholars who attempted to combine forces and study midrash as an exemplar of a non-logocentric, non-Western interpretive tradition. This movement fell short of its goals, Judaic scholar David Stern (1996) cautioned, but it launched a direction that still holds promise, if carried out in a less doctrinaire manner and with more historical and literary accuracy. It is my hope that

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<sup>4</sup> For a good explanation of the distinctions between epistemological and ontological hermeneutics, see Woolfolk, Sass, & Messer (1988).

drawing upon ontological hermeneutics could help future writers avoid some of the previous pitfalls.

### **Midrash as Interpretive Process**

For the last 2000 years, Jewish interpretive traditions have been at the center of Jewish communal life; they have had a profound effect on the identities and moral understandings of Jewish communities across time and around the world. One way of understanding the millennia of Jewish literary production is to think of it as a continuous process of rewriting and extending the Hebrew Bible, which is usually — and mistakenly — thought of by non-Jews as the one, and unchanging, Jewish text. Instead, there are literary forms that have grown up in response to the Bible — commenting on, telling stories about, making law out of and gaining inspiration from it. Some of them can be thought of as elements of a fully-embraced, self-conscious, intertextual, process-oriented, ambiguity-embracing hermeneutic tradition that has continuously reframed and reinterpreted the Bible and thus, much of Jewish life. Precisely because the Bible was thought to be the word of God, midrashic rabbis believed that it required interpretation.

Through the process of studying, interpreting, and interpreting the interpretations, some Jewish traditions developed a prolonged and tenacious commitment to certain values (e.g., engagement, historicity, interpersonal interaction, the dialectic of absence and presence, the

prohibition against idolatry). They also developed a process of study and authorial creation that seems structured to encourage community members to engage with and enact those values, which are among the most important concepts in Jewish thought. Some of the values are remarkably similar to processes and commitments implicit in contemporary hermeneutic practices. Importantly, one of the qualities that can make psychotherapy so promising, frustrating, and elusive, is this same sort of dual function.

Although Jewish interpretive traditions have constituted an influential force in the ongoing development of Jewish ways of being, most contemporary Jews in the United States, certainly most secular Jews, do not participate in the ongoing group study of biblical commentary. The loss of midrashic study continues a 200-year trend in Western society that was identified with and justified by the Haskalah movement (see, e.g., Margolis & Marx, 1973). There are many reasons for the cessation of group study in the U.S., including the sheer difficulty of deciphering midrashic texts (even in translation), the pressures on racial and ethnic minorities in the U.S. to disavow difference, and the difficulties mainstream Judaism has had in developing meaningful responses to late modern-era dilemmas. As a result, American Jews, in unprecedented numbers, have ceased participating in one of the most important social practices in Jewish history.

Secular or alienated American Jews, at one time or another, might happen upon an article or book about midrash or biblical commentary, perhaps a collection of short parables or a list of sayings or ideas. But what is missing from such an isolated and decontextualized reading of aphorisms or ideas is an immersion in the engaged and communal process of interpretive practice. Although the interpretive processes of this type of text are difficult to demonstrate in print, I will try to do so in the midrashic passages discussed below, in the subsection titled “Unpacking the Process.”

### **The Historical Context of Midrash**

Pre-Pharisaic Judaism, (up to approximately the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E.) was focused in part on festivals and on the sacrificial rites that, over time, came to be confined to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. The centralization of sacrificial practices and ceremonies in Jerusalem was helpful to the emerging nation in several ways (Kaufmann, 1960). However, centralization and the resultant strengthening of the priestly class also brought on certain vulnerabilities, chief among them an inescapable dependence on the relatively hierarchical and static processes of religious practices and the singular location of the Temple Mount. If deprived of the Temple, Judaism would have been at risk of receding into irrelevance and then death. And, indeed, that is what the Jews faced when the Temple was destroyed by Rome in 70 C.E. However, historians such as

Ellis Rivkin (1971) argued that a new political party called the Pharisees, composed of scribes, judges, and intellectuals, had created or at least influenced an alternative understanding of Judaism. They slowly gained respect and power in the decades following the triumph of the Maccabees (165 B.C.E.) and before the destruction of the Temple. They modified Judaism and prepared the people for a life without the sacrificial system by inventing or at least recasting and building upon the concept of a continuously modifiable oral tradition.

Pharisaic tradition was based on the belief that, simultaneous with the giving of the Ten Commandments, God also communicated to Moses the beginnings of an oral tradition, which Moses then relayed to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders, etc.<sup>5</sup> (see Avot 1:1). One of the distinguishing marks of this oral tradition, from a 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective, was its inherent flexibility and thus its capacity for change and innovation. We could say that it functioned to make the development and especially the warranting of new laws and customs possible. There is a question as to whether or not a coherent oral tradition existed before the Pharisees. But either way, an ongoing oral literature that created and justified a new, self-conscious body of laws and customs had materialized in the cultural terrain of late antiquity.

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<sup>5</sup> “Moses received the Torah on Sinai, and handed it down to Joshua; Joshua to the elders; the elders to the prophets; and the prophets handed it down to the Men of the Great Assembly.”

Deprived of both their geographical and spiritual place by the destruction of the Temple, loss of national sovereignty, and finally exile, the Jews needed a way of living that could accompany them wherever they dwelt. Without the concrete relation embodied in the smoke of the Temple's animal sacrifices, they desperately needed a new way of understanding and then enacting their relation with God. The Pharisees accomplished both through the creation, systematic collection, and arrangement of small, everyday social practices and customs that were necessitated by the ever-new challenges brought on by new historical circumstances in both Israel and the diaspora. They came to warrant, describe, and explain their practices and customs through biblical commentary and legal texts.

Because the rabbis believed that their religious practices originated in and were determined by God's word as contained in the Bible, they had to develop ways of linking cultural and ideological innovations to biblical sources. Over time they achieved this by developing the idea that the Bible "contains endless levels of meaning that inhere, implicitly, in the biblical text (Peters, 2004, p. 16; see also Holtz, 1984). For instance, the School of Rabbi Yishmael likened the process of midrashic interpretation to the action of a hammer on a rock: "Just as a hammer splits [a rock] into many pieces, so will one verse have many meanings (Sanhedrin 34a). These meanings, they argued, could be drawn out by skillful reading and

interpretation, and were then committed to memory as oral tradition, which eventually was written down, studied, and continuously added to. Then, in time, the newly written compendia were subjected to newer textual study and examination, which would discover new gaps and puzzles that in turn justified the development of new interpretations that allowed the rabbis to address new cultural, political, and religious dilemmas.

As a result of strategic necessity, Judaism became a critical practice, and rabbinics in part became a training in critical thinking and textual analysis. Rabbis and their students learned how to notice gaps in the texts and how to address questions to them. As the centuries turned, living in unfamiliar cultures and changing historical eras profoundly influenced Jewish ways of being. In some locales, Jews became affected — even partially constituted — by the social world of the dominant culture; they had to adapt to it and yet not lose sight of their own commitments and gifts. They did so in part by developing the capacity for self-criticism and, in some cases, even the ability to evaluate their beliefs and practices in relation to those of neighboring traditions. These textual skills also included the ability to appreciate literary and historical context, maneuver through and draw upon the ideas, events, and images of different Judaic texts from different time periods and different cultures, and use them to understand problematic biblical texts. These processes were made

possible in part by intertextuality, the way Jewish texts from various historical eras are thought to be entangled and interdependent; they allude to, comment upon, and, through the literary activity of the rabbis, mutually interpret one another. Through intertextuality, Boyarin argued (1990, p. 78), midrashic texts affirm the “complexity and polyphony of the Torah.”

The rabbis recognized the importance of relying on human social practices — in the form of literary production — rather than unmediated divine revelation.<sup>6</sup> Above all, they came to shape new understandings about human being, the good, God, and God’s relation to the Jewish people. They brought all this about through the crafting and telling of stories explaining textual gaps, the debating and arguing over their implications, the interpreting and re-interpreting of the sacred texts.

