

The following selections from the *Midrash Rabbah* have been translated by Rabbi William G. Braude, spiritual leader of Congregation Beth El in Providence, Rhode Island, whose translations of the Midrash on Psalms and of the *Pesikta Rabbati* are widely hailed as significant contributions to the study of Midrashic literature.

A MIDRASH ON THE GROWTH OF POPULATION

The Lord your God hath multiplied you (Deut. 1:10).

12. How many children must a man have to consider himself exempt from the command to be fruitful and multiply? Our Masters taught: A man is never to consider himself exempt from the command to be fruitful and multiply. Assuming, however, that he must have at least a certain number of children to be exempt from the command, how many must he have? At least two males, according to the School of Shammai. According to the School of Hillel—so said R. Eleazar ben Azariah—at least a male and a female.

What is the reason for the School of Shammai's ruling that two males are required for the exemption? Because of Cain and Abel as exemplars. And what is the reason that the School of Hillel say a male and a female are required? Because of Adam and Eve as exemplars.¹

R. Eleazar [ben Azariah] said further that he who neglects propagating the race is deemed to be one who diminishes the Image of God, for it is said *In the image of God made He man* (Gen. 9:6). Hence no man is to neglect the propagation of the race.

For 130 years—so said R. Simon—Adam abstained from intercourse with his wife. Why? Because after his begetting of Cain and Abel and Cain's subsequent slaying of Abel, as though the anguish of Abel's having been slain were not enough, there was also Adam's awareness that Cain the slayer would

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end his days under the curse of banishment, for God said to him *A fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth* (Gen. 4:12). Since both of his sons were to perish, Adam, aware of their doom, asked himself: If such be my lot, shall I continue begetting sons and see them perish thus?² What did he do? He resolved to abstain from intercourse with his wife for 130 years, as is said *Adam lived [thusly] for a hundred and thirty years* (Gen. 5:3), and only after that period *did he beget in his own likeness after his image* (*ibid.*). How did the Holy One get Adam to resume intercourse? By adding desire to his former desire, He led him to have intercourse with Eve and thus beget Seth.

For the Holy One said: I created the world with no purpose other than that the human race be propagated, as is said *He created the earth not to be empty, but to be inhabited [by humankind]* (Isa. 45:18). And therefore He said to Adam and Eve *Be fruitful and multiply* (Gen. 1:28). Thus from the very beginning the Holy One in creating Adam and Eve, intended that they be fruitful and multiply—that they keep begetting children and keep on being fruitful and multiplying. Why? Because the propagation of mankind redounds to the glory of the Holy One. Therefore when Israel went out of Egypt, they went forth as sixty myriads, [having obeyed the command to be fruitful and multiply] as is said *The children of Israel journeyed from Rameses . . . about six hundred thousand* (Exod. 12:37). After they came into the wilderness they continued to be fruitful and multiply, so that even more were added to them and their numbers kept growing, as Scripture points out about them: *The children of Israel were fruitful, and [continued to] increase abundantly* (Exod. 1:7).³ Hence Moses exclaimed to the children of Israel: "How can I cope with you whom the Holy One saw fit to make more and more numerous!" And the proof that Moses spoke thus? The words in the lesson for the day *The Lord your God hath continued multiplying you* (Deut. 1:10).

13. *For ever, O Lord Thy word standeth fast in heaven* (Ps. 119:89). What is intended by the words *For ever, O Lord?* R.

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Berechiah said: That for ever He conducts Himself toward us in the measure of mercy, [for He is designated "Lord of mercy"]; *the Lord, the Lord, being a merciful God* (Exod. 34:6). Hence, *For ever, O Lord*, etc.

R. Eliezer taught: The creation of the world was begun on the twenty-fifth day of Elul, so that Adam was created on New Year's Day which fell on the sixth day of creation. In the first hour of the Day, according to R. Judah, Adam came into existence as a thought in God's mind; in the second hour God consulted [the ministering angels to whether He should create him]; in the third hour God gathered up the dust from which He was to make him; in the fourth, God made him into a golem; in the fifth, God jointed his limbs; in the sixth, God put the breath of life into him; in the seventh, God stood Adam up on his feet; in the eighth, God brought him into the Garden of Eden; in the ninth, God gave him a command; in the tenth, he sinned; in the eleventh, he was brought to judgment; in the twelfth, he was driven out of Eden [instead of being sentenced to death].⁴ For, as God was about to impose a death sentence upon Adam, having said to him previously *In the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die* (Gen. 2:17), He realized that it was New Year's Day, and so had mercy upon him, and he went forth a free man.

