

# Fantasia, Enargeia, and the Rabbinical Midrash: The Classical Way to Read Jewish Texts

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## **Introduction**

The apparent discontinuity of Jewish literary tradition between the texts of the Tanakh and the Talmud seems to mark more than a switch in genres or thematic concerns. It would seem to be a radical shift or transformation of national imagination, if we dare such a sweeping generalization. The *Tanakh* consists of three main sections – *Torah*, *Nevi'im*, and *Ketuvim*, that is, the Pentateuch, the Major Prophets, and the Miscellany of Hagiographical Writings. For the most part, these biblical books can be divided into lengthy and continuous narrations, whether sagas of families, national histories and chronicles, and exemplary or allegorical stories; formally structured poems, such psalms, hymns, laments, and love songs; and harangues, sermons, and more or less discontinuous proverbs, sayings and attributed or unattributed expostulations on moral and spiritual themes. Their thematic concerns are associated with the mythical history of the human race, the national development of Israel as a Holy People, and the moral dilemmas of political crisis, exile, and relationships with God within the covenantal code, the Law.

After a gap of several centuries – albeit a period in which, as we shall only briefly note, a variety of other narratives, lyrical collections, and homiletic genres appeared outside the canonical collection – a different form of discourse becomes dominant and gradually accumulates its own canonicity, relative stability, and imaginative approach to key issues of Jewish life. These books can be generally called rabbinical or talmudic, and consist of *Mishnah* (along with the supplementary Tosafist writings), *Gamora*, which when published in conjunction with the *Mishnah* that they comment on is known as *Talmud*, albeit their two main collections, a *Yerushalmi* (or Jerusalem) *Talmud* for the Land of Israel and a *Bavli* (or Babylonian) *Talmud* for the Lands of Exile, and a series of what Jacob Neusner calls the successor books, including Midrashim or exegetical and poetic elaborations on Scripture and other separate collections of *halachic* (legal) and *aggadic* (homiletic and non-legal) commentary on biblical texts. These rabbinical books are characterized by features such as brief and seemingly disconnected anecdotal narratives, short comments and conversations or debates on thematic issues, and, as a

consequence, an almost total lack of narrative coherence, consistency, and development, on the one hand, and an analogous near-complete lack of logical coherence and development in regard to thematic exposition.<sup>1</sup> To an outsider, unfamiliar with both the inner dynamic of rabbinic dialogism and with the rhetorical strategies and techniques of wit and allusiveness, this second range of Jewish discourses seems without order, consistency or unity of purpose. In addition, the rabbinical books have an appearance of having shifted away from matters of national or even universal import to those of a strictly local, parochial, or provincial significance, and thereby to lack moral resonance outside of the Jewish world – and even then to float in a non-historical, non-political and unimportant sea of petty squabbling and quibbling.

However, these generalisations, once set out in this bald way, fall apart almost immediately as unviable and untrue for many reasons. Not least of these reasons may be that close attention to the *Tanakh* shows that it contains many aspects of later rabbinical writings already functioning within itself, so that we can characterize it as being engaged in a rabbinical commentary upon itself long before rabbis and their central institutions of scholarship and legislation came into being. In addition, though the later books sometimes seem to be grotesque extensions of the least narrative parts of the Five Books of Moses, particularly the last three books with their exposition of the Law handed down at Mounts Sinai and Horeb and expounded further by Moses, Aaron and other elders in the Tent of Meeting, have a witty, personal and philosophical keenness not really evident in the biblical texts. In fact, once we are alerted to these three features – wit, personality and philosophy – it is possible to begin to find a subtle sequence of red threads binding together the otherwise apparent gallimaufry and confusion of trivia that constitutes the so-called Sea of *Talmud*.

More than that, I am now going to argue, at least in a preliminary way and in the footsteps of one branch of modern scholarship, that this shift in the imagination of Hebrew civilization from *Tanakh* to *Talmud* is also a shift from Middle Eastern to Mediterranean, that is, classical Greek and Roman (or Hellenistic) civilization. Such a shift, which is also a transformation, is not a replacement of one by the other, but rather a recasting of the traditional ancient materials in a form that is motivated by the need to respond to new circumstances, challenges, and crises that cannot otherwise be endured. In each instance, when Israel is faced with a set of events that force it to leave its

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<sup>1</sup> See Jeffrey L. Rubinstein, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition and Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) for an examination of Talmudic narrative techniques. Also see the collection of essays edited by Carol Bakhos, *Current Trends in the Study of Midrash* (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2006).

position of relative stability and harmony, either by destruction of its institutions, expulsion from the lands where its laws and customs are operative, or undermining of its educational and intellectual foundations, Judaism has created new – and sometimes, new kinds of – discourses to attempt to stabilize, fill in gaps, or re-envision the situation mythically, morally and juridically.