The rabbis revered the Hebrew Bible and knew it remarkably, astoundingly well; their intellectual and spiritual life revolved around it to an extreme degree. And yet they developed an orientation toward the written word that is the opposite of the deification and worship of sacred texts characteristic of many fundamentalist movements of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. In a paradox emblematic of a prominent stream of Jewish thought throughout the last 2000 years, the rabbis’ love for and

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<sup>6</sup> Or, as they might have thought of it, the rabbis relied on human relations and literary creativity as the principle medium of divine revelation.)

attention to the Bible did not at all stop them from noticing its many gaps, puzzlements, annoyances, contradictions, paradoxes. In fact, their unswerving attention to those gaps became the mark of their devotion, the vehicle through which the Pharisees and the rabbis who inherited the Pharisaic tradition breathed new life into Judaism. To realize the paradox inherent in a tradition that is given by God and yet continuously reinvented by mortals is to begin to understand the heart of Diaspora Judaism.

A particular characteristic of the midrashic texts of the first several centuries C.E. is that the rabbis proceeded with the painful understanding that God had ceased to intervene directly in human events. Especially given the Jewish nation's defeat and exile, the rabbis were acutely aware of God's absence in their world. Both Jews and Christians seem to have been affected by the experience of absence: Jews yearned for the messiah, Christians for the second coming. About the time of the first of the midrashic collections, the Christian philosopher Augustine of Hippo experienced a revelation: his self-loathing revealed an immense personal emptiness that could only be filled by the presence of God. But for the Rabbinic Judaism of late antiquity, there was no such comfort available in the form of an unmediated presence. A limited solution was achieved, in part, through the learned capacity to tolerate absence through everyday rituals, the beginnings of group prayer, and the communal study of the

texts. The tension between absence and presence, and the subsequent development of what appears to be a different understanding of God's presence, permeates midrash.

### **Unpacking the Process**

Reading about the process of learning midrash might be similar to reading a description of how a sweet, juicy orange tastes on a hot, dry day, or trying to dance without the music: there is simply no substitute for the experience itself. Studying biblical commentary in a traditional setting is a dyadic or group project. The text is read, questioned, and debated aloud, and the dyad or group does not move on to the next biblical verse until all parties are for the moment satisfied they understand the issues involved. Although there is usually someone who guides and facilitates, everyone gets to be involved. It might appear to be chaotic to an outsider, because the texts are read and debated in a rhythmic, idiosyncratic way that sounds as much like singing as reciting. The method is a remarkable mix of obsessiveness combined with an imaginative, flowing style in some ways similar to psychoanalytic free association. Simi Peters (2004, p. 20) has rightly called the process an "unmethodological methodology," and it might best be characterized as (barely) controlled chaos. It is a kind of poetry, a kind of singing, and yet always with an eye to interrogating the text. After witnessing it, one could never again unquestioningly think of

Judaism as a Western religion, nor could one utter the phrase Judeo-Christian and believe the two were one.

Midrash is structured according to the chapters and verses of the Bible, and it is initiated by a textual problem that needs to be solved. It begins with a puzzlement in the text: an unusual spelling, an incorrect choice of words, a contradiction or an incoherence, an action outrageous on its face (such as when Jonah the prophet tries to run from God) or a statement that makes no sense (such as God's response when asked by Moses for His name). Midrashim sometimes begin interrogating the text or developing a solution to a problem by telling a story, called a *mashal*. However, often the *mashal* itself needs an explanation (usually an analogy sometimes, not surprisingly, in the form of another story) in order to become part of the solution rather than the problem. This second level story or saying, brought in to clarify the *mashal* or summarize its message, is called a *nimshal*. It is usually shorter, less complex, and the meaning more directly stated. The *mashal* often begins by a formulaic question such as "To what might this thing be compared?" or "This may be compared to . . . ." Either explicitly or implicitly each midrash struggles with the question *Lama li?*: "Why is this (phrasing or spelling or problem) important?" or "Why does it (the text) need further explanation?"

One of the reasons for the question *Lama li?* is because, unfortunately for the reader, it is rarely obvious at first what problem the

rabbis are trying to solve, or why. Often, the student has to identify the rabbis' solution and then free associate or reason back from the solution to identify the problem. Some Judaic scholars think this was sometimes a deliberate act on the part of the rabbis: it guaranteed that the student engage intensely with the text in the company of one's colleagues in order to understand it.

There are several traditional signposts and study aids the rabbis developed to help the reader navigate the maze of formulaic expressions, abbreviations, folk sayings, and the like. One type of reading aid is the common understanding pertaining to certain textual formulas or customs. For instance, there is the problem of the *vayomers*. The words *vayomer* and *vayedaber*, in certain situations, both mean "and he said." When interpreters would happen upon a biblical text that used two or more *vayomers*, or a *vayedaber* followed by a *vayomer*, without an intervening act or a direct quote, they would assume this indicated that a quotation was missing from the text. That would give them license to create what they thought was missing, a narrative description of action or a direct quote that is designed to help explain a troublesome event, questionable assertion, or grammatical abnormality.

Some midrashim are fairly simple narrative fragments often used for homiletic purposes. Some possess straightforward story lines revolving around the explanation of a grammatical abnormality. Other

midrashim are complex, featuring several stories and rabbinic interpretations that contrast and conflict with one another, illustrating different theological concepts and forming different textual solutions.

In order to cope with the complex task of translation and then detective work many midrashim require, individual teachers have developed procedures for deciphering the mysteries of midrash. Peters (2004, p. 30) identified six steps that she uses for midrashim that contain both a well-defined *mashal* and *nimshal*. She recommends

- (1) dividing the paragraph into its constituent parts
- (2) examining the *mashal* part [i.e., the primary story] of the midrash as a story in its own right to look for inconsistencies, gaps or problems
- (3) isolating the important elements of the *mashal* part of the midrash
- (4) matching the elements of the *mashal* and the *nimshal* [i.e., the secondary story or analogy, used to clarify or sum up the *mashal*] [in order to better notice absences or puzzles]
- (5) drawing conclusions
- (6) re-reading the biblical text in light of the midrash to see how the *mashal* has helped us interpret the text.<sup>7</sup>

By examining these six steps it becomes apparent that in studying midrash one enters a process fraught with puzzles, mysteries, and competing opinions. It seems true that the rabbis distributed clues so as to entice the reader down paths of understanding, but they are not easy to find or decipher. As one wades into the process, though, it is possible to

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<sup>7</sup> Rosenberg (personal communication, August, 2005) suggests a seventh step, inserted between Peters' fifth and sixth steps: Trying to determine the intertextual (really, traditio-historical) reach of a midrash.

discern reason in the chaos. For instance, the rabbis are playing with the texts; the Bible is where they live, and they have fun in it and with it. Also, they are intimately familiar with and knowledgeable about it; they allude to it, use one text to illuminate, debate, disprove, reinterpret a second text, and a third to speak to the first. The Bible, in tandem with the rabbis' respect for and love of it, is also their field of play.

Also, although they are profoundly committed to the ideas expressed in the Bible, they are not simply preaching a doctrine in some removed, authoritarian way. By the way they shaped and taught midrash, they created study situations in which they and their students were maneuvered into enacting those values as well. The gaps, puzzles and mysteries the text provides are not only present in the Bible, they are also — and perhaps even more so — present in midrashim. As students of history we can hypothesize that at least sometimes the rabbis consciously placed puzzles and gaps in their texts. And so, close textual reading, critical thinking, historical awareness, participation in group study and debate, the ability to tolerate confusion and uncertainty, and the capacity for engaged learning and dialogue must have been important values to the rabbis, because they designed midrashic texts so as to influence readers to enact those values and develop those skills.

Genesis Rabba 39:1

Let us study together. In the commentary about the following short but famous verse from Genesis (12:1) we can see many aspects of midrash that are characteristic of the genre. Due to the limitations of space, this will be the only midrash we will study in this much detail.<sup>8</sup>

And God said to Avram: “Go, you, from your land, and your birthplace and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.”