Thereupon the Holy One said: As thou livest, even as I pardoned thee freely, so will I pardon thy children on this day, on New Year's Day, as is said *In the seventh month* (Lev. 23:24). Hence *For ever, O Lord [of mercy] thy word standeth fast in heaven*, etc.—that is, God conducts Himself in the measure of mercy. What is implied by *standeth fast in heaven*? That Thou art not like a man who makes a promise and is then compelled to disregard it. For whatever Thou sayest endures, as is said *The words of the Lord are [steadfast] words* (Ps. 12:7). Thus a king of flesh-and-blood may promise to do something, but may not be able to accomplish it. He may enter a province where the people praise him, so that he says to them, "Tomorrow I shall build you bathhouses, tomorrow I shall bring in drainage ditches for you." Thereupon he goes to sleep but then rises no more. Where is he then, and where are his promises? But

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the Holy One does not act thus. *The Lord is the God of truth [who is able to keep His promises] because He is the living God and everlasting King* (Jer. 10:10). Such is the implication of *For ever, O Lord, Thy word standeth fast in heaven*.

Accordingly when with seeming contradiction Balaam said *God is not a man that He should lie; as to that which He hath promised He will not do it* (Num. 23:19), he meant the first part of the verse to apply to good things. When God promises to do good, He will do it. Thus He said He would bring Israel into the Land and give it to them, and indeed He gave it to them. But when He promises He will bring evil, He repents. What did He say to Moses when Israel did that unspeakable deed? *Let me alone, that I may destroy them* (Deut. 9:14). But He did not do so. He repented of what He intended to do, as is said *And the Lord repented of the evil* (Exod. 32:14). But when good is promised, His promise is carried out. Hence *For ever, O Lord [of mercy], Thy word standeth fast in heaven*. And, so, too, *The [merciful] word of our God shall stand for ever* (Isa. 40:8).

14. Another comment. *For ever, Lord, Thy word in heaven stands fulfilled* (Ps. 119:89). Can the Psalm possibly be saying that the word of God stands fulfilled only in heaven and not upon earth? If not, just what is meant by the words *in heaven stands fulfilled*? It means that the word God utters in heaven is indeed fulfilled upon earth, as the word which God uttered to Abraham in heaven was fulfilled on earth. For proof, consider how Scripture describes Abraham's vision: *He brought [Abraham] forth beyond, and said: Look toward heaven and count the stars in it* (Gen. 15:5). *Brought him forth beyond*, means in the context—so taught R. Judah bar Simon and R. Hanin in the name of R. Johanan—that the Holy One raised Abraham beyond the vault of the firmament. For in this context *beyond* implies "beyond the heavens," as in the verse *While as yet He had not made the earth nor the areas beyond* (Prov. 8:26). Accordingly, the word *look* in *Look now toward heaven* (Gen. 15:5), means—so said R. Samuel bar Isaac—looking downwards from above, as in the verse *Look down from heaven, and behold*

(Ps. 80:15). And so when Israel went forth out of Egypt and came into the wilderness, Moses saw them in great multitudes, [numerous as the stars]. Thereupon Moses said to them: *Look now toward heaven*, for the words which the Holy One uttered to your father Abraham are now fulfilled; *The Lord your God hath multiplied you, and behold, ye are this day as the stars of heaven for multitude* (Deut. 1:10).

15. Another comment: [*The Lord your God multiplied you*. This verse is to be considered in the light of what Scripture says elsewhere]: *Upon those who share in rebuke shall be delight, upon both shall come the blessing of the good* (Prov. 24:25). R. Simeon ben Lakish and R. Johanan analyzed this verse. R. Simeon ben Lakish pointed out that the text does not say [that delight will be only] "Upon him who gives rebuke" but says that it will be also *Upon those who share in rebuke*. And R. Johanan went on to point out that the text does not say "upon them shall come the blessing of the good" but says *upon both shall come the blessing of the good*—upon him who gives the rebuke as well as upon them who receive it.