### Classical Connections

This article cannot do more than touch on a few minor areas of this overwhelming series of shifts and metamorphoses in Jewish history. What follows is at once, then, an introductory foray, a synthesis of some recent insights by major scholars, and a few exemplary readings of texts to show how and where the changes are occurring in the rabbinical books. One of the foremost Israeli folklorists and commentators on ancient popular traditions, Dov Noy, wrote a quarter of a century ago:

The Talmudic-Midrashic *Aggadah*, unlike the philosophical works of Greece, does not formulate problems in abstract terms, but the problems are evident in the story and the narrative plot. The acting characters of the story, or the sages discussing it, often manifest various philosophical attitudes.<sup>2</sup>

From this brief statement we may extrapolate several key points to be discussed here: there is a relationship between rabbinical writings of the rabbis in the formative age of Judaism and the philosophers and rhetorical theorists of classical Greece and Rome. While these different cultural groups use different techniques to argue their cases, they are nevertheless engaged in similar enterprises common to the Mediterranean world of Late Antiquity.

The rabbinical mode of argumentation, though it appears radically different in style to that of the ancient pagan philosophers, nevertheless resembles the other sufficiently to be seen as concerned with questions of epistemology, moral discernment and application, discussions of social and political justice, and similar topics specific to the classical concerns of philosophy. The *aggadah* therefore has to be approached in ways that seem more familiar to literary analysis than to philosophical discussion, but still will reveal in due course essential thematic concerns, which go beyond the normal boundaries of literary criticism and enter those of philosophy proper.

By coupling together both Talmudic and Midrashic narrative modes, Dov Noy also alerts us to a shared enterprise in both of these rabbinical kinds

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<sup>2</sup> Dov Noy, 'The Jewish Theodicy Legend', in *Fields of Offering: Studies in Honor of Raphael Patai*, ed. Victor D. Sanua (Rutherford, Madison, Teaneck, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press and London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, A Herzl Press Publication, 1983), pp. 66-67.

of exegesis and enhancement of texts that requires for understanding an appreciation of how Jews see the various texts that came into being in the eight hundred years or so between the close of the Hebrew Bible (*Tanakh*) and the close of the two major talmudic collections, the *Yerushalmi* (The *Talmud* of Jerusalem or the Land of Israel) and the *Bavli* (The *Talmud* of Babylonia or the Lands of Dispersion): between them come the *Mishnah*, Tosafot, and a series of “the successor books”, not least of which are the *Midrashim*. Though each of these separate documents comes into being because the authors, compilers, and redactors felt compelled by particular circumstances – or more accurately, crises – that beset the Holy People of Israel, the cumulative result has been, precisely because the persons involved in the enterprise shared basic attitudes and rhetorical techniques, a unified, mutually-enlightening body of rabbinical discourse. The attitudes shared focus on the importance of written texts as the medium of both revelation and analysis of that revelation. The techniques shared centre on oblique, witty, and dialogic modes of discussion, debate and amplification of the principles contained within that ongoing revelation, at once an originary moment of reception of a written text (Tablets of the Law or *Torah* scrolls) and a simultaneous, dynamic and continuing production of an oral text (*Torah al-peh*). While the Written *Torah* is contextualized by Israel as a Middle Eastern civilization in the Ancient World and hence shares many of its own attitudes and strategies of application with other contemporaneous or precedent civilizations, although always with a radically critical distinction, the Oral *Torah* grows and develops within a larger, Mediterranean culture shared particularly with what emerges as Hellenistic civilization.