*Genesis Rabba* 39:1 comments:

- (1) *And God said to Avram: Go, you, from your land . . . .*
- (2) R. Yitzhak opened: (Psalm 45:11) ‘Listen, daughter, and see and turn your ear and forget your people and your father’s house.’
- (3) R. Yitzhak said: This may be compared to one who was passing from place to place and saw a fortress (*bira*) illuminated/ burning (*doleket*).
- (4) He said, ‘Will you say this fortress has no governor (*manhig*)?’
- (5) The master (*baal*) of the fortress peeped out (*hetzitz*) at him.
- (6) He said to him, ‘I am the master of the fortress.’
- (7) Thus, because our father Avraham would say, ‘Will you say this world has no governor?’
- (8) The Holy One Blessed be He peeped out at him and said to him, ‘I am the Master of the world.’
- (9) (Psalms 45:12) ‘And the king will desire your beauty’ — to beautify you in the world;
- (10) ‘because he is your master and bow to him,’ that is, ‘And God said to Avram . . . .’

This is the way midrash reads; it is dense, cryptic, formulaic, and full of quotations or partial quotations from or allusions to other books of the Bible or other commentaries. There are many problems and gaps in

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<sup>8</sup> The translation is from Peters (2004, pp. 37-38).

this text, and for our purposes only a few will be discussed. The first and most obvious problem, of course, is the difficulties encountered when translating one language to another. *Doleket* (line 3) is a Hebrew word that scholars seem unable to agree on; they cannot tell us for certain whether in this particular situation it means illuminated or burning. This furnishes us with a good lesson about the uncertainties of interpretation: because human being is historical and linguistic, learning about another era or culture through a text is always problematic and fraught with unsolvable dilemmas such as the degree to which differing social worlds are incommensurable with one another.

In terms of the structure of this midrash, line 1 is the opening quote, line 2 is the opening verse, in this case from Psalms, that serves as a kind of epigraph for the midrash, lines 3-6 constitute the *mashal* (the primary story); lines 7-8 make up the *nimshal* (the secondary analogy, which usually starts with “Thus”), and lines 9-10 furnish a concluding verse from Psalms, including commentary.

Immediately several questions appear. For instance, to whom is the passerby addressing with the question in line 4 (“Will you say this fortress has no governor?”). Peters (2004, p. 40) suggested that the question is rhetorical; Abraham already knows someone must have built the impressive structure and is responsible for it. Also, Abraham inquires about the governor of the fortress, but the man peeping out calls himself

its master, rather than its governor, and he is identified as God (“the Holy One, Blessed Be He”). Peters’ six procedural steps then require that we match up the events and characters from the *mashal* and the *nimshal* and look for gaps and discrepancies, which will give us hints as to the problems the rabbis are struggling with and their proposed solutions. She noticed that most of the events and characters from the *nimshal* match up with those from the *mashal*. But there is no equivalent in the *nimshal* for the *mashal*’s description of the man “passing from place to place” (see line 3). She suggested this discrepancy is an indication that the line should be regarded as a clue to the puzzle the rabbis are trying to solve.

Peters noted that the Bible does not give the student any hints about Abraham’s personal qualities or why he was chosen by God to leave his family and start a new religion. So she speculated that the description of the man who is passing from place to place might allude to Abraham’s character and thereby serve as a brief introduction; that is, Abraham might be a person who is in spiritual “transition,” a person who is flexible, interested in spiritual questions, and open to new possibilities (2004, p. 42). As will be noted below, this concept of Abraham fits well with other stories about him in Genesis.

We could explore more of Peters’ ideas about this midrash, but instead I would like to depart from her point of view and interpret one particular issue. What also seems important about this story is Abraham’s

critical, almost confrontive, stance toward God. If we adopt the translation of *doleket* as burning rather than illuminated, then we could read the midrash as portraying Abraham as saying something like “What is happening here? The fortress, our refuge, is burning, and God, its owner, is nowhere to be found! I know you are there, God, so show yourself, and do something before our protection is destroyed.”

This interpretation fits well with the characterization of Abraham in later chapters in Genesis (e.g., 18:16-33), when Abraham is explicitly portrayed as questioning or arguing with God over whether God should destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. It also fits well with other midrashim about Abraham, for instance his early (and subversive) life as a young boy caretaking his father’s business of manufacturing idols. In both instances Abraham is pictured as an independent, critical thinker who is able to stand up to severe disapproval (both from his father and from the king Nimrod, who throws Abraham into a burning furnace because he challenges the culture’s idolatrous religion).

Remember that the midrash in question was developed in the centuries following the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the despoliation of the land, and the exile of the Jewish people from their ancestral home. The fortress of the Temple had, quite literally, burned, and the center of the nation had been destroyed. For the rabbis, it was not an ancient event but a current, immediate issue. In lines 7 and 8 of the

midrash, first Abraham and then God drop the poetic conceit of the “fortress” analogy and say directly that they are discussing the fate of “the world.” It must have seemed like the world continued to burn, both because of the long-ago destruction of the Temple and because of the less monumental, everyday injustices they witnessed in a world not of their own making.

But there is more to my interpretation: Abraham’s critical question not only complains about God’s absence, it also provokes a response from the fortress’ owner, who in the *nimshal* (line 8), is identified as God. Importantly, it is after Abraham complains about God’s absence through a rhetorical question (line 4) that God appears and identifies Himself as “the Master of the world.” Abraham was not content to ignore the problem; he noticed and commented on the scene and asked a question that was calculated to gently confront God and thereby prod him into action. Abraham’s behavior in this midrash echoes biblical stories that narrate Abraham’s relationship with God, such as the Sodom and Gomorrah confrontation. In the midrash we are studying, Abraham provokes God into relating to him and into taking His rightful place in the world. Abraham is pictured as critical, outspoken, and related. He insists that God be present in the world and do something about the destruction that Abraham witnesses. And God is willing to show himself and accept His responsibility, as soon as he has a related, engaged partner. In his

complaint, Abraham thereby becomes an active force for good by engaging with — and enlivening — God.

This midrash seems to be prescriptive: that is, just as Abraham engages with God through awareness, criticism, and relatedness, so too is the student of midrash encouraged to engage with the text through awareness (a careful reading), criticism, and relatedness (with the text and with one's colleagues). It is difficult for students to understand this midrash without actively engaging with it and with one another — it is too complicated and cryptic to understand in isolation and disengagement. When students do engage, thoughtfully, critically, and caringly with the text and with one another (like Abraham did with God), they prod or provoke the text into showing itself, relating, being responsible — revealing its meanings. And, by implication, we might say students also provoke God out of His hiding place and evoke a new understanding of His presence in the space between student and text or student and student. This is a story about the indispensable nature of interpretive, compassionate moral engagement and political activism that demands, and finds, relationship.

#### Exodus Rabba (3:4)

The same critical and active voice heard in Abraham's challenge to God in the midrash about the burning fortress can be seen to show up from time to time in the Bible, a theme that could move the reader to

believe that the process of critical activity is extremely important in Jewish life. For instance, according to the rabbis, Moses also had a critical conversation with God. It happened during the episode of the burning bush (Exodus 3:6-10). It is worth noting that once again something is burning and God's absence is revealed and (as we shall see) challenged. There is a saying that the primordial Torah, God's writing, was "Black fire on white fire" (Tanhuma, Genesis 1). The letters of the Torah, just as the midrashic fortress, the world, and the bush (which we are about to study), are aflame with the relational paradox of silence and speech, inaction and action, negative space and the written word, God's absence and presence, hopelessness and the wish for a repaired, just world.

Moses stops before the burning bush and hears God speaking to him, telling him to return to Egypt and lead the Israelites out of slavery. Moses responds by saying *mi anokhi?* (i.e., "who am I?") in a sentence usually translated as "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and I should take the children of Israel out of Egypt?" (Exodus 3:11). The midrash of *Exodus Rabba* (3:4) presents three different readings of the phrase *mi anokhi?* by three different rabbis, each interpretation suggesting a different punctuation and thereby a different meaning. Only the text from one rabbi will be discussed below, but it is important to note that the text included three interpretations. This is often the case — the student is free to decide which of the interpretations is persuasive, although the order

and presentation of the interpretations might also hold clues as to which were favored by the rabbis or by the editors. As usual, midrash welcomes ambiguities, contradictions, and multiple truths.

