Sandy Eisenberg Sasso

MIDRASH

Reading the Bible with Question Marks

Afterword by Joan Chittister

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Midrash: Reading the Bible with Question Marks

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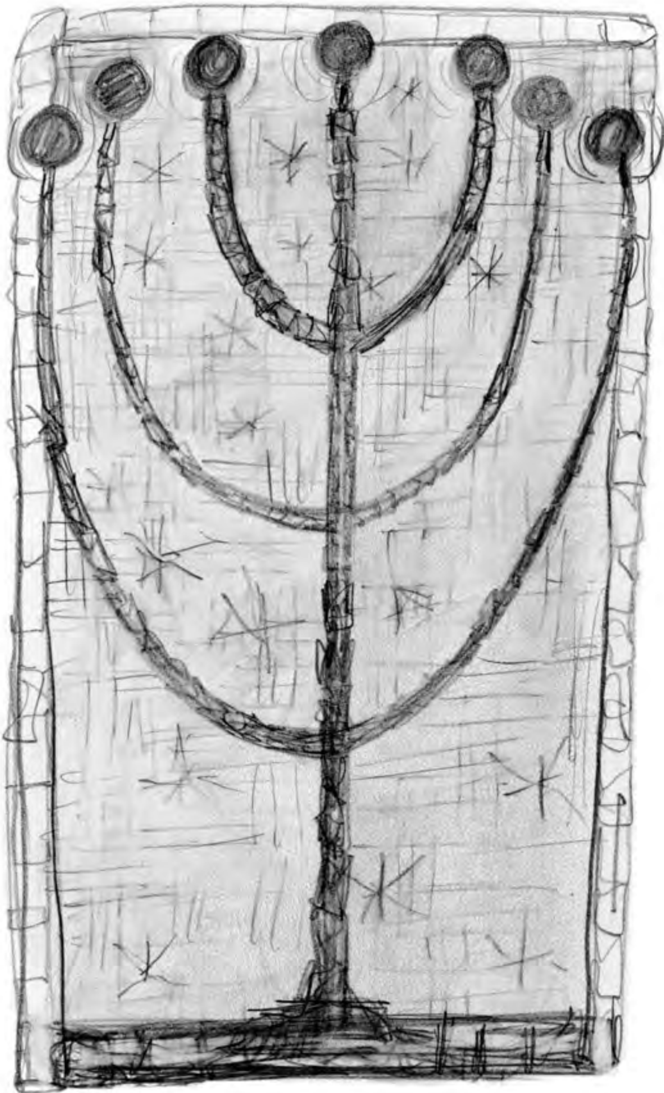
For *My* Grandson, Darwin,

God's Echo

Part One



Is God Speaking to Me?
Listening to God's Echo

ustomarily, when we read the Bible we listen to its ancient words, allowing it to tell us our ancestors' stories. But what would it mean to read the Bible by allowing it to help us tell the stories of *our* lives? What if we read our joys, our fears, and our doubts into the biblical narrative?

Then God's question to Adam and Eve after they have eaten the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden—"Where are you?"—would become a question for us, for now. What are we doing in our lives at this moment? Are we ashamed? Are we hiding from something, from someone? Are we running away? What part of Adam and Eve's story is our own? Asking such questions is the beginning of midrash.

If we approached Scripture in light of our own stories, all the stories of the Bible would read differently. Consider Esau sitting by his father's bedside, knowing that the blessing of the firstborn has been given to his younger brother, Jacob. Esau asks, "Father, have you only one blessing?" This is not simply a son's poignant plea to his father, Isaac, about the birthright. When we use midrash, Esau's question becomes a question for all

Note to the reader

You will see references such as this one—*Pesikta de-Rab Kahana* 12:25—throughout this book. *Midrashim* (the plural of *midrash*) are classic texts, and these are bibliographic references that make it possible for anyone to go back to the original sources.

Midrash, capitalized, refers to the classic written collections of the first millennium CE. I use *midrash,* lower case, as a generic reference.

* * * * *

of us who have ever felt rejected, cheated, or betrayed. We may ask ourselves, and the text itself: What part of Esau's life is like our own?

