

THE EXEGESIS (*MIDRASH*) OF THE TRADITION OF ISRAEL

Its Greatness and Limits

by Pierre Lenhardt

The Hebrew word *midrash*, from the root *darash*, which means to seek or search, expresses what the exegesis of the sages of Israel is: the search for the meaning of Scripture.

This search, which we will henceforth call Midrash, is part of a much vaster search which embraces it and serves as its basis. According to Scripture and the Tradition, one “searches” with intensity, out of hatred or love, in order to find.¹ The psalmist complains that his enemies seek his hurt (Psalm 38:12); he also speaks of those that seek the Lord (Psalm 24:6). God also seeks and searches: He searches all hearts (1 Chronicles 28:9); as the shepherd of Israel, He seeks His lost sheep (Ezekiel 34:16); He searches the land of Israel (Deuteronomy 11:12).² According to the Tradition, God is “the one who searches for us,” or, in other words, He seeks Israel.³ After the destruction of the First Temple (in 587 BC), God complains that no one searches for his flock (Ezekiel 34:6); He complains that no one seeks out Zion (Jeremiah 30:17). Concerning this last complaint, Rabbi Yohanan (Palestinian sage, end of 3rd century AD) understood that searching, here called *derishah*, is required by God, which, he said, explains the fact that the Second Temple, destroyed in 70 A.D., is remembered in the liturgy.⁴ The searching called *derishah*, the active noun from the root *darash*, embraces all searching and thus automatically includes the exegetical searching which the Tradition calls Midrash exclusively.

Midrash is thus above all an activity: the act of searching for the meaning of Scripture. This is what one finds in the sentence of Simeon Ben Gamaliel: “It is not the Midrash that matters, but the act.”⁵ Midrash also signifies action in the expression *beit ha-midrash* (house of searching), equivalent to *beit ha-talmud* (house of study and teaching). Ben Sira, in the original Hebrew, uses this expression in his exhortation, “Turn to me, O ignorant, seat yourselves in my house of searching (*beit midrashi*).” (Ben Sira,

¹ Jesus assumed this to be familiar to his audience when he said: “Seek, and you will find” (Matthew 7:7).

² An anonymous, authorized tradition, probably previous to the destruction of the second Temple, teaches that this particular, apparently exclusive search of the land of Israel implies that God searches all countries together with the land of Israel (cf. Sifrei on Deuteronomy 11:12, p. 80).

³ Introduction to the Hosha’ anot on the festival of Sukkot.

⁴ Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 41 a.

⁵ Mishnah Avot, 1:17. Simeon ben Gamaliel was the son of Gamaliel, the teacher of St. Paul (cf. Acts 22:3). According to him, Midrash as the activity of interpreting Scripture, as study, is less important than action (the observance of the commandments). This view was corrected by the masters of Yavneh, after the destruction of the Temple (70 A.D.), who shared the opinion of Rabbi Akiva that “great is talmud (the act of studying and teaching)”, which means, in the context, that talmud is greater than action (the observance of the commandments) “because talmud leads to action” (Sifrei on Deuteronomy 11:13, p. 85). See also Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 40 b, and Mishnah Avot 3:9, which insist on the value of action. See also the unforgettable declaration of the people of Israel in Exodus 24:7: “All that the Lord has spoken, we will do and hear.”

51:23) Ben Sira thus demonstrates, in about 180 B.C, that the word “Midrash” still retained its original sense of the act of searching, although this sense already appeared to have been lost in about 350 B.C., in the Second Book of Chronicles, where it means book or chronicle, and is thus the result of an act and not the act itself (cf., 2 Chronicles, 13:22; 24:27). Thus the word “Midrash” meant first of all, and continued to mean, the act of searching, but it also had the derivative sense of the result of the searching, the teachings drawn from Scripture by means of this search: isolated teachings or teachings gathered together in collections of different kinds and of different dimensions, called “Midrash” in the singular and “Midrashot” or “Midrashim” in the plural.⁶

Midrash is above all a search for the meaning of Scripture. However, it forms part of a more basic search: the search for God, who Himself is seeking and wants to be searched for, and who speaks in the Scriptures in order to be known, heard, listened to and obeyed. The Midrash searches for God in order to find Him, a thing that is possible because God desires this searching, inspires it and makes sure it is sufficient.

We shall see in the first part of this study how the Pharisee masters recognized and expounded the greatness of Midrash. For them, as for their successors to this day, the Midrash had the status of the oral Torah, the Word of God, no less than the Scriptures themselves. The greatness of Midrash is thus unsurpassed.

Yet Midrash, as an activity and with its results, forms part of the oral Torah which precedes it, embraces it, receives it and transmits it, organizes it and sets its limits. We shall examine this in the second part of this study.⁷

I. The Greatness of Midrash

The greatness of Midrash proceeds from the divine origin of Scripture. It is therefore of primary importance to situate it in relation to this origin.