R. Yehoshua ben Levi compared Moses' complaint to a king's daughter who was promised an excellent lady-in-waiting when she was wed, but who received instead a common servant. R. Yehoshua implies that Moses was saying to God, "Look, you promised the Israelites that you would lead them out of Egypt, ["" And I (*anokhi*) will surely bring you up' (Genesis 46:4)], but then you gave them me instead, a poor substitute." Moses' point revolves around emphasizing the word *anokhi*, which is an archaic or highly poetic form of the word *ani*, I or me. The rabbis were disturbed by God's absence in the proposed exodus, as well as puzzled by the use of the unusual form *anokhi*, and explained them both in order to understand the verse and to argue for a particular moral value.

According to Peters (2004, p. 148), R. Yehoshua ben Levi's story suggests that the punctuation of the phrase *mi anokhi?* should be changed to read *mi 'anokhi'?* Instead of meaning "Who am I to accomplish this feat," Moses could be understood as saying to God "Hey, wait a minute — who is the 'I' in this phrase? It's not me, because I never promised to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. The only person who uses *anokhi* is you, God, as in Genesis 46:4, when You promised to free them by saying 'And I [*anokhi*] will surely bring you up.'"

This is a long and involved midrash, with many twists and turns. But for the purposes of this article it is sufficient to note the way the rabbis play with the grammar, use narrative expansions to explain their point of view about the passage and better understand the passage, use one part of the text to illuminate another part, and especially to highlight once again the moment of challenge and critical meeting between an important historical figure and God. In this midrash Moses is thought to be challenging God to remember His promise to the Israelites and realize He is not living up to His part of the covenant. In God's plan for the Israelites, as with Abraham, criticism and an appeal to justice intensify and deepen the relationship. As with Abraham, Moses' engagement draws God out, intensifying and deepening the relationship. As a result of Moses' challenge, God promises several things to the Israelites and to Moses to help them on their journey; again, the dynamic between absence and presence, and their link to justice, is highlighted. Midrashic interpretation became a vehicle for both respecting and challenging a text, thereby simultaneously revering and yet continuously updating the tradition.

As in the midrashim about Abraham, Moses, and God, the prescriptive element of midrashic texts as a whole seems obvious: engagement with the text reveals a God who thrives on relationship and responds positively to honest, critical dialogue and to a reminder of His

part of the covenant. This is a God who is relational and just, and the social practices of critical and communal study evoke a new understanding of the presence of God in the room. “The object of midrash,” Judaic scholar David Stern (1996, p. 31) wrote,

was not so much to find the meaning of Scripture as it was literally to engage its text. Midrash became a kind of conversation the Rabbis invented in order to enable God to speak to them from between the lines of Scripture, in the textual fissures and discontinuities that exegesis discovers.

The world of the rabbis was burning, and it was difficult to find God — especially the covenantal God who had agreed to protect and watch over them — amidst the rubble. They found God, and a new understanding of God’s presence, in the gaps of the text.

In light of all that the Jews were experiencing during the early centuries of the Common Era — the serial wars against Rome, continuing devastation and loss, Bar Kochba’s failed revolution<sup>9</sup>, and finally an exile without end — the rabbis were faced with several impossible tasks that were historical, political, psychological, emotional, spiritual. Their response to this job is inscribed in the books and chapters and paragraphs and lines of midrash. In their hands, midrash became an instrument of religious experience, political resistance, and communal salvation.

The Rabbis’ conception of Torah as a figurative trope for God . . . expresses both their sense of alienation and their attempt to

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<sup>9</sup> 132-135 C.E.

overcome that alienation intellectually. . . . [T]he text of the Torah became for the Rabbis the primary sign of the continued existence of the covenantal relationship between God and Israel, and the activity of Torah study — midrash — thus became the foremost medium for preserving and pursuing that relationship. (Stern, 1996, p. 31)

The midrashim that we have studied in this section seem to comprise a rigorous training program in critical, historical, and imaginative interpretation. The rabbis' work seems framed in a fascinating mix of both a genuine reverence for and a playful relation with the text. They seemed to have an unerring appreciation for context, especially for how the literary, philosophical, or historical context of one text could have an effect on how a second text, or a third, would come to light.

Above all, these interpretive practices seem to me to embody the most important of all Jewish commitments: the fight against idolatry. In this case, it is the opposition to the idolatry of the written word. This interpretation of midrashic tradition stands against authoritarian uses of the written word. It opposes the demand that a text — even a sacred text, thought to be the word of God — be seen as hyper-concrete, immutable, the one truth. It opposes the idea that the meaning of the text is the same for all time and all people, that it is transparent to and thus unproblematically understood by those in power, and that their singular

understanding should be imposed through a unilateral, disengaged, authoritarian process.

### **Engagement and Paradox**

Over time, and continuing even today, some of the activities that inhere in interpretive process came to be understood as the quintessence of Jewish life: engagement — both textual and interpersonal — as spiritual practice. You can't have texts without people to write them, and you can't have people writing them without a sense of community and mission. These texts can't be studied, learned about, debated and discussed, new stories and new ideas can't be developed and applied to everyday life, without one's fellow students. As the tradition says, "Torah is acquired only in community." And of course the converse is also true. Engagement with one's colleagues, neighbors, friends, and family, through the living out of the ever-changing oral tradition applied to the everyday (*halacha*), became the foundation of Jewish communal life.

But Jewish engagement wasn't — couldn't be — a heavy, overly serious activity, because of the paradox lurking quietly in the background. It is true that the myriad interpretations in midrashic texts are thought to be worthy of learned rabbinic dispute because they are attempts to explain God's word. And yet, shockingly, for every interpretation there are several more, each with its own biblical prooftexts and each with its engaging story and thoughtful reasoning. In time, customs become old

and sometimes no longer relevant, and new customs — often necessitated by a new historical or cultural frame — spring up, justified by new ideas illustrated by new stories warranted by new prooftexts. How can all these interpretations, sometimes confusing, contradictory, or incoherent, be considered correct interpretations? How can a custom be the correct custom in one historical era or culture, and a forgotten custom in a new setting? How can one understanding of God be embraced by the Jewish people in one era or setting and another, different understanding be embraced in a new era or setting? How can the prescribed content and manner of prayer change from era to era?

In other words, the rabbis were playing with fire; to work on such demanding philosophical challenges you have to be light on your hermeneutic feet. You have to be capable of tolerating paradox; thinking that there can be more than one truth in the text; realizing that textual engagement is generative and therefore readers coauthor the text; facing the fact that human understandings are always uncertain and incomplete; accepting that to some degree the shape of truths and the good change with the shape of the cultural terrain, and that the terrain provides helpful, but imperfect, moral guidance.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> There are other, more historical, explanations for multiplicity (Stern, 1996, pp. 31-33).

Above all, one must come to the understanding that God is not only in the product, but also in the process; that it is in the space between persons, between persons and texts, and between one text and another, between one word and another, that God resides; that the activity of engaged communal searching and study and care and critical thinking is, somehow, a way of relating to or being a partner with God; that even when new stories are made up to justify new ideas or new customs, they are not exactly made up — in some way, the texts are speaking us, and in some way God is thought to have spoken or inspired the texts. So, in other words, participation in the activity of engaged, compassionate study and interpersonal interaction is a kind of relation with God.

Midrashic texts require a conception of truth that is based not on correspondence, but rather imaginative appropriation — and a conception of a text that is something not so much penetrated into as opened outward from within (Rosenberg, personal communication, August, 2005).

This highlights one of the major paradoxes with which Jewish interpretive tradition wrestles. Humans must develop ideas, make decisions, live in a social world with others, all of which necessitate taking stands about the good in everyday life. These decisions require a knowledge of and a commitment to a particular historical tradition. But, in order to make these decisions, we also have to be critical of and creative with the tradition as well as committed to it. How can we do both at the

same time? One way is to develop a stream of the tradition that values change, that by its very nature understands that change is a necessity and a virtue; to define God as ever-changing<sup>11</sup> and humans as made in His image; to live in and encourage a way of being capable of change — change that is framed and profoundly influenced by particular ideals and values, but change nonetheless; to worship a God that is invisible, that has no name, and is always becoming.<sup>12</sup> This is a God that has no name because it is alive, not an inert idol of stone or wood; it is the verb “to be,” third person singular in the imperfect tense (see Exodus 3:14); it is *YHVH* — that which is becoming — the Jewish God.