Rabbi Levi once commented on words from Exodus 20:2, "I am the Lord your God." He taught: "The Holy One appeared to the people as a statue with faces on every side, so that though a thousand people might be looking at the statue, they would be led to believe that it was looking at each one of them. So, too, when the Holy One spoke, each and every person in Israel could say, 'The Divine Word is addressing me'" (*Pesikta de-Rab Kahana* 12:25).

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Listening to God's echo in our lives, approaching Scripture as if God were speaking to us, is the beginning of midrash.

The ancient Jewish sages following the biblical period were known as rabbis. They believed that the Word spoke to every generation anew. They allowed the biblical stories into their lives, and they let their lives enter the stories. They created midrash, interpretations of Scripture, an imaginative body of literature, which enriched the biblical narrative and kept it fresh and vital.

This book invites you to listen to some of the most beautiful selections of midrash, to hear how the words of Scripture spoke to others before us and influenced generations to this day. And then it invites you to do one thing more—to hear how the Word is still speaking to you.

What Is Midrash?

Reading the Bible with Question Marks

In the Bible story of the first murder, Cain kills his brother Abel. The biblical narrative says, "Cain said to his brother Abel . . . and when they were in the field Cain killed his brother Abel" (Genesis 4:8).

In the original Hebrew, the text does not tell us what Cain said to Abel. The conversation, or more likely the argument between the two brothers, is missing from the narrative. We are left wondering about the nature of the conflict that brought death and violence into the world.

The rabbis, writing between 400 and 1200 CE, filled in the gaps through midrash. Grounding themselves in the biblical narrative, they retold the ancient story in light of new realities and changing conditions. Through this interpretive method they made sense of contradictions in the text, provided missing information, and made the narrative relevant to the times in which they were living. Reading midrash allows us to become more familiar with the values, problems, and theology of another generation and invites us to consider how we too might add our own voices to the biblical text so that it continues to speak to our own generation.

Whereas modern biblical scholarship sees the Bible as a human document, written and edited in various stages, the rabbis assumed that the Torah was divinely revealed and therefore contained eternal, perfect truths, both evident and hidden meanings that required ongoing elucidation. The rest of the books of the Bible, what Jewish tradition refers to as Nevi'im, the Prophets, and Ketuvim, the Writings, were also considered products of divine inspiration.

Midrash does not challenge the idea that the Bible is divinely inspired or revealed. In fact, the rabbis believed that nothing in the Bible, not the choice of words or their spellings, not the order of events or the relationship of one text to another, was haphazard or inconsequential. Everything was intentional and purposeful. The rabbis deemed it their responsibility to discover connections and harmony where on the surface none appeared to exist. They believed it was possible for one text to contain multiple meanings. Chronology, as we understand it, was of no consequence. The rabbis felt free to read back into the patriarchal stories events that happened at the time of the Temple or, on the other hand, to see in the early stories of Genesis a foreshadowing of future events.

According to rabbinic thought, there are two Torahs, the Written Torah and the Oral Torah. The Written Torah is the biblical text (particularly the Pentateuch

Eventually, in about 200 CE, this Oral Torah was written down, edited, and compiled into a collection called the Mishnah. The Mishnah consists of six sections or orders divided into sixty-three tractates, each one further subdivided into chapters and paragraphs. When mishnaic references are included in this book, they indicate the tractate, chapter, and paragraph (e.g., Avot 1:1).

In the course of time a commentary to the Mishna, known as the Gemara, was written. Together the Mishna and the Gemara are called the Talmud. There are two Talmuds, one produced in Palestine and one in Babylonia, where many Jews were exiled after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE. The Palestinian Talmud was completed towards the end of the fourth century, and the Babylonian Talmud, which became the larger and more important in the life of the people, was completed in 500 CE. When quoting a passage from the Talmud, it is customary to cite the name of the tractate preceded by PT (Palestinian Talmud) or BT (Babylonian Talmud), followed by the number of the page and the letter "a" or "b," indicating the side of the page or folio quoted (e.g., BT Menahot 29b).

or Five Books of Moses) as we have it. The Oral Torah is the interpretation that grew from Scripture and was eventually codified in a variety of texts, such as the Mishnah, the Talmud, and the Midrash. Rabbinic tradition teaches that God gave not only the Written but also the Oral Torah to Moses at Mount Sinai. It may be that the rabbis understood the Oral Torah to be their way of discovering meanings implicit in the text, allowing them to uncover what was already there, what was God's unspoken, original intent. Or it may be that they saw themselves deriving new meanings from the text, creating something new but rooted in tradition, and that ongoing human interpretation was indeed God's original intent.