What is meant by *the blessing of the good*? R. Judah, R. Nehemiah, and the Rabbis differ as to the meaning of the phrase. R. Judah said: It means the blessings of the Holy One who is called "Good" as in the verse *The Lord is good to all* (Ps. 145:9). R. Nehemiah said: It means the blessing of Torah that is called "good," as in the verse *I have given you a doctrine which is good* (Prov. 4:2). And the Rabbis said: It means the blessing of Moses who is called "good" as is said *And his mother saw the infant [Moses] that he was goodly* (Exod. 2:2). And where in Scripture does Moses bless Israel? At the end of Deuteronomy. After he had rebuked them saying *These are the [stern] words* (Deut. 1:1), he blessed them because they willingly received his rebukes. Therefore the Holy One said: Since Israel willingly received Moses' rebukes, let them now receive his blessings. And how did Moses bless them? After he said *The Lord your God hath multiplied you* (Deut. 1:11), he went on to say, *The Lord of your fathers make you a thousand times so many more as you are, and bless you as He hath promised you*

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(Deut. 1:12).

How is the statement *The Lord your God hath multiplied you* (Deut. 1:9) relevant [to the preceding words *I am not able to bear you alone*]? Because the words are to be read [not *hath multiplied your number*, but] “hath heightened your worth [over that of your judges].” Thus you find Ben Azzai saying “Even the ear of a Jew’s dog [never mind a Jew himself] is of greater consequence than Israel’s judges.” How so? It happened that a man came to his fellow and said: “Will you trade with me—take this kid and give me your dog?” His fellow said: “Yes.” While they were standing there, another came along and said: “Take two kids in exchange.” Still another came along and said: “Take three.” And still another came along and said: “Take four.” When the four men could not work out the dispute among themselves, they went to court and told the judges what had happened. Thereupon the judges proceeded to decree: Let the dog be divided among the four contestants. (According to the Sages, be it noted that the one who had made the first offer should have been declared in the right.)⁵ As it was, the judges divided the dog among the four.

Thus justice was perverted, and what was worse, one of the four was, in fact, given more—by the ear of a dog—than his fellows.⁶ What befell the judges? Their lives and the lives of their children, and all that was theirs perished. What brought this end about? That more was given to one contestant than to the others. Hence a dog’s ear [unjustly assigned] can be deemed more important than [some] Jewish judges. And so the verse is to be understood “The Lord your God hath heightened your worth” [over that of your judges].

[To return to the verse’s usual reading *The Lord your God hath multiplied you*]. When did He multiply you? When you were in Egypt, for so it is said *I have caused thee to multiply as a seedling of the field* (Ezek. 16:7). Just what is the meaning of the analogy? The following: When Pharaoh charged his people *Every son that is born, ye shall cast into the river* (Exod. 1:22), what did the Jewish women do? When a Jewish woman felt that the time for giving birth was near, she would go out into the field. And as she was giving birth, she would raise her

eyes on high, and say, "I have done what I had to do in keeping with what Thou didst say, *Be fruitful and multiply*. Now do what Thou art to do."

In the meantime what were the Egyptians up to? When the Egyptians saw the daughters of Israel go out into a field to give birth there, they would crouch down at some distance from the place where the women were [and spy upon them]. After the women gave birth and went back to the city, the Egyptians would take up stones and set forth to slay the infants. But the infants would vanish into the field, then after a while be seen in the distance, and again vanish only to be seen again after a while, so that eventually the Egyptians would weary and go hence. How did the children remain alive in the field? The Holy One, so said R. Levi, assigned two angels to each infant, one to wash him and clothe him, and the other to suckle and anoint him. Of the second angel it is said *He made him suck honey out of the rock, and oil out of the flinty rock* (Deut. 32:13); and of the first angel it is said *I washed thee with water . . . I clothed thee also with brodered work* (Ezek. 16:9-10). According to the elder R. Hiyya, it was not the angels who attended the infants, but the Holy One in His own glory, for the text reads *I washed thee*. If the text read "I had thee washed," one might have said, "Washed very likely at the hands of an angel," but the text reads *I washed thee*—not "washed at the hands of an angel." May the name of the Holy One be praised! He, in His own glory, thus attended the infants.