A God that is ever-reinterpreted requires a human tradition willing to tolerate the awareness that human truth is always historical: new truths come to light at different times for different reasons. Midrashic practices provide those interpretive understandings. Some 2000 years later Hans-Georg Gadamer’s (1975) hermeneutics gave voice to much the same perspective. In Gadamer’s vision,

[h]istorical tradition can be understood only as something always in the process of being defined by the course of events. . . . [T]exts . . . are inexhaustible. . . . It is part of the historical finitude of our being that we are aware that others after us will understand [a text or concept] in a different way. And yet it is equally. . . [true] that it remains the same work whose fullness of meaning is realized in the

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<sup>11</sup> “Just as a single verse may have many meanings,” David Stern wrote while discussing *Pesikta de-Rab Kahana* 1:223, “so God, too, is said to possess many countenances” (1996, p. 27).

<sup>12</sup> See Fromm, 1966, pp. 29-32.

changing process of understanding” (p. 373).

Gadamer, it seems, in a different historical context, well understood the paradox that moved the interpretive genius of midrash.

It is not easy to live with that paradox. To be involved in a stream of tradition dedicated to critical but playful thought and ongoing historical and cultural change is to be challenged to face the power, fragility, and imperfection of human interpretation. It is to realize how much and how little humans are capable of. It is to understand — and thus reject — the desperation that drives people to cling to belief systems and practices that claim the one, indisputable, perfect truth, and to warrant their truth by claiming a direct experience of God’s presence. Ultimately, it is to reject the fundamentalist fantasy of a concrete, unquestionable, unproblematic, perfectly knowable truth, be it a set of practices, a system of belief, a scientific method, or the doctrine of a charismatic leader. Human traditions, in other words, are always historically contingent, contestable, available for examination and debate, in need of additions, subtractions, or sometimes even a complete reconfiguring. They are beautiful and imperfect, inspirational and incomplete — always in question. Human being, Heidegger scholar Hubert Dreyfus (1991, p. 25) once noted, is interpretation “all the way down.” When this hermeneutic vision gets too much to bear, humans collapse into fundamentalism.

Although the hermeneutic paradox at the heart of midrash has played a large part in the shape of Jewish culture, the paradox's influence both waxes and wanes historically. In fact, it could be argued that, today, some of those actively involved in the study of midrash are opposed to the ontological perspective and political commitments that inform this article. The capacity to hold both sides of the hermeneutic paradox, human history demonstrates, is fragile indeed. Absolutist, authoritarian claims, especially during times of turmoil and trauma, are powerfully seductive as an anesthetic of last resort. So a people's capacity to tolerate the paradox and do something creative with it is necessarily fragile.

This is true within Jewish society as in any other. Midrash isn't a magic pill that can erase all the forces at work in a community. It is a powerful, yet fragile, practice. There are no guarantees, and no transformations.

### **Therapeutic Implications**

During my study of midrash, similarities between Jewish interpretive processes and various ideas from relational psychoanalysis and relationally-oriented psychotherapy began to emerge. Processes central to the learning of midrash emphasize, among other things, the importance of intertextuality, interpersonal engagement, the absence-presence dynamic, and the prohibition against idolatry.

Intertextuality. The concept of intertextuality is used to describe the relation between the many Jewish texts that appear in midrash: how texts refer to, inform, echo, mirror, oppose, reinforce and modify, contrast and dispute and engage with, intertwine and repel one another (see especially Boyarin, 1990). Intertextuality implies that, in a certain sense, texts are all we have to turn to when learning about the world. In the social world the rabbis inhabited, direct experiences of God, such as a witnessing of miracles or a direct communication or mystical communion with God, did not usually happen. Because they only knew God through the interpretations they compiled about God, there was no way to turn to some putatively unproblematic and unmediated experience of or text about God. Humans, they thought, learn about the world through imperfect, historically contingent, human-made sources and tools. These sources are always reflections of their time and place, products of the inescapable moral frameworks of their historical traditions and the power relations of their political terrain. “A midrashic exegesis,” Stern (1996, p. 30) explained, “always returns to the text, not to God.”

Similarly, although it is comforting for therapists to believe our favorite psychotherapy theory (or teacher, supervisor, or mentor) delivers a perfect, universal truth about human being, no such truth exists. What we have to work with — and it can be a lot — is the thoughtful, imaginative interpretations of our colleagues and teachers, captured in the

writing and the personal interactions of supervision or consultation. Those gifts — not unlike midrashic texts — are imperfect and incomplete, always open to new interpretations that are necessitated by challenges that appear in an ever-changing historical terrain, and that flow from the textual problems and flaws sometimes discovered through group effort, but they can also be helpful, insightful, at times even brilliant.

Primarily, of course, therapists have the opportunity to learn about a particular patient from interacting with that patient. But again, a hermeneutic interpretation of midrashic process teaches us not to believe that our impressions about patients are the one truth about them, unproblematically discovered and perfectly understood. In fact, just as midrash turns to a second text in order to learn about the first, Louis Sass (1988, p. 250) has cautioned that humans are not texts, and we ought not claim a privileged, unquestioned ability to read them. Instead, Sass suggested, when we learn about patients we are not reading them, we are reading over their shoulder the cultural text from which they themselves are reading. And let us remember that when we read over a patient's shoulder we use other texts, especially the cultural texts about the good that have brought us to light, in order to interpret the texts from which the patient is reading.

In this way, the midrashic emphasis on intertextuality suggests that therapists exercise caution in relation to the claims of the teachers,

professional celebrities, and theories that we admire, and to our own opinions and evaluations. Our job, as was the job of the rabbis who created midrash, is not to use a text unquestioningly, but instead to question, historically situate, critically appraise it. Our job is to find the gaps and problems and puzzles in texts and try to make sense out of them by using other texts to compare and contrast them with. Of course we don't want to see the problems in a cherished theory or its practices, we want to believe that we have found the one perfect psychotherapeutic truth. But just as the rabbis couldn't do that with their sacred texts, neither can we do that with ours. In other words, this interpretation of midrash reinforces hermeneutic commitments about the value of critical reading, dialogue (see below), and humility in one's work as therapist, teacher, supervisor. (e.g., see Fowers, 2005; Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999; Stern, 1991, 1997). There are truths in a text, and similarly there are truths achieved in personal meeting, and we should cherish them when they appear. But that does not mean a truth forecloses further interpretation, exploration, even disagreement. These midrashic and hermeneutic values have many implications for clinical practice that fit well with relationalists such as Aron & Harris, 2005; Hoffman, 1998; Ehrenberg, 1993; Layton, 2002, 2005; Leary, 1997, 2000; Mitchell, 1988, 1993; Stern, 1997).

Interpersonal engagement. The rabbis' emphasis on intertextuality will also lead us to the concept of interpersonality. By that I mean a recognition of the importance of depending on our fellow humans, turning to them in order to learn about and affect the world. As in intertextuality, understanding one person through another sheds light on both. The rabbis mined the spaces between letters, words, and concepts, explored the gaps and puzzles in their texts, and turned to other texts and their study partners in order to explain those gaps. Similarly, therapists can mine the spaces between them and their patients, explore the gaps and puzzles of the other (and themselves), and turn to the impressions and opinions of their patients and colleagues — and the intersections they have with those impressions and opinions — in order to better discuss the gaps and puzzles they are trying to understand and make meaning from.

In this respect, aspects of relational psychoanalysis seem to be similar to aspects of the stream of Jewish interpretive traditions emphasized in this article. The profound insistence on communal activity — interpersonality — reflects the main mode of literary study — intertextuality — and both activities reflect and enact one of the strongest of Jewish values: the commitment to value the cultural, historical space between persons, to recognize the existence and value of the other as other, and to encourage a meaningful engagement with the other. It is the space between that is the terrain in which meaning is made. As much as

the content of its ideas, it is the process of engaged, critical, compassionate, respectful involvement that heals texts, souls, psyches, and communities.