Hasidism, a tradition beginning in the eighteenth century that popularized Jewish mystical teaching, taught that revelation was not a once-and-for-all event. The modern philosopher Martin Buber once wrote, "Everyone of Israel is told to think of himself as standing at Mount Sinai to receive the Torah. For man there are past and future events, but not so for God: day in and day out, He gives the Torah."[1]

A wonderful story in the Talmud illustrates this ongoing nature of revelation and the human responsibility for interpretation of Torah:

> When Moses ascended Mt. Sinai, he found that God was attaching little crowns or decorations to the letters of the Torah. [In a Torah scroll, some of the Hebrew letters have ornamentations or crowns.] Moses asked God about the meaning of those decorations. God explained to Moses that someday in the future, a man would appear, named Akiba ben Joseph, who would be able to interpret the significance of the crowns. Moses asked God to allow him to meet this great teacher. God transported Moses [1200 BCE] through time, and brought him to the academy of Rabbi Akiba ben Joseph [second century CE].
>
> Moses sat in the back of the classroom and listened to Akiba expound on the teachings of the Torah. Moses was distraught when he was unable to understand much of what Akiba was teaching.
>
> When a certain subject was presented, the students asked Akiba, "How do you know this?" And Akiba responded, "This is a teaching from Moses on Sinai." And Moses was pleased. (BT Menahot 29b).

This Talmudic text may simply indicate that Akiba was such an extraordinary individual that he was capable of understanding something of God's Word, of Torah, that Moses in his time was not ready to grasp.

On the other hand, the rabbis may be suggesting that the Torah as received by the generation of Moses was not meant to be the last word. What Moses delivered amidst the thunder and lightning of Sinai was not a final product but rather the beginning of a conversation between God and the people of Israel. Revelation did not end with Moses but began with him. Torah as received by Moses was God's first word, and subsequent generations were to see themselves, like their ancestors, as also standing at the foot of Sinai receiving Torah. What Akiba taught, although incomprehensible to Moses, was nevertheless in the tradition of Moses, who began the process of interpreting God's Word.

Viewed in this light, the rabbinic passage about Akiba's classroom highlights the sacred nature of the ongoing process of interpretation that ensures the continuity of Torah through the generations. The crowns above the Hebrew letters, the rabbis are telling us, point to God's intention that the Torah text be interpreted.

In other Talmudic passages, the rabbis highlight Torah as a continuing revelation, and they underscore the divine desire to place the understanding and meaning of the Bible into the hands of its interpreters. The following rabbinic tale illustrates the importance of this process of human interpretation:

There was once a discussion in the academy concerning a matter of law. The rabbis differed as to the correct interpretation. Rabbi Eliezer offered every proof imaginable in order to support his position but still the other rabbis would not listen to him.

Rabbi Eliezer said to them, "If the law is according to me, let this carob tree prove it." And the carob tree moved a hundred cubits. Some say that the tree moved as much as four hundred cubits!

The other rabbis were not impressed and responded, "We don't learn proofs from a carob tree."

Then Rabbi Eliezer said to his colleagues, "If I am correct regarding this matter of law, then let this stream of water prove it." At that moment the stream of water turned and flowed backwards.

His colleagues said to him, "We don't learn proof for a matter of law from a stream of water."

Then Rabbi Eliezer proclaimed, "If the law is according to me, let the walls of the House of Study prove it." Just as he spoke the walls of the House of Study began to topple. But Rabbi Joshua rebuked the walls, saying, "When scholars are arguing about a matter of law, what business do you have to interfere in the conflict?" In honor of Rabbi Joshua the walls of the House of Study did not fall completely, but to honor Rabbi Eliezer, they did not become upright, but remained inclined.

