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Review Essay

IN THE RABBIS' GARDEN— ADAM AND EVE IN THE MIDRASH

by GERALD J. BLIDSTEIN

(Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1997)

I

Judging by its title, Professor Blidstein's book would offer us a leisurely stroll through a designated body of *midrashim*. A stroll, rather than a walk—ruminations, rather than a study. The author's introduction affirms that the tenor of this work is reflective, rather than investigative (p. xiv):

What have I done in my explorations? Where do I lead the reader? This is difficult to sum up. . . . Generally, I ask the midrash questions; I probe and nudge it further than it thinks of going. So this little volume is not exactly a commentary; it is, equally, a midrash on a midrash.

A noted scholar of Talmud, who has made his mark especially in the field of Maimonidean scholarship, Blidstein maps out his territory with characteristic care. He delineates the boundary between explication of a text and meditation upon it, even as he prepares to weave his way back and forth across the borderline. It is characteristic of this excursion into midrashic territory to allude, almost casually, to thorny and momentous issues, while the author proceeds without slackening, seeming to take them in his stride. The passage cited above is a case in point. Modern philosophers and critics have debated, at great length and in great depth, the nature of literary interpretation: what meaning is discovered—or created—by the interpreter? Is it a meaning encoded by the

author, governed by an interpretative community, or produced by the individual reader? When a reader “probes and nudges” a text “further than it thinks of going”, is he still reading the text, or has he smuggled in extraneous material? Is eisegesis (reading in) part of interpretation, or should this term be reserved for exegesis (reading out)? Blidstein signals his awareness of these issues, but it is not his purpose to resolve them or even to define them clearly. He is prepared, for the purposes of this book, to skirt around them.

What, indeed, are the purposes of this book? Why do they warrant the discursive style, which neither shuns exegetical and philosophical technicalities, nor slows its pace to devote to them the attention they undoubtedly deserve? The author tantalizes us with the following piece of autobiography, which closes his introduction (p. xiv):

Years ago I promised my children I would take a break from academic writing and do a book for them. They were, after all, too young then to understand (or find interest in) scholarship. It has taken me a long time to fulfill that promise. I have not written a story, but reflections of reflections on a story, so I have only partially kept my promise. To reflect on midrash, certainly on Genesis itself, is the least juvenile of activities. But the children, too, are now adults or are entering adulthood.

Why does the author think that the reader needs to know that this book took shape as a (partial) fulfillment of this promise? He appears to be ambivalent about his current enterprise. On the one hand, he clearly feels that there is value in presenting midrash in story-mode, divested of scholarly accoutrements; on the other hand, he seems to have hesitations about letting down his scholarly hair and addressing texts impressionistically. The promise adumbrates the nature of the work presented before the reader, while justifying the backgrounding of scholarly tools. Here too an important and fascinating issue has been suggested: what is gained and lost by use of scholarly tools? Conversely—what is the value of reading and writing impressionistically? Rather than confront the issue head on, undermining the tone and pace of the book, the author conjures up the issue with a few swift brush strokes, and moves on, leaving the reader to ponder and reflect.

The discursive-impressionistic tone of the book presents a problem to the reviewer—at least to this one. The reviewer, like other readers, is summoned to stroll with the author through the book, enjoying with him the midrashic scenery, here adding a comment and there carrying

the conversation a step further. While this type of review might best convey to the reader a sense of the book—and I am old-fashioned enough to believe that this is the main job of a reviewer—it would fail to offer the reader a critical evaluation of the book's contribution. Torn, somewhat like the author, between the lure of impressionistic appreciation and the duty of critical appraisal, I shall attempt to steer a middle course. As stern reviewer, rather than appreciative reader, I shall begin by attempting to flesh out the meaning of Blidstein's "vacation" from scholarship. Afterwards, we shall be free to meander with him through the garden.