Above all, a belief in the healing nature of genuine human engagement, beyond particular technical theory and strategic technique, is a concept that is at the heart of both relational psychoanalysis and the study of midrash. What Martin Buber called “meeting” has similarities to what the hermeneuticist Gadamer (1975) called “genuine conversation” or “dialogue” and to how Donnel Stern (1991, 1997) applied Gadamer’s “fusion of horizons” to the practice of psychoanalysis. The concept of the fallacy of the blank screen and the importance of a two-person psychology<sup>13</sup> — a cornerstone of relational psychoanalysis — are ideas the practitioners of midrashic tradition would intuitively understand.

It was Martin Heidegger, the founder of ontological hermeneutics, who wrote about the indispensable importance of engaged learning and juxtaposed it to the disengagement required by the scientific method dominant in the modern era. It is the model of disengaged learning, Heidegger thought, that led to the failures and destructiveness of the modern era. The interpretive processes involved in the communal study of midrash, begun some 2000 years before Heidegger’s Being and Time,

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<sup>13</sup> See e.g., Racker, 1968; Levenson, 1983, 1991; Gill, 1983; Hoffman, 1983, 1998.

seem to be an excellent example of his concept of engaged learning. Heidegger, one of the greatest philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was a member of the Nazi party for one year, and never explicitly denounced it after he left (Safranski, 1998). I have often thought that recognizing the “Jewishness” of some of his ideas is our best revenge.

The Absence-Presence Dialectic. In the social world of the early mishnaic rabbis, unlike that which was recorded by the biblical text they studied and interpreted, God neither intervened directly in the affairs of humans, nor did He communicate directly and personally with them. The contrast, one might imagine, must have been difficult for them to come to terms with. However, over time, the ability of the rabbis to face the fact of God’s absences, while still remaining in relation with Him, helped them shape a new understanding of presence. The tension between the two poles of absence and presence appeared to open up a space in which neither hopeless despair over God’s absence nor a defensive inflation or exaggeration of His presence prevailed.

In that dialectical space emerged the literary practices of midrash. The rabbis held on to presence in the face of absence in two ways. First, they drew forth new stories and meanings from of a text that, to the untutored eye, contained little to none of what was subsequently developed. And second, through the process of communal study and ongoing artistic creativity, the rabbis created a new way of being with one

another and with God in a social world that, to the untutored eye, contained little or no precedent for what was then developed. By relying on one text to interpret another and by relying on a group of study partners to support, encourage, challenge, and care for one another, the rabbis created a way of enlivening and relating to a God who, to the untutored eye, must have seemed removed and weak. They created a way of being that brought presence into an otherwise absent space.

Similarly, patient and therapist hold onto presence in the face of absence in two ways. First, they create new stories out of a conversation that, to the untutored eye, initially contained few of the memories, ideas, or especially meanings that are then developed. And second, through the process of mutual, cooperative, honest interpersonal involvement and care, patient and therapist shape a new way of relating that, to the untutored eye, initially contained little possibility for what is then developed. They come to live out a way of being that brings the presence of meaning into an otherwise absent space.

Patient and therapist accomplish this in a way similar to the rabbis: by relying on the generative processes of textual interpretation and moral discourse. In both the 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E. rabbinic academy at Yavneh and the contemporary analytic dyad, new meanings are developed through a process of interpretive relations. The rabbis turned to the text because that was all that was available, just as patient and therapist turn to the

narrative they develop because it is all they have: they cannot revisit the past in some direct, materialized way, they cannot make the past a presence. Similarly, they can't materialize life outside the consulting room during the clinical hour. They can only tell stories about the past or life outside the office, and from that process recognize and develop new meanings out of the presence that was given to them from their traditions and over time develops between them.

Relational analysts have written extensively on the healing qualities of relational processes. For instance, Rachel Peltz (1998), drawing from philosophers and analysts, including Irwin Hoffman (e.g., 1998) and Thomas Ogden (e.g., 1994), argued that the dialectic between presence and absence, when both poles are held in a dynamic tension, has the potential to open up a generative space in which new meanings come to light. Presence and absence, she suggested,

represent overarching terms that, when held in relation to each other, help sustain the tension between other binary pairs like certainty and uncertainty, permanence and temporality, stasis and transformation, reality and fantasy, communication and noncommunication, immortality and mortality. (p. 387)

The degree of the parent's presence or absence, most psychoanalysts believe, has a constitutive effect on the (take your pick) internal object relations, regulatory selfobject functions, or relational patterns of the individual throughout the life span. Similarly, the

continuing negotiation over the presence and absence of both patient and therapist during the course of treatment will have a significant effect on its outcome. And, as I (2005) have argued, the sense the patient has about the overall degree of safety and meaningfulness of the social world (i.e., the degree of absence and presence) is thought to have an impact on the quality of his or her relational life and sense of wellbeing.

In other words, there must be enough of a sense of presence to produce relatedness, and enough honesty to face and complain about the inevitable and necessary absences of everyday life. The move from stuckness or deadness during moments of impasse or enactment in treatment, Peltz thought, are generated when the dialectic collapses and the dyad is trapped in one pole or the other. Too much presence — usually in the form of grandiosity or overridealization — causes a defensive reliance on ecstatic communion with a fantasized omnipotent other that makes the generation of new meaning impossible. This is parallel to the spate of mantic experiences and mystical communion with God in late antiquity from which the mishanic rabbis diverged. Conversely, being caught up solely in absence causes an obsession with betrayal and loss and the continual reenactment and re-experiencing of painful feelings and rage that make the generation of new meaning impossible.

Finally, the rabbis' characteristic quality — the belief that engaged textual reading, combined with communal study, will bring to light new meanings potentially available but previously unseen — seems similar to the recent analytic belief that the unconscious is best thought of not as a kind of archeological site, but rather a process in which, to use Donnel Stern's (1997) important words, that which previously has been "unformulated" can become "formulated" when the patient's perspective shifts. Just as the rabbis seemingly brought new stories and meanings out of God's silence, so too does the dialectical moment in the clinical hour open up a space — an absence — in which new memories, ideas, and feelings can be formulated and then explicitly interpreted in order to make meaning — a kind of presence. The particular content of inflated and intoxicated fantasies about presence and the betrayals and rages produced by loss and absence vary, of course, depending on the historical terrain in which they appear. But the struggle with absence and presence in which the rabbis were engaged might well shed light on the struggles patients and therapists go through during the contemporary clinical hour.

The Prohibition Against Idolatry. The prohibition against idolatry brings together and concentrates many of the hermeneutic understandings and Jewish values discussed in this paper. It is ironic that the fight against idolatry is usually thought of as either an antiquated issue long-since dispensed with or one too obvious to be important in

modern Western society. But there have been a few explicit explorations of idolatry in the last two centuries, including those by two Jews — Karl Marx (1867/1976) and more recently Erich Fromm (1955, 1966) — who have applied the concept to the political and psychological struggles of contemporary life. Marx's concepts of alienation and commodity fetishism have been used by contemporary Marxists and postmodernists to explain the seductive power of the commodity over the consumer in advanced industrial economies, inspiring reverence, devotion, wish, desire. Although Marx did not identify this idea as an expression of the Jewish prohibition against idolatry — he was neither interested in nor knowledgeable about his Judaic heritage — these two interrelated ideas could be understood as examples of how a cultural value (i.e., the prohibition against idolatry), even when possessed as only a vaguely known heritage, can influence a theory beyond the author's awareness.

Fromm's contribution to the subject (see e.g., 1951, pp. 111-137; 1966, pp. 41-49), however, is more explicit and elaborated than Marx's. He argued that idolatry is the process by which certain qualities become de-identified from or disavowed by an individual or society, and are then projected onto another — either a particular person (e.g., a charismatic leader or celebrity), a type of person (e.g., a person of color), or an object (e.g., a commodity such as a car). The disavowed quality is then worshipped from afar either positively (as in placing the movie star “on a

pedestal”), or negatively (as in believing African American males are naturally hostile, Jews stingy, Latinos lazy). Worship takes on the quality of complete submission to idolatrous processes, an inability to question the dynamic or resist its power. Either in the positive or negative varieties, this dynamic of disavowal and worship is alienating and highly destructive for both the one who is projecting and the one projected upon. Fromm used this concept to explain noxious late modern-era social phenomena such as consumerism, racism, and blind patriotism, and he drew from biblical sources in order to illustrate his argument.