Rabbi Eliezer then called upon Heaven to demonstrate the correctness of his position. He said, "If the law is according to me, then let the heavens prove it."

At that moment a Heavenly Voice cried out to all those assembled, "Why do you argue with Rabbi Eliezer? The law agrees with him in every case."

At that moment, Rabbi Joshua rose to his feet and exclaimed: *It is not in heaven* [Deuteronomy 30:1].

What did Rabbi Joshua mean by quoting this verse from Deuteronomy, *It is not in heaven*? Rabbi Jeremiah explained, "The Torah has already been given at Mount Sinai; we no longer pay attention to voices from heaven. Long ago You [God] wrote in the Torah at Mount Sinai, *After the majority must one incline*" [Exodus 23:2].

Some time later Elijah appeared to Rabbi Nathan, and the rabbi asked him what God did at that moment. Elijah said to him, "God laughed saying, 'My children have triumphed, my children have triumphed.'" (BT Bava Metzia 59b)

Not only the written words in the text, but the very process of interpreting those words, is divine. Despite the fact that Rabbi Eliezer was a well-known scholar who attracted many students and conducted his own

academy, he could not claim to know what God had meant in a particular matter of law. Miracles were not acceptable as proof.

The authoritative textual understanding is "not in heaven" but with its earthly interpreters. God delights in the human imagination. No one person can claim to hold the key to unlock what God intended, because what God intended was for each generation to read its story into the text. In fact, the Torah itself teaches this: "Surely this Teaching which I enjoin you this day is not . . . beyond your reach. It is not in the heaven . . . neither is it beyond the sea. . . . No, the thing is very close to your mouth and in your heart, to observe it" (Deuteronomy 30:11–14).

In the Mishnah, we read the teaching of Ben Bag Bag concerning Torah: "Turn it and turn it again, for all is in it, and contemplate it, and grow gray and old over it, and stir not from it, for you can have no better rule than this" (Avot 5:26). These sources point away from a fundamentalist, literalist reading of the biblical text.

A Hasidic rabbi, Rabbi Mendel of Rymanov, offers the striking suggestion that what was heard on Mount Sinai was not the Ten Commandments but only the first letter of the first word of the first commandment. That Hebrew letter is *aleph* and it is silent—or, more precisely, it is the very beginning of sound. You open your mouth ready to speak. That is the *aleph*. Revelation here is not understood as containing specific content

but as the very beginning of a conversation with God, a conversation in which we are all called to participate.

Burt Visotzky, a professor of midrash and interreligious studies, suggests that for the Bible to become more than an revered ancient book, but an eternal one that continues to speak to each new generation of readers, it must be open to interpretation:

> It is only in the reading and the rereading which each community does together that the Bible becomes a timeless text, the Word of God. . . . The give and take of interpretation creates an extra voice in the room, the sound of Reading the Book. When that happens, the Bible speaks not only to each community of readers, be they Jewish, Christian or any other flavor, but to all humanity.[2]

Robert Alter, a professor of Hebrew and comparative literature, likewise reminds us that by taking the Bible literally we miss its deeper meaning:

> Religious tradition has by and large encouraged us to take the Bible seriously rather than to enjoy it, but the paradoxical truth of the matter may well be that by learning to enjoy the biblical stories more fully as stories, we shall also come to see more clearly what they mean to tell us about

> God, man, and the perilously momentous realm of history.[3]

New Testament scholar Raymond Brown made the same claim about understanding the Christian Scripture:

> In Christian faith God's action climaxed in Jesus Christ who is once for all time (Heb. 10:10) so that after the gift of the divine Son no further revelation is needed—whence the theological axiom that revelation closed with the death of the last apostle. Yet there is no reason to think that God ceased to guide a developing interpretation of that action. Indeed, the subsequent role of the Spirit in human history, in the history of the church and its pronouncements, in the writings of the Fathers and theologians enters into *a Tradition that embodies the post-scriptural interpretation of the salvific action of God described in Scripture.* . . . People have continued finding in the NT meaning for their own lives as they face new issues; they have asked what the NT books mean, not simply what they meant. . . . Once a work is written, it enters into dialogue with its readers, including future readers. . . . The text is not simply an object on which the interpreter works analytically to extract a permanently univocal meaning; it is a structure