### **Inadvertence and Implication**

Dov Noy argues that in rabbinical writing it is the inadvertent implication, “talking unawares”,<sup>3</sup> that is picked out for most careful scrutiny and discussion. Rabbis aver that the most trustworthy evidence in a trial is that from a witness who speaks naively, without consideration of the impact or implications of what he or she is saying at that point. Noy sums up the rabbinical decision neatly: “The *Halakha* accepts as trust-worthy the testimony of a witness who tells of an event in this manner, without being asked and without being aware of the possible legal implications”.<sup>4</sup> This unforeseen implication, when utilized by commentators in their reading of sacred books, goes beyond the intentions, intelligence or awareness of the speaker or actor, as well as the original writer or commentator, and hence may illuminate passages elsewhere

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<sup>3</sup> Noy, ‘The Jewish Theodicy Legend’, p. 66.

<sup>4</sup> Noy, ‘The Jewish Theodicy Legend’, p. 66. The reference Noy makes here is to *Bavli*, Yebamot 121b.

in the same text that were supposedly conceived in a different light altogether or in other books not yet compiled or edited. For the detail picked out may be credited less to the naïve speaker or the person passing on a tradition in the name of authoritative predecessors and more to the glimpse this detail gives in to a situation otherwise occluded or totally closed off from inspection by prior concerns.

Akin in part to certain aspects of irony as structured into the philosophical, dramatic and narrative classical works of ancient Greece and Rome, this rabbinic stress on the inadvertency of detail – sometimes, an apparent error in spelling or grammar by a scribal copyist – goes further than the normal range of implications allowed to irony. There are several reasons and dimensions to this witty discursive ploy of supposed inadvertency. As in the most subtle word-play, allusions and patterns of thematic relationship to be found in Homer, Apuleius or other classical authors, the rabbis inject into their own exegesis of sacred texts a sense of an orderly purpose that belies the chaotic or anarchic nature of history when experienced outside the conscious realization of God's controlling justice.

In the writings of the Greeks and Romans, these deflections to the eccentric and the trivial signal the generic force of comedy and satire. These genres rise out of and then develop through the Cynical schools of thought, wherein a model of applied morality and ethics undermines the suspected motives of sophistical learning, that is, modes of knowledge. On the one hand these can be taught to anyone for a price and to prepare the practitioners to function within established social institutions; and, on the other hand, to fissure the certainties of supposedly abstract, objective processes of thought. In both cases, the Cynics seek to expose hypocrisy, materialistic goals, and Machiavellian principles – those willing to argue either side of a case and adopt or adapt any position for the sake expediency, self-aggrandizement, or political influence. The line from the Cynics to the rabbis runs through figures such as Socrates and Apuleius, with some peripheral guidance from both Epicureans and Stoics, as well as a number of secular authors who are cited usually more indirectly than directly in talmudic discourse. Word-play, in brief, manipulates words in order to destabilize conventional structures of epistemology and open spaces for Jewish insights and experiences.<sup>5</sup>

In reaction against the polytheistic, idol-worshipping import assumed to underlie all pagan writings, the rabbis seek to reveal a transcendent, timeless unity of purpose and meaningfulness that is at the same time dynamic, continuous, and shockingly surprising. The truth and ethical principles of the

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Parry, 'Ancient Ethical Theory', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2009), at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-ancient/>, accessed 28/12/09.

Law exist in a kind of cybernetic accord with the free will of individual persons, the shifting waves of political and social history, and the tremendous and extensive diversity of the natural universe. They do this, however, by diverting philosophical discussions from either the abstract logos of classical rhetoric and homiletics, or the street language of Socratic speech, as Alcibiades describes both the form and content, as well as effect, of Socratic teachings, in Plato's *Symposium*.<sup>6</sup> Rabbis frame their discussions on minor domestic, commercial and agrarian incidents unrelated to historical, political or theological issues, and seem to address topics of what in classical rhetoric would be categorized as the matter of farce, comedy and satire – bodily functions, child-rearing, spousal relationships, commercial arguments, farming practice, and so forth. The language moreover, though analogous to what is mocked in Socrates and other putative Cynical traditions, seems to be mundane, ordinary, and personal rather than ritualised, formal and hieratic or cultic.