The main point is that the dynamic of either positive or negative idolatry is a kind of deadening process. It freezes human creativity because it stops critical thought and meaningful engagement with oneself and with the other. It is alienating because it prevents the one who projects from confronting and integrating the quality that is being disavowed. It locks the disavowed quality into a trap from which it cannot escape. And of course it does equal or worse damage to the one upon whom the quality is being projected. To be the object of over-idealizing admiration or hatred is a horrible (sometimes life-threatening) experience, bound to end in disaster. One thinks immediately of Marilyn Monroe or Medgar Evers as examples of the deadly force of either positive or negative forms of the dynamic.

The most prominent aspect of idolatry, according to Fromm, is the alienation of the individual from his or her human qualities, foremost among them the quality of intelligent, critical thought. Submission to the idol is complete and uncompromising. When one gives up the ability to think for oneself, to question and doubt and resist, Fromm thought, all is lost. That is an awful kind of slavery, the most dangerous way of “escaping” from freedom (Fromm, 1941).

One way of understanding midrashic process is to realize that it is the antithesis of idolatry. To embody midrashic process is to have the capacity to hold both sides of the hermeneutic paradox: to question rigorously and thoughtfully within a historical tradition of moral understandings deeply held. It is both to refuse to accept texts or authority without interrogating and exploring their inconsistencies and contradictions, and to be aware that critical activity is achieved only by virtue of a set of moral commitments and beliefs framed by the historical tradition one lives within and modified by those of neighboring traditions. Midrashic study is a kind of training in critical thought, moral discourse, political resistance; from it we learn that no text, person, or idea should be exempt from being evaluated according to the tradition’s highest standards of social justice, compassion, and personal respect.

Midrashic process, in Fromm’s terms, is preparation for the fight of a lifetime: the fight against idolatry. It inspires us to develop a way of life

that features intellectual honesty, flexibility, and an openness to difference always informed, necessarily, by the historical traditions that value and enable these qualities. It is a definition of the good in Jewish life.

The application of this Jewish concept to psychotherapy seems obvious. Regardless of a patient's particular presenting problem, from a hermeneutic perspective therapy can be thought to help a patient be less involved with an old social terrain that contains certain limited, contradictory, destructive (or in Kleinian terms, perverse) moral understandings about the good and the self-images that fit with and enable them (see Cushman, 1995, chapter 9). But humans cannot simply substitute one understanding of the good for another, because during the course of living, the good becomes embodied by us in various complex and unconscious ways, and because we cannot live without some understanding of the good that is linked to the historical traditions in which we live. The good, according to this interpretation, encompasses much that current therapists refer to as character structure, object relations, self-state regulation, identity, Jungian complexes, the subject positions of gender, race, and class, or what Lynne Layton has recently called "the normative unconscious" (2005). Understandings of the good may differ in content, but not in location: they are central to human being. Traditions about the good are not clothing we can take on or off. They come to constitute us.

So therapeutic change is difficult and usually time-consuming; it cannot happen until therapist and patient develop a meaningful (although usually covert) encounter about the good with one another, and begin — both drawing on their understandings of the good — to argue and dispute and question and care for one another. It takes time to settle into a rhythm that allows for the living out of one’s moral terrain, the inevitable enactments that are produced, the growing awareness of how we reproduce the very cultural terrain and personal relations that cause our suffering and the suffering of others, the questioning and disputing of our moral understandings, the slow encounter with the other’s perspective, and the openness that allows the other’s perspective to influence our own perspective. It is important to remember that the understandings and identities of patient and therapist do not materialize out of thin air; they are not wished into being, created out of fantasies, created solely in the therapy office, or just adopted impulsively from someone else — first and foremost, they are products of historical traditions. The traditions can be questioned, modified, and reworked — in fact, that is the essence of a hermeneutic approach — but they can never simply be dismissed, wished away, or magically transformed. It is in that type of moral discourse — more a dance than a discussion — that some hermeneuticists think therapeutic change comes about.

This hermeneutic way of thinking about the process of psychotherapy has points in common with the process of midrashic study. They both require the capacity to think critically and discuss the good. They are predicated on both the freedom to question and the freedom to be part of a larger tradition; the capacity to resist that which one thinks is bad, and the capacity to have a place to stand, to know what one stands for, and who one stands with; the freedom to know incompletely and uncertainly. These qualities are the products of a life less influenced by idolatry.

When texts, belief systems, leaders, psychotherapy theories, or therapists lose sight of the simultaneous power and fragility of human interpretation, they lose touch with an essential aspect of humanity. When a text becomes an idol, God becomes a thing (visible, named, and known), and human creativity and relatedness become deadened. The less people believe in their ability to be engaged and effective in the world, the more they look toward — and begin to depend on — a magical figure (or, in psychology, a disengaged method) to save them. Subservience follows idolatry and leads to apocalyptic visions and inflated fantasies. In our desperation, God is thought to be intimate and immanent, a presence who stands ready to intervene whenever needed, to provide a sign, a touchdown, a remission for cancer, or an irrefutable justification for war.

An idolatrous dynamic and its products run counter to the strategies midrashic traditions developed. “To really understand the concept of the coming of the Messiah,” a wise old rabbi once told me, “you must realize he will never come.” An important Jewish understanding is that, contrary to the Christian Bible,<sup>14</sup> the word is not made flesh. It remains the word, and the word, as always, remains contingent, imperfect, incomplete. “Midrash refuses,” David Stern (1996, p. 29) taught, “to make the identification between God and Torah literal.” Psychoanalysis, Freud often reminded us, refuses to equate God’s word with the analyst’s interpretations. Words are surrounded by gaps, puzzles, inconsistencies, self-contradictions. Readers, therapists, and patients fall into those textual gaps, engage with their interlocutors there, wrestle with God there. We live in those gaps, we are our best selves there.

### **Jewish Interpretive Processes and Jewish Therapists**

Recently Frank Richardson and Tim Zeddies (2004), using a hermeneutic framework, critiqued my work and that of Irwin Hoffman. Richardson and his long-time colleague Blaine Fowers have been a great help to me in my intellectual development, and I feel deeply indebted to them and their colleague Charles Guignon. The Richardson and Zeddies’

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<sup>14</sup> See John, chapter one.

critique, in part, argued that Hoffman and I fall short because we are too relativistic.<sup>15</sup>

Some aspects of the Richardson-Zeddies critique I agree with, especially as it applies to my earlier writing, before I began to learn from my hermeneutic friends. However, I think they are wrong when they say I do not adequately realize that moral understandings frame historical traditions or link moral traditions with a call for social reform. And I especially disagree with their contention that I do not think it “possible or desirable to reconnect in any way with traditional beliefs or values” (2004, p. 622).

Evidently Richardson and Zeddies don’t see the connection between traditional values and social reform that I have emphasized since 1995 (see, e.g., 1995, pp. 279-356; 2001, 2005a & b). Nor, in a similar vein, do they see in my writing the connection between the positive vision of a world arranged to promote peace, justice, cooperation, and caring, on the one hand, and the deeply felt imperative to oppose aspects of our current world that run counter to that positive vision. They also do not see the similarities between the two ideals they suggest — reverence and civic engagement (see 2004, pp. 650 ff.) — and two ideals I often discuss,

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<sup>15</sup> Hoffman (personal communication, November 10, 2005) has asked me to note that he does not agree with the ideas in this paper and to make sure that I in no way associate his ideas with mine or imply that he approves of them.

historical awareness (1987, 1995, 2001) and interpersonal and civic engagement (2000, 2005a & 2005b).<sup>16</sup>

I don't understand how they could overlook these connections. But perhaps after all the fault is mine. I am moved to wonder if, more than I realize, I still make the mistake of not fully disclosing my values, identifying their often traditional sources, or indicating how traditional sources can be drawn upon in psychotherapy. During the research I undertook in order to write this piece, a new thought occurred to me. I have been struck by how implicit Jewish understandings of the good are in everyday Jewish culture. I began to realize, once again, how applicable hermeneutic ideas about the ubiquity and primordially of moral understandings were for Jewish life — and my life. Jewish interpretive processes are saturated with certain moral understandings that are deeply entangled in the many social practices a Jew performs, even, I think, but to a lesser degree, for Jews who are alienated, negatively-identified, or not Judaically educated. And the thought occurred to me that the links between a value and its practice, content and process, absence and presence, are so much a taken-for-granted aspect of my life as a Jew, so much (to use Heidegger's phrase) in everydayness, that it is difficult for me to notice and especially to comment upon them.