And so like seedlings the infants grew up in the field and when they were grown up, they came in bands to their homes. Of these children, Ezekiel said: *I have caused thee to multiply as a seedling of the field* (Ezek. 16:7).

But how did these children know where to find their parents? Again it was the Holy One who went with them and showed each and everyone of them his father's home, saying to him, "Call out to your father by his name, and to your mother by hers." Then the child would say to his mother: "Do you not recall when five months ago you gave birth to me in such-and-such a field on such-and-such a day?" When she asked him, "Who took care of you?" he would reply: "A young man with

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beautifully curled locks—you never saw one like him! He is outside and he brought me here.” The mother would then say: “Come, show him to me.” They would then go outside and walk around among all the lanes everywhere, but could not find him.

Therefore when they came to the Red Sea and saw Him, they pointed him out with their fingers to their mothers and said to them: *This is my God who I said was so beautiful* (Exod. 15:2). He is the one who took care of me. *This is my God who I said was so beautiful.*

You find, said R. Joshua, that the Egyptians issued their decrees to prevent Israel’s multiplying. Having carefully considered all occupations to determine which one most diminishes a man’s potency, they decided that it was plowing. Why plowing? Because, said R. Simeon ben Yohai, the act of plowing so turns over a man’s insides that it exhausts him. In addition, the Egyptians decreed more hard work—they had the Israelites go out and labor at making bricks in the field. Despite these decrees, the children of Israel, upon returning to their homes after their labors, would find rest in sleep and then would lie with their wives and have children. Thereupon the Egyptians said: It is as though we had decreed nothing. So they declared: Let us make the Israelites sleep wherever they work. And this the Israelites had to do. But then the daughters of Israel—so taught R. Simeon ben Halafta—would go down to fill [their pitchers with] water from the River. And whenever they went down to draw water, the Holy One would have fish come along and enter the pitchers of the women. Upon coming up from the River, each woman would sell the fish, buy wine and oil and cook food therewith, then, with a mirror in her hand, go out to her husband in the field where the two would eat and drink. After they had eaten and drunk, she would say to her husband, “Come and see in this mirror who is more handsome—you or I,” and thus slowly she aroused desire in her husband and he would lie with her, and at once the Holy One would remember her. With how many children? With two in her womb at the same time, some say. With six, others say. With ten, others say. With twelve, still others say. And all these opinions derive from the verse *And the children of Israel were fruitful, and in-*

creased abundantly, etc. (Exod. 1:7). According to the opinion that there were six in her womb, the phrase *were fruitful* implies one; *increased abundantly*, one; *multiplied*, one; *waxed*, one; and *exceeding mighty*, [two more]—hence, six. According to the opinion that there were ten, the verse is expounded as follows: *were fruitful* implies two; *increased abundantly*, two; *multiplied*, two; *waxed*, two; and *exceeding mighty*, two—hence ten. And according to the opinion that there were twelve, *exceeding* is taken to imply two and *mighty* two—hence twelve.

Taking the word, *yišresu*, “increased abundantly” as a form of *sērisah*, “fertility of small animals,” R. Hanina of Sepphoris commented: [By *yišresu* Scripture gives us an idea of just how fertile the Israelites were, for] it implies that the Israelites in Egypt were as fertile either as the largest of small animals or as the smallest of small animals: if by small animal, the largest of small animals, the mouse, is meant, it bears no less than six young at a time; if the smallest of small animals, the scorpion is meant, it bears no fewer than sixty at a time.

To Egyptians [who sought to stay Israel's increase] the Holy One said: The seed of Abraham to whom I said *So—[like the stars]—shall thy seed be* (Gen. 15:5) are to be diminished? And is it by your futile decrees that you intend to diminish them? By your lives, [Scripture will say of you] *But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew* (Exod. 1:12). What was it you said of them? *Lest they multiply* (Exod. 1:10)? Indeed, by your lives [*More and*] *more they multiplied*, [*more and*] *more they grew* (Exod. 1:12). To what extent? To such an extent, said R. Simeon ben Lakish, that the Egyptians *came to have a sickening abhorrence of the children of Israel* (*ibid.*). Hence when an Egyptian was about to stop a while with a friend, he would see a thousand Israelites, and [would be so sickened that] unable to go on to see his friend, he would put his hand upon his nose and all but wish he were dead, saying “I can't bear this people—how numerous it is!” With regard to Israel's increase in Egypt the Holy One said: *I have caused thee to multiply as the seedling of the field, and thou hast increased, and waxen great* (Ezek. 16:7). And upon seeing Israel going forth out of Egypt, marching as unnumerable camps under un-