### Simultaneity in Language

Still another way to approach the specific language used to express rabbinic debates and arguments, both halachic and aggadic, is a figure is picked out for discussion by Robert Gordis. This rhetorical trope is called *talhin*, and like *paronomasia* it suggests that several meanings to a word, phrase or allusion are operative, but unlike word-play proper, it is not a conflation of sounds or appearances, even with intricate manipulation of “letters”. “*In tilhin*”, according to Gordis, one word conveys two levels of meaning simultaneously, one primary, the other secondary, and the reader’s recognition of both is the source of aesthetic pleasure”.<sup>7</sup> This description is too cautious. The figure should be understood more dynamically and generously, so that it indicates in potential more than two simultaneous meanings, none of which may take precedence except as the reader shifts the perspective from which the exegetical process is manipulated, and the pleasure is often more than aesthetic, in that it may open up wonderful new insights into God’s plan, the merits or the demerits of the characters discussed, and the manner in which halachic law may be applied in diverse cases. Not even that expansion of the description of this rabbinic wit is enough. *Talhin* may signal an explosive

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<sup>6</sup> Plato, ‘Symposium’, trans. Benjamin Jowett, *The Internet Classics Archive*, at <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/symposium.html>, accessed 28/12/09.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Gordis, ‘Mythology, Folklore and Tradition: Studies in Yiddish Etymology’, in *Fields of Offering: Studies in Honor of Raphael Patai*, ed. Victor D. Sanua (Rutherford, Madison, Teaneck, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press and London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, A Herzl Press Publication, 1983), p. 87.

intrusion by the rabbinical commentator, one that shatters at least for a moment the surface textures of syntax, logic and historical continuity in a narrative or the flow of logical argument, reassembles the particles of discourse, including the transformation of verbal and numerical equivalences (*gematria*), establishing new contexts in analogous passages elsewhere in the same book or some successor book. Such disruption, intrusion and reformulation may include the creation of characters, objects, places and actions by re-voicing of the Hebrew consonants, redistribution of the letters, reassembly of the words, and imposition of non-Hebraic word-play. But again, the key factor in these innovations is that no one reading replaces the other: all can be seen by shifting the perspective of the mental eye, as it were.

### Rhetoric and the Rabbis

The shifting perspective which transforms the kind and function of images in the mental eye are best understood in a technical sense by discussion of classical rhetorical theories. Philosophically and theologically, of course, rabbis and classical writers have very different agenda, and their understanding of the function of these rhetorical tropes can at best be analogous within different contexts. Let us take a couple of examples of the rabbinical imagination before looking into these two rhetorical terms mentioned in the previous section. Gershom Scholem, discussing “The Crisis of Tradition in Jewish Messianism”,<sup>8</sup> cites two passages where the crisis is encountered, challenged, and seemingly resolved.<sup>9</sup> These form part of a series of mitzvot that will not be continued in the future of messianic times, as Rashi comments on the reading of Numbers 7:11, “Today, to do them”, as explained in the *Talmud at Avodah Zarah* 31 and 4b.

First, Scholem says, the *Talmud* cites a debate on the status of the *Torah* at the End of Days.<sup>10</sup> He refers to *Midrash Vayikra, Rabba* IX:7 (which may be supplemented by several other rabbinical writings for what seems a

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<sup>8</sup> Gershom G. Scholem, ‘La crise de la tradition dans le messianisme juif’, in *Le messianisme juif: Essais sur la spiritualité du judaïsme*, ed. and trans. Bernard Dupuy (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1974), pp. 103-138; originally *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974). This essay is also available, albeit without notes, online at The Greatest Service (3 September, 2007), <http://cliffordshackforum.blogspot.com/2007/09/crisis-of-tradition-in-jewish.html>, accessed 28/12/09.

<sup>9</sup> For a more mystical discussion of the topic keyed to kabbalistic frames of reference, see Rav Pinchas Winston, ‘*Parshas Mishpatim*: Laying Down the Law Forever’, [roshhashanah.torah.org](http://roshhashanah.torah.org) (2005) at <http://roshhashanah.torah.org/learning/perceptions/5765/mishpatim.html>, accessed 28/12/09.

<sup>10</sup> Scholem, ‘La crise de la tradition’, pp. 110-111.