II

Even when a scholar sets out to write an avowedly non-scholarly book, he doesn't check his scholarship at the door. The author's general erudition is apparent, although surfacing only intermittently, as in occasional citations from or allusions to writers as varied as John Dunne (p. 88), Eliade (p. 99), and Paul Morris (Introduction, p. xi), or in deployment of buzz-words such as "polysemous" (p. 98). In the field of midrash, he has availed himself of classic commentators, such as *Maharzu* (p. 91), as well as modern scholars, including Yitzhak Heinemann (p. 87), David Stern (p. 58) and Daniel Boyarin (p. 81). No attempt has been made, however, to provide comprehensive references (the work has no footnotes). Thus, Blidstein's discussion of the degree of "fit" of a *mashal* (p. 58), while referring to Stern's work on rabbinic parables,¹ takes no notice of Yonah Fraenkel's important discussion of the topic.² His discussions of two "midrashic stories" (pp. 53ff, 89ff) don't allude to Ofra Meir's parallel treatment of these stories.³ The author invites the reader to enter the garden with him lightly-clad in scholarly raiments.

Having noted the author's unsystematic references to scholarly literature, we may proceed to a more central point: his use of scholarly methodology. Based on a passage in the author's introduction (p. xiv), we would expect him to avoid "technicalities" as much as possible, even though they cannot be avoided altogether. At certain points philological issues surface, such as discussions of various manuscript readings (p. 59) and the implications of different vowel-pointings (p. 106). A midrashic passage is discussed in light of the background provided by Second Commonwealth and early Christian texts (pp. 6ff). Even these instances do not provide full-dress scholarly discussions, and philolo-

gists would question some of Blidstein's assumptions⁴ and conclusions. The author has not blinded himself to philological issues, but he has kept them largely out of sight.

References to previous scholarship and employment of philological tools may be kept in the background without seriously affecting the content of Blidstein's discussions. The specialist may be left to wonder whether and how the author took pertinent issues and possible objections into account, but the general reader—and arguably the specialist as well—benefits from a free interpretative flow. However, the author's hermeneutic assumptions and methodology cannot be so neatly shunted into the background. Insofar as these bear directly on the content of the author's readings of the midrash, we may presume that even the lay reader might wish to know how the author's technique stands up under scholarly scrutiny.

Aware of the importance of this issue, the author addresses it in his characteristic fashion (Introduction, p. xiii-xiv):

In how many ways does midrash read the Bible? Too many to tell. It can approach the text in the most outrageous manner, foisting absolutely impossible meanings on long-suffering words and phrases, splitting coherent units and combining patently discrete ones. Beginning readers are often baffled, disoriented, and disturbed. At the same time, midrash can produce the most delicately accurate readings of the Bible, awakening us to see gaps within a seemingly seamless whole and to hear echoes of distant passages. It is a textual commentary and requires its readers to grapple with the biblical text; at the same time, it deals in concrete images and mystifying parables that require its readers to extract meaning from experience. It reads very literally, but it never renounces the imagination. It hugs the ground, even when it soars. . . .

What have I done in my explorations? Where do I lead the reader? This is difficult to sum up. Sometimes I try to explain how the midrash treats the biblical text. . . . At other times, I try to plumb the content and significance of the midrashic teaching. . . .

Midrash is a multi-faceted text, which can be approached from several angles, as the author makes clear. Some scholarly background will enable us to appreciate better what he has and hasn't told us. From the Middle Ages until the present, scholars have debated whether, and how, midrash is designed to be read as biblical exegesis. At one pole stand (among many others) Rambam and Prof. Yonah Fraenkel, who perceive

midrash as a literary technique for presenting Hazal's ideas; at the other, stand (again, among many others) Maharal, Yitzhak Heinemann, and Prof. Daniel Boyarin, who perceive midrash as a kind of exegesis.⁵ Where does Blidstein stand regarding this issue? He appears to plant a foot in each camp, attributing to the midrash both "absolutely impossible meanings" and "delicately nuanced readings". While there is certainly room between the opposing scholarly camps for mediating, or dialectical, alternatives, the reader is entitled to wonder—shall we say: invited to ponder—how exactly the author would ground and formulate his midrashic hermeneutics.