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numerable standards, Moses said: *The Lord your God hath multiplied you* (Deut. 1:10). Remember that the Holy One multiplied you in Egypt even as He promised your father Abraham.

16. In comment on *And, behold, ye are "this day"* (*ibid.*), R. Hanina said in the name of R. Jose bar Hanina: What is meant by *ye are "this day"*? That your encampment this day is like the stars of heaven—your camps are set up in the same way as are the stars in heaven, which the Holy One showed Abraham when He showed him all heavenly bodies encompassing the Presence. The Holy One said to Abraham: As the heavenly bodies encompass Me with My glory in their midst, so thy children will become numerous and encamp under many standards with My Presence in their midst, as is said *Then the Tabernacle of the congregation shall set forward with the camp of the Levites in the midst of the camp: as they encamp so shall they set forward, every man in his place by their standards* (Num. 2:17). So as Israel set forward, they encompassed the Ark in their midst.

At the time Israel came up from the Red Sea, the Holy One said to Moses: Array them in many standards so that they set forward in the order of royal armies. Upon being drawn up according to their standards they went forward in the orderly fashion of royal armies, with the Levites encompassing the Ark. And so Moses said to them: *The Lord your God hath multiplied you, and, behold ye are this day as the stars of heaven are for multitude* (Deut. 1:10), which God showed to Abraham when He said to him *Thus shall thy seed be* (Gen. 15:5).

17. *The Lord God of your fathers make you a thousand times so many more as ye are* (Deut. 1:11). Israel said to Moses: Moses, you appear to set a limit upon our blessings, for you said to us *The Lord . . . make you a thousand times so many more*. In the light of Israel's remark, consider the parable of a king who had an administrator to whom he said: Go and distribute gifts among the legions. The administrator went and distributed among them a thousand gold coins. The legions said:

"Is this all you give us? The king said that he would give us many and you give us only a thousand gold coins." The administrator replied: "All that I have given you is my own. But the king, when he said he would give you coins, will indeed give them without limit."

Moses also said to Israel: The Holy One declared: *Thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth* (Gen. 28:14), and also *Look now toward heaven, and count the stars* (Gen. 15:5). When I blessed you a thousandfold, I bestowed blessing of my own, but when the Holy One said to you *and bless you* (Deut. 1:11), He meant that He will add to the blessings *so many times more* (*ibid.*). As R. Simeon ben Lakish said: The amount the Holy One adds is greater than the amount He specifies. Among mortals, the amount specified is greater than the amount added. But with the Holy One it is different: the amount He adds is greater than the amount He specifies.

The Holy One said: At the redemption from Egypt I redeemed only those of you who dwelt in Egypt—no others. But when I come to bestow upon you the redemption of the world-to-come I will redeem you doubly—all of you the world over—as is said *Twofold with His hand the Lord will add when He recovers the remnant of His people, that shall remain from Assyria, and from Egypt, and from Pathros, and from Cush, and from Elam, and from Shinar, and from Hamath, and from the islands of the sea* (Isa. 11:11).

(*Midrash Debarim Rabbah*, ed.
Saul Lieberman, *Debarim*,
12-17, pp. 9-17)

NOTES

1. See Yeb. 6:6.
2. Cain and Abel were born in the first year of Adam's and Eve's life.
3. See PRK (ed. Mandelbaum) 11:11.
4. The stages in God's making of man indicate that unlike the world which came into being by His decree, man is literally God's own handiwork.
5. Kid. 1:6.
6. In the 4th century, there were judges in the Land of Israel who judged not according to the principles of Torah, but according to their own notions of right and wrong. Some of these judges were corrupt. See Gedalyahu Allon, *Mechkarim be-Toledot Yisra'el* 2 (1958/5718), 28ff.