commonplace), “All sacrifices will be abolished except for the offering of thanksgiving”.<sup>11</sup> “All prayers will be abolished except for the prayer of thanksgiving”. “All festivals will be abolished except for Purim, which will never be abolished”. Here the absolute closure to the old ways – which are the ways of our current status under the Law – seems to resolve with the abolishment of all sacrifices, prayers, or festivals except one, and this one both marks the beginning of a new time and continues the essence of all that has gone before. But then comes a voice of objection, dissension, and modification. Rabbi Eleazar intrudes into the debate, as found both in *Yalkut* and *Midrash Mishlei* where Proverbs 9:2 is in question, “Also the Day of Atonement [that is, *Yom ha Kippurim*] will never be abolished”. He adds to the list of what will continue and threatens the thrust of the radical transformation first announced. If there is one additional holiday not to be abolished, then why not another and another, until the original statement is watered down to meaninglessness? That breech, however, does not see a flood of other exceptions. The reason is that the addition is not so much a supplemental statement, a special pleading further exception to the rule of what will no longer exist in the Days of the Messiah, but something else. Scholem remarks that Rabbi Eleazar does not so much put forward a further example of festival that will survive the closure of past history. He makes a pun. “The pun”, Scholem says, “is both witty and dangerous, for it rests on the equivalent of sound present in both the name of the most holy and thoroughly ascetic holiday of the Jewish calendar, *Yom Kippur*, and *Purim*, a day of joy”.<sup>12</sup> The pun seems simple enough; *Yom ha-Kippurim* and *Purim*.

The explanation given by the Israeli historian of mystical religions is that “a utopian element emerges here which splits apart the Day of Atonement and equates it with its opposite”. He adds casually at the close of this discussion, that although these changes are “witty and dangerous”, they are nevertheless “statements that are made almost in passing”. Let me unpack this complex statement and relate it to what has been said before. Two different kinds of Jewish holiday are juxtaposed, a similar sound noted in both, and they are thus made equivalent. The equivalence results in the splitting of the Day of Atonement, by a separation out of the two syllables of *pur* plus *im* (as though they were a meaningful body of meaning in themselves, instead of the *im* merely giving the plural ending to the word *kippur*). The two different kinds of holidays which began as opposites are transformed into a single equivalence, since the first, the Day of Atonement is a day of seriousness, fasting, and soul-searching, whereas the second, *Purim* or The Festival of Esther or of Lots, is a

<sup>11</sup> For kabbalistic texts, see Winston, ‘*Parshas Mishpatim: Laying Down the Law Forever*’.

<sup>12</sup> Scholem, ‘*La crise de la tradition*’, p. 110.

day of joy, feasting, and carnival revelry and drunkenness. The new holiday that is created by this splitting and reconstruction is one of supreme joy, heavenly celebration, and divine ecstasy.

These three points are, I believe, what Gershom Scholem is getting at in his commentary. My own view is somewhat different. The two holidays, or rather, the two names of the holidays are more than juxtaposed, they are superimposed. The so-called pun fits the name of the second festival, Purim, into the longer name of the first, *Yom ha-Kippurim*. Purim is absorbed into the Day of Atonement. Or we might say instead: the word *Purim* emerges out of the name *Yom ha-Kippurim*. After hearing that the most joyful, post-biblical holiday, Purim, will be the one of all to be still celebrated at the End of Time, Rabbi Eleazar expands it to designate as well the most sacred and solemn of all Jewish holidays. In so doing, he transforms it, allowing the joy and ecstasy of Purim to flood into the fear and anticipation of Yom Kippur. The result is anything but equivalence. Both holidays are changed and merged into a new celebration that draws on the essential qualities of each, and both are taken out of their original contexts and placed together in a new matrix of relationships between earth and heaven, mankind and God. In other words, it is not a matter of splitting and then the juxtaposing of equivalence. There is the discovery of that which was hidden, silent and supposedly abolished in the second holiday name, *Yom ha-Kippurim*, the full name of which was condensed into the first, *Purim*. Rabbi Eleazar's "adding" of a second festival to escape extinction is really the expansion of the first name, a revelation of what was previously unnoticed and unintended.

Now Scholem makes his point reproducing the very rhetorical figure that he seems to downplay to the point of triviality or insignificance. How they can be "witty and dangerous" and also casual signals something more than he is able to deal with. In fact, when Scholem says that Rabbi Eleazar's comments "are statements that are made almost in passing", he himself makes this comment "almost in passing" as well. The revolutionary messianic innovation inherent in this pun on the two names of holidays, so important in later post-*Mishnah* Jewish writing, appears first as a mere side comment, one left undeveloped by the original speakers and commentators. It would seem, ironically, the modern author treats this revolutionary transformation as an interesting but essentially naïve – innocent of theological intentions – consideration on the way to more important matters. It is as though Rabbi Eleazar did not realize and perhaps could not realize what he was actually saying when he made his witty remark. Similarly, does Scholem know that he is operating within a particular rabbinical convention? He certainly does not seem to be aware, so that we will have to come back to this point when we deal

with the classical rhetorical figures so that the apparently casual and yet ill-fitting phrase “witty and dangerous” takes on a more revealing significance.