As far as I can detect, there is no gap here between the author's theory and his practice—his interpretations of midrash do indeed oscillate between the two poles. In *Bereshit Rabba* 19:3b R. Hiyya faults Adam for "making the fence more than the principal thing", by conveying to Eve that touching the Tree of Knowledge is as dangerous as eating from it. The author argues for the necessity of attributing the prohibition against touching the tree to Adam, arguing (p. 29) that, although the average listener would "hear a simple overdramatization of God's words in Eve's . . . this cannot have been the case. For Eve is terribly disturbed when she sees that she is unscathed after touching the tree, which would not have happened had she invented that ban . . .". Nonetheless, after arguing for the exegetical necessity of the midrashic reading, he finds (p. 32) that the moral of the midrashic tale, addressing the need for legislators to take care not to make the fence higher than the principal which they seek to protect, seems remote from primeval Eden "but is very relevant to the rabbinic authors of midrash". The moral articulated by R. Hiyya is "addressed very specifically to the Rabbis themselves".⁶

Yet, although Blidstein acknowledges the midrashic propensity to read into the text anachronistic meanings, governed by the realities of *Hazal's* own world, he sometimes appears perturbed by the gaps between midrashic statements and the evidence of the biblical text. *Bereshit Rabba* 19:6a explains the opening of Adam and Eve's eyes after eating of the tree by means of a parable, in which a villager has broken expensive glassware and the the store-owner reacts by saying: "I know that I cannot obtain redress from you, but come and I will show you how much valuable stuff you have destroyed". After explaining the teaching of the parable, that God's pedagogy is to arouse feelings of guilt rather than punishing, the author wonders (p. 61): "But, in the biblical story, God does, in fact, punish as well . . .", ignoring the

midrashic penchant for fixating on one detail or one aspect of the biblical text and detaching it from its context.⁷

One final comment regarding the author's methodology: the conversational tone of the book enables the author to raise questions and draw conclusions from unsupported generalizations about midrashic practice. This may be unobjectionable, as when he asserts that (p. 71) "Biblical gaps are legion and the usual midrashic strategy is to fill them in".⁸ Other instances, however, are more questionable. Searching for a biblical warrant for R. Berekhiah's statement (*Bereshit Rabba* 19:8) that the trees cried out in condemnation of the sin, Blidstein proposes that *le-ruah ha-yom* (*Bereshit* 3:8) might suggest the wind swirling through the trees, but then objects that this is "more naturalistic than midrash normally is." Since midrash often fleshes out naturalistic details of the biblical narrative, it is unclear to this reader what claim the author is advancing, or why.⁹

This last point helps focus our attention on the major scholarly gap in the work before us. Blidstein has not set out to fulfill the main duty of a scholar: to make his methodological assumptions and practice transparent. He doesn't behave as an instructor, summoning the student to join him in his laboratory and verify the results for himself. His behavior may be compared, rather, to that of a tour guide, whose job is to interest, to provide pleasure, at most—to edify. In the case of this guide, his "vacation" from his scholarly task would appear to be a kind of busman's holiday. While he self-consciously doesn't lay his methodology on the table, the questions and canons of scholarship are never very far in the background. Borrowing the author's own metaphor, we might say that even when he soars, abandoning the constraints of jot-and-tittle precision, he always hugs the ground of close and methodologically-aware reading.

III

What sites do we visit and what sights do we see in Blidstein's garden. The scholarly issues have been—ambivalently—shunted into the background in order to free our guide to point out the sights and discourse about them freely and engagingly. Here is the strength of the book—our guide is knowledgeable, alert, imaginative, and articulate. Reflecting on midrashic gap-filling, he often goes several steps beyond where the midrash has left us. R. Joshua ben Karhah (*Bereshit Rabba* 18:6)

explains the juxtaposition of Adam and Eve's nakedness (*arumim*) to the serpent's subtlety (*arum*): "Because he saw them engaged in intercourse, he [the serpent] conceived a passion for her." Blidstein ponders (pp. 4-5) the meaning of sexuality in this scenario, neither sinful nor entirely innocent, and continues by attempting to reconstruct the serpent's thinking (pp. 5ff): if he is interested in Adam's death, why does he attempt to seduce Eve? Is seduction to eat the fruit a transposed sexual encounter for the serpent himself? How does the serpent feel when the woman turns upon him to accuse him?