> that is engaged by readers in the process of achieving meaning and is therefore open to more than one valid meaning. Once written, a text is no longer under the author's control and can never be interpreted twice from the same situation.[4]

Amos Oz, a renowned Israeli author, once remarked, "Fundamentalists live life with an exclamation point. I prefer to live my life with a question mark." The rabbis turned the text and turned it again. They delighted in reading the Bible with question marks to discover not just what the Bible meant but what it continues to mean. They entered into dialogue with the text and added another voice in the room. And it was from these voices and question marks that they wrote midrashim.

Some historical background

In order to appreciate the environment in which midrash flourished, it is necessary to understand Jewish life in the early centuries of the Common Era. During most of the first century CE, Judaism was socially, politically, and religiously diverse. Many different groups populated the spiritual landscape. The Sadducees were the priests who administered the Temple in Jerusalem. Descendants of the high priest Aaron, they belonged to the upper social classes. The Sadducees constituted a hereditary group who interpreted the Bible literally.

According to the Bible, the Temple was first built by King Solomon, in about 1000 BCE. It was destroyed by the Babylonians (586 BCE), subsequently restored during Persian rule (515 BCE), and then renovated and expanded during the rule of Herod the Great (20 BCE). Built and rebuilt in the heart of Jerusalem, the Temple was the center of Jewish life until its destruction by the Romans in 70 CE. Its remains are now located in the Old City of Jerusalem.

The Pharisees came from the middle class and achieved their position of leadership by virtue of their learning, piety, and charisma. They understood themselves to be the successors of Moses, to whom God had entrusted the Torah at Sinai. The Pharisees took a more lenient approach to the Bible, interpreting Scripture and developing an Oral Torah alongside the Written Torah.

Other groups such as the Essenes, who preached an ascetic lifestyle in anticipation of the end of days, and the Zealots, who espoused political rebellion to overthrow Roman rule, helped to make up this heterogeneous community. In addition, various messianic and apocalyptic movements that yearned for divine redemption were part of the Jewish community of Israel and the Diaspora.

By 70 CE, when the Romans destroyed the Temple, everything had shifted. The messianic movement that had come to center around Jesus of Nazareth eventually gave birth to Christianity. Many of the Essenes had secluded themselves in a small area by the Dead Sea, Qumran, essentially withdrawing from society. The Zealots were defeated in their rebellion against Rome, and their political power was crushed. The priestly Sadducees lost their power base with the destruction of the Temple. It was left to one group, the Pharisees, to rescue the Jewish people from the political and spiritual catastrophe they had experienced and to ensure a Jewish future.

With the people exiled from their homeland and the Temple, which had served as the central sanctuary for sacrifice and worship, destroyed, the Jews yearned for a spiritual means to approach God. The Pharisees and their successors, the rabbis, secured Judaism's survival by teaching new ways of coming close to God through study, prayer, and deeds of loving-kindness. In place of the Temple, the rabbis elevated the home as a small sanctuary (*mikdash ma'at*) and established synagogues and academies as places of assembly, learning, and worship.

In those academies, the rabbis developed new ways of interpreting Scripture. They read the biblical text in light of the historical, political, and religious upheaval of their time, addressing the displacement and despair of their generation. These rabbis, the inheritors of the Pharisaic tradition, became the guardians of Torah.

Late in the first century CE in the city of Yavneh (or Jamnia), the rabbis engaged in the process of canonizing the Hebrew Bible, which came to be organized into three sections—Torah, Nevi'im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings). The first letters for the Hebrew names for these divisions—T N K—give us the name for the Hebrew Bible, TaNaKh*. Most sacred of all the divisions was the Torah, which had been established since the time of Ezra.

* The vowels are provided for pronunciation. The K (*kaf*) at the end of a word is softened, hence kh.