As soon as he has completed his discussion of the above example of how word play operates in rabbinic discourses, Scholem passes on to the next matter:

Though still remaining in the purely speculative exegetical and literary realm, a remark concerning Psalm 146: 7 goes much further. It decisively removed the words “The Lord releases the prisoners” from the previous undialectical interpretation affording to which the tradition will be completely fulfilled in the Messianic age and, in most descriptions of it, shone forth with undiminished radiance.<sup>13</sup>

Again we are, according to Scholem, dealing with rabbinical commentators – here it is a matter of *Midrash Tehillim* on Psalms 146:7 – who do not possess full awareness of the import or consequences of their remarks, although they do seem to be somewhat more advanced towards theological speculations into the nature of the messianic period as something that will do more than bring to completion and perfection programmes and principles already at work since the revelations of the mythical ancestors. Whatever the contextual concerns of the Psalmist in his own historical period, the rabbis now claim to discern a higher intention, which they can clarify by concentrating on the substance of the words themselves, rather than merely their overt sense. Here again is Scholem’s description of what happened:

The Hebrew words of the Psalm lend themselves as well to a more daring but still faithful translation as: “The Lord dissolves the commandments” or “The Lord allows the forbidden” (*mattir isurim* instead of *mattir asurim*). What does this mean? Some say: ‘All animals which were forbidden [to be eaten] in this world God will one day again allow, as was the case until the time of Noah’. And why, in fact, has He forbidden them? In order to see who would accept His words and who would not. In the time to come, however, He will allow everything which He has forbidden.<sup>14</sup>

The rabbis seem to be arguing over the problem of how to interpret the biblical injunction that would allow the eating of unclean animals at the End of Time when the Messiah has come, as though the regulations in the *Torah* were time-bound to the world before sanctification, whereas they feel strongly that *Torah* is eternal and the Law is perfected not abrogated in the Days of the Messiah. This seems to lead to a division of the question into at least two parts. First, does the promise that forbidden foods will be permitted at the end of time mean that this dissolution of the regulation is a return to the status quo ante,

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<sup>13</sup> Scholem, ‘La crise de la tradition’, p. 111.

<sup>14</sup> Scholem, ‘La crise de la tradition’, p. 110.

before the Expulsion from the Garden of Eden, and hence a rectification of a temporary measure not a category shift completely on what is clean and what is impure, *kosher* and *trayf*? Or second, does it mean that there is indeed a more radical transformation of the world at the End of days which does more than sanctify and purify what was disturbed by the sinfulness of the original parents in Eden? A new beginning in new terms, so that the eating of what had been stipulated as unclean animals does not transgress the previous *mitzvot* because these animals and the people allowed to eat them are transformed from what they were, both from what they had been as pre-lapsarian innocents in gan eden and as sinful creatures during the intervening period until the Days of the Messiah? Scholem argues that it is this second interpretation that radically alters Jewish messianic beliefs from traditional rectification to apocalyptic transformation.

The interpretation in the *midrash*, however, is not discussed so much in speculative, dialectical, or philosophical terms, as in a witty re-reading of the primary text: the voicing of the Hebrew consonantal passage turns *mattir isurim* into *mattir asurim*. Changing the vowels to get *isurim* instead of *asurim* is indeed witty and dangerous, witty in the sense of a pun that merely substitutes one sound for another close to it, but dangerous because it suggests that conventional (*pshat*) readings of the text have hitherto been out of step with the original intentions of the writer of the text.

### Midrashic Imagination

The midrashic imagination normally consists of four kinds of readings or interpretation beyond that of the simple *miqra*, that is, the sounding out of the consonants into traditional syllables, words, and phrases. For beginners, books contain vowel markings to guide such a preliminary reading. But interpretation proper carries forward through *pshat*, the conventional and normative reading that confirms current legal understandings of the Law or narrative event. This is anything but a literal level, as in Christian schemes of allegory, for it often involves elaborate substitutions of “what is spoken and understood” for “what is seen” on the page. Next comes *ramez*, the recontextualization of the word, phrase, or sentence under discussion, in order to interpret through analogies to passages in the same or similar books; the reader takes the “hint” from a shared sound, peculiarity of spelling or syntax, or occasionally detail of description or narration. Third is what is known as *drash* – although the whole process can also be termed a *midrash* – in the sense of a explanatory essay, narrative, riddle or other creative enhancement of the text in question. More specifically, this kind of interpretation begins to shatter the surface textures of the passage and reassemble letters, sounds, syntactic units and other elements of narration or