These reflections add interest and spice to the suggestive, but undeveloped, midrashic comment. But the author takes us further, noting (pp. 6-7) the midrashic focus on the serpent as a moral agent. This contrasts sharply with the presentation of the serpent, in pre-rabbinic Second Commonwealth and early Christian texts, as a cosmic, metaphysical principle of evil. The anthropomorphic serpent of the midrash is thus revealed to be (p. 10) a dramatic device, by means of which the rabbis reflect upon spiritual meanings of the story, such as the psychological roots of sin in jealousy. He closes his discussion by pondering the parallel between the serpent's sin of aspiring to equality with man and man's sin of aspiring to be like God, wondering "whether the midrashic message is not social, as well as interpersonal". If so, what are the social limits which a person is forbidden to transgress?

Midrash is replete with anthropomorphic thinking, and Blidstein is especially responsive to this aspect of midrashic thought. The midrash explains that Adam and Eve did not die, as they had been warned, on the very day on which they sinned, because God interpreted "day" to mean a divine day of one thousand years. Blidstein comments (p. 94):

Midrash is not merely a rabbinic activity; God applies these very same techniques to His own words... Nor is this reading an automatic "objective" process. God's reading is informed by His mercy; it is a reading that is guided by its goal.

By humanizing God, *kivvakhhol*, the midrash—and Blidstein—enhance our ability to derive moral and spiritual instruction. The bounds of *imitatio dei* are extended to cover broader areas of human experience.

Anthropomorphic thinking, however, is not free of problems. The Torah related the first sin to the serpent's suggestion that man might be God-like, and the midrash follows with a further anthropomorphic idea:

“He [the serpent] began speaking slander of his Creator, saying, ‘Of this tree did He eat and then create the world; hence He orders you, ye shall not eat thereof, so that you may not create other worlds, for every person hates his fellow craftsmen.’” Blidstein discovers (pp. 38-39) multiple levels on which this midrash plays with the idea of shared divine and human characteristics. On one level, the serpent has denigrated divine creativity by attributing it to eating of a tree; at another level—following Buber—the suggestion that man may emulate the divine creativity by eating of a tree is a denigration of the value of human achievement. The serpent’s suggestion is anthropomorphic in a further negative sense by imputing to God an all-too-human attitude towards “fellow craftsmen”, rather than recognizing God’s bountiful generosity in encouraging man to emulate Him. Blidstein notes the ironic nature of the first sin, which stems from a perversion of man’s divinely-mandated quality of *imitatio dei*, concluding that “it is paradoxically clear that the serpent’s heresy lay not in promising this power [of creating worlds] to humankind, but rather in his assumption that it could be gained only if God was first destroyed.”

Anthropomorphic rabbinic thinking may be found in abundance in rabbinic parables, many of which attempt to elucidate the workings of God by deploying human analogies. Blidstein follows the lead of earlier scholars in noting that often the “fit” between the parable and the text to be explicated is often inexact, and that these discrepancies are frequently to be found at the problematic boundaries of anthropomorphic thought. Expatiating the midrashic reading of *alei te’enah* (fig leaves) as “the leaf which brought the occasion [*to’anah*] for death into the world” (*Bereshit Rabba* 19:6c), he cites another, later midrash (*Tanhuma*, *Va-yeshev* 4), which brings a parable, based on *Tehillim* 66:5, “Come and see the works of God, awesome through pretexts (the midrashic rendering of *alila*):

A parable of someone who wishes to divorce his wife. . . . When he goes home, he takes the bill of divorce with him . . . looks for an excuse to give it to her. So he says, “Prepare something for me to drink.” She pours for him; but as soon as he takes the cup from her, he says, “Here is your divorce.” She says, “Where have I sinned?” He says, “Leave my house. You poured me a lukewarm cup.” She says, “And did you know beforehand that it was going to be lukewarm, so that you wrote out the bill of divorce and brought it with you?”