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<sup>16</sup> All of these manuscripts were made available to Richardson and Zeddies while their paper was being written.

So perhaps Richardson's constant drumbeat (now well into its fifteenth year) that I need to be more learned and explicit about these things is still more accurate than I realized. Perhaps there is something about Jewish life that is embodied by many Jews but is implicit, and thus not often visible, to non-Jews. Could it be that one of the reasons I appear relativistic to Richardson and Zeddies is that the moral frame that is so obvious and taken-for-granted in my life is less explicit — and perhaps less consciously developed — than I realize?

As I have tried to show in this paper, in some streams of Jewish tradition, critical, engaged, cooperative relating is inseparable from a more encompassing moral framework that focuses on social justice, compassion, respect for the other, the value of moral discourse, and the prohibition against idolatry. The rejection of immanent presence does not — necessarily — consign the Jewish seeker to the prison of an empty, hopeless, unrelated absence and its sequelum, an extreme relativism. For me, the entanglements between all these qualities are so obvious as to be unremarkable. But to others, these entanglements might not be noticeable, so it is up to me to put them into words.

If that is the case then this is a good illustration of one way that hermeneutics can be used in relationally-oriented psychotherapy. A way of conceiving of one of the tasks of therapy is for the patient to develop the capacity for what Heidegger called "authenticity" and what Gadamer

called “dialogue” or “genuine conversation.” My interpretation of this process is that therapy can be thought of as a series of encounters with difference. Gadamer thought that by learning how to be open to difference (rather than simply arguing with and trying to defeat it), person #1 can let the encounter teach him or her something about the social world that brought person #2 to light. By doing so, the new understanding of the social world of the other can move person #1 to ask, if it is true that person #2’s social world brings him or her to light in that way, then what kind of social world brings me (person #1) to light in the way I am? By asking that question person #1 can learn about aspects of his or her social world that are so central to that world that he or she does not usually notice them or notice that person #2 does not notice them. Some therapeutic issues, encounters, and enactments, as I have suggested previously (e.g., 2005a & b), can be worked on in this way.

Hopefully, patients can come to understand themselves better through an encounter with their therapist; conversely, therapists can understand themselves better through an encounter with their patient. In this case, perhaps I can learn something through an encounter with the colleagues who critiqued my work. Because they did not recognize something that I think is obvious, I have learned something more about myself, my tradition, my profession, and the world of my friends. And I am grateful.

Perhaps what I have learned about myself is also true for many Jews in our profession — both positively-identified and alienated alike. In ways that we may not realize, Jewish therapists might be moved by deeply felt, embodied ways of being and thus moral commitments that have their origins in ideas and social practices hundreds or even thousands of years old, and socially transmitted to us in ways implicit and constitutive. And perhaps this is also true about many non-Jews and their respective traditions as well.

Thought about in this way, the theories and practices of Jewish relationally-oriented therapists might be somewhat less relativistic — more constituted by moral meanings — than their theories at first appear to be and that they themselves might be aware of. The therapeutic practices of Jewish therapists, which we rightly think are informed by late 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophical trends, might also be more influenced by the nineteenth centuries that led up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century than we might have imagined.

There are, of course, many historical forces that affect Jews, including pressure from the dominant group to disown difference. The wish to do so, in fact, might play an important part in the sometimes confused way Jewish therapists think about the connections between their ethnicity and their work. But neither current cultural trends nor the wish to avoid one's fate as a despised minority can help in the long run. Each

of us humans was at birth thrown into a family and a historical tradition that have both good and bad aspects. In adulthood, we undertake a hermeneutic task that will occupy us for the remainder of our lives: the responsibility to embrace, critique, and improve the “inescapable” moral understandings of those historical traditions that constitute but, importantly, do not determine, us.

### **Conclusion**

From my perspective, one of the most important features of midrashic practice is its grasp of the primordial entanglements between moral understandings, communal activity, and personal well-being. Because of this vision, as well as its intellectual content, the interpretive midrashic tradition of 1<sup>st</sup> millennium C.E. can be identified as an early form of an ontological hermeneutic tradition, and can be understood to offer something valuable to current psychotherapy theory. In particular, the valorization of intertextuality, engaged understanding, the dialectic of absence and presence, and the prohibition against idolatry suggest the kind of psychotherapy we now refer to as relational psychoanalysis. As I recently argued (2005, a & b), a robust hermeneutic vision recognizes and builds from an understanding of the entanglements of moral and political meanings and recognizes them as central constituents of the self. Recent writings about race, class, and gender in relational psychoanalysis (see e.g., Altman, 1995, 2000; Bodnar, 2004; Botticelli, 2004; Cushman, 2000;

Dimen, 1991, 2000; Flax, 1991; Goldner, 2002; Harris, 1991, 2000; Layton, 2002, 2005, Leary, 1997, 2000; Walls, 2004) are part of an ongoing effort to recognize those entanglements and utilize them in order to contribute to the effort to repair our troubled world.

Ours is a social world that in recent years increasingly has adopted the processes and commitments of fundamentalism — religious, political, and intellectual. Religious fundamentalism is apparent in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities, and whether it is combined with terrorism (as in radical Islam), geographic imperialism (as in the Israeli ultra-orthodox *haradim*), or political power (as in the Christian far right), it constitutes a threat to thoughtful, cooperative, peace-loving people throughout the world.

Fundamentalisms of all kinds believe that the one perfect truth has been revealed to the proper authorities, and one's only task is to comply with it. Some streams of Jewish interpretive traditions — and I'm sure aspects of other traditions as well (e.g., Sufism, Zen Buddhism, Mennonite interpretive traditions) — are built on a different understanding: texts are the works of mortals, regardless of the source of their inspiration, and must be questioned in a playful but conscientious manner, and according to standards, in order for the tradition to shift, allowing its various truths to come to light.

For some Jewish interpretive traditions, argument is as valued as agreement, and compliance is worthless — or worse, dangerous — unless first the belief or custom has been contested and, for the moment, found worthy. It is the space between that makes possible the engaged, interpersonally related life some streams of Jewish interpretive traditions, ontological hermeneutics, and relational psychoanalysis value.

Engaged, related moral discourse, in occasional moments, has the potential to evoke the dialectic of presence and absence. This evocation is possible, even though the world continues to burn, and evidence of God's absence is all around us. Struggling with the world as it is, not as we would wish it, learning to live a life forever east of Eden, realizing that the messiah will come only after we don't need him — these might give us, like the midrashic rabbis, the opportunity to develop a different understanding of presence. This would be an understanding that would identify interpersonal, communal, interpretive practices as a medium for pursuing the relationship between God and humans, locate God's voice in the spaces between words and between people and in the puzzles and uncertainties and multiple meanings of people and texts, and place into question the claim of a privileged, unmediated experience of God. This in turn, might help us face up to our responsibilities to one another, including the necessity of making thoughtful, persuasive political arguments that do not rest on the claim that God has spoken the one truth

(but only into the ears of a privileged few). By facing God's absences, we might better turn our attention to our responsibilities to one another, as did the rabbis of late antiquity. This, in turn, might help us become slightly better human beings who work to make the world a slightly better place. Although couched in language unusual for the clinical hour, that is a description of what some of us might call a crucial aspect of a good therapeutic outcome.

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