logical argumentation to generate a new version of the original, sometimes with new characters, objects, sequences of action, frames of reference, and moral principles. Finally there is the mode of interpretation named *sod*, the secret, which operates by finding new and unexpected aspects of the text hidden in the spelling, grammar and order of the words on the page, sometimes even in the formation and size of letters, layout in the manuscript pages, and other non-verbal or extra-literary aspects. The purpose here is less to recreate a different version of the original text by providing it with alternative letters, words, contexts, or contents; it is to reveal meanings supposedly already always there in the sacrality of the original script but requiring shifts in perspective to see. These four kinds of interpretation, *pshat*, *remez*, *drash* and *sod*, yield an anagram, *PaRaDeS*, that is, *Pardes* or Paradise. They are also keyed to an *aggadah* about Four Men who entered paradise, each of whom has a different fate as a consequence, only Rabbi Akiva able to return safe and sane from his daring flight of interpretive fancy.<sup>15</sup> The others either go mad, turn apostate or die. It is in the light of this symbolic anecdote that we should understand Scholem's warning about the dangers of rabbinic wit in *aggadic* interpretation. It is also in this light that we can understand how the rabbis ventured to read their texts in processes that resemble, to a certain extent, what the rhetoricians called *enargeia* and *fantasia*.

### ***Enargeia* and *Fantasia*: The Power of Classical Rhetoric**

Let me here quote from a study of rhetorical visualization in eighteenth-century poetry by James A. J. Wilson;

The tradition begins with Aristotle, who states in his Rhetoric that "smart sayings are derived from proportional metaphor and expressions which set things before the eyes...things are set before the eyes by words that signify actuality". Visualisable descriptions are also encouraged by the [pseudo-Ciceronian] *Ad Herennium*, the works of Cicero, and those of Quintilian. The *Ad Herennium* defines the figures of Descriptio (vivid description) and Demonstratio (ocular demonstration), both of which are regarded as effective means for arousing the passions of indignation or pity, and directing these passions to fulfil specific aims. Quintilian defines *enargeia*, which Cicero calls "illumination" or "actuality", as that quality "which makes us not so much to narrate as to exhibit the actual

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<sup>15</sup> Mortimer Ostow, 'Four Entered the Garden: Normative Religion versus Illusion', in *Fantasy, Myth and Reality: Essays in Honour of Jacob A. Arlow*, eds Harold P. Blum, Yale Kramer, Arlene K. Richards and Arnold D. Richards (New York: International Universities Press, 1988), pp. 287-301.

scene, while our emotions will be no less actively stirred than if we were present at the actual occurrence.<sup>16</sup>

The reason why I cite this passage in full is first of all because it shows that the ideas we are dealing with derive from all the main Greek and Roman rhetorical theorists and so constitute the heart and soul of classical ideas of how verbal language translates into mental images laden with potent emotional persuasion. Secondly, because it is assumed that the power of words is transformative and penetrative, that is, that they change from being sounds in a public oration or declamation, or graphic representations on the page, into sensory experiences that stimulate the mind to form mental pictures. In a sense, to take T.S. Eliot's expression, objective correlatives of the emotions which the speaker initially experienced or wished to convey to his listeners in order to achieve the goals of rhetoric, namely, to move them to indignation, pity, or some other powerful feeling and associated action. More specifically, in regard to forensic or political persuasion, the speaker seeks to establish an ideological disposition in the audience to accept the experience of this orally induced truth in place of any prior memories, commonsense understanding or formal statements of what happened, what was seen, or what an event may have meant. This replacement or displacement of previously existing images, words, and emotions in the mind of the audience by those conveyed by the orator's speech was also known as *superstitio*; a sense of having knowledge or experience of something otherwise either completely unknown or known in a different way with other kinds of meaning embedded in it.