Our author notes (p. 76) that, according to this midrash, God “did not tell the truth in Genesis”, making it “available to the attentive read-

er of Psalms... and to the possessor of midrashic traditions in general". Moreover the midrash "virtually accuses God of dissimulation and fairness". This is a fair enough presentation of our midrash, as far as it goes. The author, quite understandably, continues by noting the midrash's unanswered questions (p. 77): "Why should God so mislead? Why does He burden humanity and individuals with a guilt that is not truly theirs?" Here indeed is a highly problematic anthropomorphism, in which the midrash imputes to God behavior that is understandable—if hardly forgivable—in humans. Unfortunately, here our author closes his discussion, leaving us to ponder for ourselves what theological conclusions this midrash implies. The conundrum is eased but slightly, if at all, by the author's characterization of this reading as (p. 76) "a courageous midrashic understanding, which itself is in the best tradition of Job and Abraham".

Another parable analyzed by our author also raises theological problems, but here it is less clear whether the problems arise from the midrash or from its interpretation. *Bereshit Rabba* 19:10 compares God's question "Who told you that you are naked . . ." to:

A woman borrowing vinegar, who went in to the wife of a snake charmer and asked her, "How does your husband treat you?" "He treats me with every kindness", she replied, "save that he does not permit me to approach this cask which is full of serpents and scorpions." "It contains all his finery," said the other; "he wishes to marry another woman and give it to her." What did she do? She inserted her hand into it, and they began biting her. When her husband came, he heard her crying out [with pain]. "Have you touched that cask?" he demanded.

Exploring the "fit" of this parable, Blidstein acknowledges (p. 105) that it might be confined to the parallel between the questions which close the story: God and the snake charmer know, by similar means, what sin has been committed. This would leave intact the meaning of the parable which appears on the surface: the clear illustration of the faithlessness of the woman, hence of Adam and Eve. Blidstein is fascinated, however, by the alternative of a point-by-point comparison between this parable and the divine *nimshal*. Fastening on the question why the husband maintains a cask containing snakes and scorpions which his wife is forbidden to touch, he is led to ponder the uneasiness of the fit between *mashal* and *nimshal* (p. 106): "The snake charmer needs his snakes about, after all; why does the divine creator "need" a Tree of Knowledge in His garden?"

And he leads us yet further into the problematics of midrashic theology. Our parable exists, in other midrashic compilations, in two different versions. In one such version (*Abot de-Rabbi Nathan* [A], Chapter 1), the husband is not identified as a snake charmer and he leaves in the house a jar with figs and nuts, protected by a scorpion at the mouth of the jar, underneath a tight-fitting lid. Here, Blidstein explains (p. 109), "The sealed jar is a test of obedience and loyalty, almost of gratitude, a test that carries its own punishments." The author is thereby led to the following theological reflection (p. 110):

. . . while a reader may be willing to acknowledge the significance of God testing humanity and setting limits for us, it is difficult to sympathize with the husband in our mashal. Is the parable meant, then, to question God's behavior? To suggest that He is tyrannical? Or should we say that these comments are anachronistic, that husbands were allowed such behavior in the ancient world, and that the original reader of this midrash would not make our value judgment?

Here again, the author is content to raise the issue for our consideration, leaving the multiple question marks to reverberate in the reader's consciousness. Indeed this is characteristic of the tone of the book as a whole. Time and again, pregnant questions are left hovering: Does the midrash believe that an individual is commanded not to reach beyond his social status (p. 11)? "Would a more technological age be more sympathetic to the serpent's invitation [to imitate the divine creator]?" (p. 38). Is the (single) divine command issued to Adam equivalent to the later concept of (multiple) *mitsva*, or is "the transition from verb to noun . . . decisive . . . reifying the overwhelming experience to a quantifying numeral turns epic poetry into prose" (p. 67)? Is the exile from Eden, which the midrash compares to Israel's exile from their land, also only temporary (p. 101)?

