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A Rational Approach to Teaching Midrash: Averting Crisis by Teaching Truth From a Young Age

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As part of the Hartman Fellowship for Emerging Jewish Thought Leaders, fellows were given a deceptively simple task: write a short persuasive essay or create a persuasive piece of multimedia that grapples with big Jewish ideas. The fellows proved themselves equal to the challenge and responded with an array of remarkable and powerful projects on a vast array of subjects, representing a wide array of political positions. We have highlighted a number of the pieces which showed particular originality or writing and production excellence.

A Rational Approach to Teaching Midrash: Averting Crisis by Teaching Truth From a Young Age

The tooth fairy is a popular phenomenon that many children grow up with and later learn is entirely made up. This realization does not always come easy to young children who have spent years thinking a fairy took their teeth from under their pillows in return for money. There are countless, admittedly hilarious, videos online of the devastation and denial some children exhibit once they are broken the news that the tooth fairy is nothing but a tale. Can you really blame them, when they believed something wholeheartedly and later learned that their parents were just lying to them all along? Imagine how much worse this kind of devastation becomes when one feels their Jewish education has misled them.

Growing up in the Modern Orthodox schooling system, midrash was a big part of my Jewish education. From a very young age, I would come home from school and proudly tell my parents about what I'd learned that day, whether it be that Vashti had a tail or that manna could taste like anything one wished (both of which are not in Tanach). Since I was never told otherwise and believed my teachers, I had no reason to question anything that I was taught.

Before laying out my proposed solution, I want to define some key terms. I use the term pshat to denote the literal and simple meaning of the text in Tanach. It is simply the perceived divine purpose of the text, bereft of any added lesson from outside of the text. Rishonim (who lived approximately between the years of 1100-1500) primarily commented on Tanach with the intention of clarifying the pshat of the text. Midrash, which was created before pshat, was written by Tanaim and Amoraim (mainly between the years 200-600) and comes from the root word drash, meaning to expound or interpret. Midrash consists of three main branches: Talmud and Midrash Halacha, which deal primarily with Jewish law and behavior, and Midrash Aggadah, meaning Rabbinic stories and folktale. Some midrashim are parshanut (trying to better understand the intent of the text), while others are darshanut (teaching lessons/ ideas/ theology of Judaism). When I discuss teaching midrash to young children, it is in reference mainly to Midrash Aggadah, since that is what is primarily taught in Orthodox Jewish elementary schools.

As a preface to my argument on teaching midrash, I would like to make it clear that I'm not arguing we should not teach midrash. On the contrary, I believe that midrash is a crucial part of my Jewish identity and upbringing. Stories of tremendous miracles and complete faith are in fact what stuck with me most over the years. I want midrash to be appreciated for what it is by implementing a better system rooted in clarity and truth. I also want to acknowledge that I am not an expert on child cognitive development.

Learning midrash was not always a positive contributor to my Jewish identity. In my Junior year of high school, my Tanach teacher handed out a worksheet titled "Pshat or midrash? Which of the following happened in Tanach?" with a list of events that we had to write whether or not they occurred in Tanach. To my complete shock and disappointment, I got a third of the questions wrong, which was actually one of the better scores in the class. We were upset, to

say the least. This couldn't be true! I was certain that Abraham had destroyed his father's idols in the Torah (Genesis Rabah 38: 13)! Once my Rabbi calmed us down and I was able to move on from my denial, my mind was racing with questions. Had we been lied to our entire elementary school? Was my faith based on stories that are not even included in the Torah? We were outraged and eager to find answers as to why any teacher would mislead their students as such.

Although I was ultimately able to reconcile my midrash learning with the truth and the distinction between midrash and the Tanach text itself, there is no doubt that this realization can lead to a crisis for some, which can so easily be prevented with a different method of teaching that should begin at a young age.

In *Teaching Midrash from a Developmental Perspective*, Tamar Schwell addresses the concern that midrash is taught as basically indistinguishable from Tanach, thereby painted as factual. From such a young age, these stories are introduced as part of Tanach and remain in children's minds as such until they are eventually taught the truth. Since they are not taught to differentiate between Chazal's midrash and the original text of Tanach, it is no wonder children internalize it all as fact. Another problem Schwell outlines is that students may grow to resent their teachers out of the perception that they were deliberately misled. And this is precisely why I believe it is critical to teach students what midrash is from a young age. I believe the first step towards clarity should be introducing the distinction from a young age, using terms such as "some rabbis tell a story of" rather than "The Torah tells us" in reference to midrash stories. Of course, as children grow older, they should be taught the timeline of the Torah being given and midrash being written later. It is also critical to explain that midrash is Chazal's explanation of what might have happened in Tanach- they are not one and the same. By teaching this distinction from a young age, we diminish the danger of disillusionment and feelings of betrayal.

In Rambam's Introduction to Perek Helek, he describes three groups of people, each representing another method of interpreting midrash. The first group he discusses, which he says is the largest, is those who interpret midrash literally. He says these people, often teachers, "vigorously expound to the people what they think rather than what the sages really said." This is the understanding of midrash that I, along with many children growing up in Jewish schools, was exposed to. By teaching midrash in a way that it was not intended, Rambam says, "this group destroys the glory of the Torah of God." The second group, whom Rambam labels "pretentiously stupid," also takes the Rabbis' midrash literally; however, they dismiss it as silly and inferior. Obviously this group is no better than those who read it literally, as they slander the Sages' interpretations. Now, the final group, whom both the Rambam and I are members of, "recognize the superiority of their [Sages] intelligence from their words which point to exceedingly profound truths" and understand that midrash has hidden meaning and lessons. Essentially, the Rambam believes that midrash is metaphorical and not meant to be taken literally.

Although he may come across as rather harsh in his labeling of others, Rambam makes a significant point here that ought to become more widely taught. Midrash is a legitimate form of art created by Rabbis to add to the Torah, not to be equated to it. Rambam's third group emphasizes both the profoundness and nuance of the Torah and midrash. The Torah should, and must be, understood as complicated, but when we teach midrashim about Rivkah marrying at the age of three or Vashti having a tail, we detract from the holiness of the real Torah and risk students having a crisis later on. And for what benefit? To grab their attention? There are countless fascinating stories that truly did happen in Tanach that could be taught to students; for example, Lot's wife turning into a pillar of salt and the ground swallowing Korach's followers. Of course, some midrashim do teach valuable lessons, such as Nachshon ben Aminadav jumping into the Red Sea with blind faith and thereby splitting it, and should be taught- as midrash, not God's word. As Rambam explains, midrash is incredible and should undoubtedly be taught, especially to the youth, to add color rather than potentially cloud the line between fiction and nonfiction. But teaching midrash should not and need not negate the importance of preaching the truth.