While *enargeia* can operate by energizing the words of the orator in such a way as to forcefully displace or replace prior knowledge and experiences and ways of understanding reality, the word itself derives from the root *argo*, light or illumination. *Energia* is an essentially different word, even though it is part of the total effect and purpose of the rhetorician's endeavour. Hence Wilson speaks of "the pseudo-transfer of emotive reaction from persona/character to reader/watcher". The process set out is a "pseudo-transfer" to Wilson because, from his modern sceptical position, he does not believe there is a real transfer of emotive reaction, not an actual transformation of words into images and from images into an emotional belief in the reality of the received and constructed experience of reality. To a certain degree, the ancients shared this scepticism and knew they were speaking metaphorically of psychological phenomena they could not otherwise understand. Hence the

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<sup>16</sup> James A. J. Wilson, 'Behold! The Rhetoric of Visualisation in Mid-Eighteenth-century Poetry', Paper delivered to the British Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies Conference, 2004, at <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~lady1262/BSECSpaper2004.html>, accessed 28/12/09.

ambiguity inherent in the term they used to designate the transferred mental image: *fantasia*.

In a legal argument, the lawyer for the defence attempts to persuade the jury that his version of what happened is the true one, so as to prove his client's innocence of a crime charged against him. On the other side, the prosecuting attorney seeks to convince these fellow citizens that a crime took place, that the accused committed the act, and that consequently a verdict of guilty is required to satisfy the law and protect the state. In effect, each of these specialists in forensic oratory seek to create a more powerful speech than the other and thus to establish in the jury's collective mind a clear representation of what happened. This can be seen dramatically and fictionally in Shakespeare's *Othello* where Iago persuades the Moorish general that Desdemona is guilty of adultery by preparing him to accept as ocular proof what is only a neutral piece of circumstantial evidence, her handkerchief. Iago's words illuminate Othello's mind with suspicions, confusions, and probabilities that sight of the handkerchief transfers into the hero's mind a powerful scene of illicit lovemaking between his wife and Cassio. All of the Moor's past knowledge of Desdemona, albeit brief, and his trust based on their intense love, all of that is replaced by a conviction of her guilt in a crime he fears so much that he cannot approach it with common sense or rational questioning.

## Conclusion

With rabbis there is little in the way of visualization of this sort in regard to people, things, events and ideas. Marc Bregman has discussed a few instances where the *midrashim* attempt to argue for changes in the way texts mean by supplementing the normal word-play in exegesis with focus on the process of seeing itself, in at least two senses.<sup>17</sup> Firstly, how characters look, recognize and act on what they see, as in the case of the *Akedah*, the Binding of Isaac, where the approach to Mount Moriah where the sacrifice is to take place is visualized in terms of simultaneous perceptions of performance of the cult sacrifices in the Temple on Mount Zion. The consolidation of these two kinds of action embodied in the emergence of the term 'to see', *reah*, in the name of the place, Moreah, by which means 'seeing' becomes a form of

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<sup>17</sup> Marc Bregman, 'Aqedah: Midrash as Visualization', *The Journal of Textual Reasoning*, vol. 10 (2001), at <http://etext.virginia.edu/journals/tr/archive/volume10/Bregman.html>, accessed 28/12/09. Also worthy of note are the commentaries on this essay in the same volume of this journal by Zacheray Braiterman and Daniel N. Conway. See also Marc Bregman, 'Isaak Heinemann's Classic Study of *Aggadah* and *Midrash*', Department of Religious Studies, University of North Carolina at Greenboro (19 March, 2008), at <http://www.uncg.edu/rel/contacts/faculty/Heinemann>, accessed 28/10/10.

sacramentalization and participation in the sacrifice of Isaac which remains incomplete. Secondly, how things or actions are seen by those outside of the formal scene itself, when, for instance, an event is recontextualized into another environment, such as when the Song of Songs is imagined to be sung either at the time of the giving of the law at Mount Sinai or of the crossing through the Red Sea by the Children of Israel. In each instance the imagery of the erotic lyrics become substantiated when seen as details within historical (or mythical) actions.

As José Faur and others have shown in the last twenty-odd years, the rabbis were already always engaged in the kind of creative speculations (sometimes to quite fantastic degrees) that we are familiar with as markers of late modern and post-modern literature. Franz Kafka, Albert Cohen and Elias Canetti engage in these kinds of witty textual practices. Rather than dismissing *midrashim* and *aggadot* as the peculiar, if not mad or demented, actions of an intellectual elite cut off from the mainstream of Western intellectual tradition, we would be better advised to take them as central components of our civilization, and enjoy – to the extent of moral learning and psychological enrichment – their exegetical games.