Clearly the author feels that his "contract" with his readers does not require him to end his discussions with an exclamation point. One might argue, indeed, that the charm of this book lies in its penchant for leaving open questions. Blidstein's garden is strewn with more questions than answers. The midrash's power is rooted, at least partly, in its ability to startle—the arresting wordplay, the imaginative gap-filling, the fantastic reconstructions, the audacious parable. In Blidstein's hands the midrash is not domesticated. At some points, he appears to delight in carrying midrashic audacity a step further, as when he speaks of God's "puckish delight" in midrashically outwitting the angels (p. 95). The

sense of wonder and enchantment embedded in the midrash carries over into this book of reflections on the midrash, and this is perhaps its most important contribution.

NOTES

1. Parables in Midrash—Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature (Cambridge, Mass.-London, 1991)
2. *Darkhei Ha-Aggada Veha-Midrash* (Givatayim, 5751), pp. 323ff.
3. *HaSippur HaDarshani BiBreshit Rabba*, pp. 161ff, 172ff.
4. On p. 59, while correctly noting that the reading *ivroni* (blind man), rather than *iyroni* (villager) in *Bereshit Rabba* 19:6a, is suspect, insofar as it is found only in one manuscript, he maintains that "it flourishes in later retellings of our midrash... [so] even if it is not the original reading... it is a legitimate subject for our reflections". Blidstein assumes that any version of a midrash contained in a recognized midrashic work is worthy of study, whereas some scholars would maintain that if a later re-telling has arisen from a demonstrable corruption of the original, then it should be treated as nothing more than a corruption. Similarly, on p. 106, Blidstein assumes that the use by "other midrashim" of a parable of a wife of a *haver* (scholar) can justify a similar reading of *h-v-r* in the *Bereshit Rabba* passage, flying in the teeth of the generally accepted reading *habar* (snake charmer).
5. I will refer the reader only to a small portion of the contemporary literature which addresses this issue: I. Heinemann, *Darkhei Ha-Aggada* (Givatayim, 1970), pp. 1-14; D. Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington-Indianapolis, 1990), pp. 1-21; J. Fraenkel, *Darkhei Ha-Aggada veha-Midrash* (Givatayim, 5751), pp. 83-85.
6. On p. 71, Blidstein notes a characteristic difference between biblical style and midrashic practice. The Torah leaves a gap in its narrative, leaving the identity of the Tree of Knowledge in doubt, perhaps "to cultivate a surrealistic, dreamlike atmosphere"; the *midrash*, on the other hand, fills in the gap, or suggests a moralistic reason for the gap, based on the value of concealing shame-inducing facts. On pp. 53-54, addressing *Bereshit Rabba* 19:5c's explanation for why animals die, rooted in the assumption that the animals also ate of the tree (based on the word *gam* in *Bereshit* 3:6), Blidstein "wonders how seriously the Rabbis took this solution, which . . . does not explain why plants and trees wither and fail".
7. Elsewhere (p. 93), he complains of certain *midrashim* that they "fly in the face of the text itself". On p. 75, he notes that "neither the biblical 'proof-texts' nor the domestic parable necessarily prove the plot". His conclusion is sound—"the daring, ironic, midrashic assertion goes beyond its ostensible source"—but the language employed in the premise seems to betray an expectation that a proof-text "necessarily prove".

8. See I. Heinemann, *Darkhei HaAggadah*, pp. 21ff. Another example which appears to me unobjectionable is his assertion that an allegoristic reading of *midrash* is “somewhat removed from the literary realities... of the midrashic period” (p. 115).
9. On p. 107, the author dismisses a suggestive reading of a rabbinic parable, claiming that “On the whole, rabbinic parables don’t work that way.”