We can begin with Moses who, according to the Book of Deuteronomy, “teaches” the decrees and judgements of the Lord (Deuteronomy 4:5).⁸ The teaching is undoubtedly that of Moses, who demands to be listened to (Deuteronomy 4:1), but this teaching of

⁶ The plural form “Midrashot” was preferred by the rabbinic language of the first centuries of our era. The shift from action to the result of action is normal in any language. The word Scripture, in English, is an example of such a transition. The word *talmud* also first signified the study and teaching of the Torah (*talmud torah*), then the result of this activity, and finally compilations: the Jerusalem Talmud, the Babylonian Talmud.

⁷ Our intention is to examine the religious and spiritual value which Midrash has for the Jews, and consequently for those Christians who know that the old covenant has not been revoked (See P. Lenhardt, ‘Le renouvellement de l’alliance dans le judaïsme rabbinique’, *Cahiers Ratisbonne*, no. 3, December 1997, pp. 126-196). Our intention is not to provide an introduction to Midrash. Such an introduction to Midrash, an exposition of its methods and its results, illustrated with numerous examples whose spiritual value and theological importance the readers cannot fail to notice, is provided by E. Ketterer and M. Remaud in *Le Midrash, Supplément au Cahier Evangile 82*, Cerf, Paris, 1992.

⁸ The verb used for “taught” is *lamad*, in the *pi’el* form, from which are derived the nouns *limmud* and *talmud*, which are practically equivalent. The word *limmud*, however, much less frequently used than the word *talmud*, signifies the act of studying rather than that of teaching.

Moses depends on an immediate hearing of God from which the people benefit (Deuteronomy 4:10-13). The Book of Exodus says the same thing in a different way: the people comes to Moses to learn the decrees and laws of God, but it makes it clear that, through Moses, it is God for whom the people is “searching” (Exodus 18:15-16). These texts express an obvious fact: previous to any Scripture, there is an oral Word which comes from God: the people wants to know this Word, and searches for God from whom the Word comes. The fact that one day - it hardly matters when - part of the Word will be set down in Scripture will not make any difference either to the form or the aim of the search. One searches at one and the same time for the meaning of Scripture and for God; and, more than this: in searching the Scriptures, in scrutinizing them, it is God for whom one is searching. The sacred authors who depict situations where the people already has the Scriptures, leave no doubt about this: they deliberately juxtapose the search of the Scriptures and the search for God (Ezra 6:21; 7:6,10; 1 Chronicles 28:8-9). It is evident that from the moment Scripture exists, Midrash, as an exegetical search, becomes integral to the search for God.

The goal of this search for God, a search He asks for, is to find God in the place and time in which He wishes to be met. This is what God says in the call he makes to Israel through the prophet Isaiah: “Seek the Lord where and when He will allow himself to be found; call upon Him where and when He is near” (Isaiah 55:6).⁹ A similar appeal had already been addressed through the prophet Amos to the house of Israel: “Seek Me and live ... Do not enter into Gilgal or pass through Beersheba” (Amos 5:4-5). Precise information is provided here concerning the place where the Lord is *not* to be found. On the positive side, the prophet points to Zion-Jerusalem as the place where the Lord dwells, and from where He roars and utters His voice (Amos 1:2). The search is thus directed towards an encounter or reunion (*mo'ed*) with the Lord in a space which, having been the Tent of “Reunion” (*mo'ed*, cf. Leviticus 1:1), will henceforth be the Temple of Jerusalem. The centripetal movement from the exterior towards the Temple via the Land of Israel and Jerusalem-Zion is also the movement which brings Israel back from sin to God, who “takes pleasure in repentance” and “is abundant in pardon.”¹⁰

The search also envisages a reunion in time. The time favoured is that of the festivals of Israel, called “meetings” or “reunions” (*mo'ed, mo'adot, mo'adim*).¹¹ Both the festivals of pilgrimage and the days of repentance, Rosh ha-Shana and Yom Kippur, are times of real encounters with the Lord, who is present - a true Presence - in the Tent of Reunion, and then in the Temple of Jerusalem.¹² We have seen that, when the Temple was destroyed, the Lord asked Israel to seek Zion, or, that is to say, His Presence (*shekhinah*) in the Temple.¹³ One sees that the search for God, which underlies and

⁹ This verse is used in the liturgy for Yom Kippur (*Ne'ila* service) to call Israel to repentance.

¹⁰ These phrases conclude the fifth and sixth blessings of the Amidah (communal prayer of the “Eighteen Benedictions”) respectively.

¹¹ Cf. Leviticus 23:2,4,44. It is unfortunate that the Hebrew word *mo'ed*, which means “meeting”, is often rendered as “solemnities” etc. in translations.

¹² It is the Holy Spirit poured out on Israel during the pilgrimage festivals which makes the meeting possible. It is also the Spirit which lights up the path of the sinner and sustains him in the repentance which leads him back to God.

¹³ Cf. Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 41 a. See above, note 4.

directs the exegetical search, is larger than the latter. One can go even further and say that the search for God is also realized in acts, in the practice of the commandments. In any case, a Midrash which would not be motivated by a search for God and would not be related to this fundamental search, required at all times and places, would be a vain and futile activity. It was perhaps such an ill-directed Midrash that Simeon Ben Gamaliel had in mind in the sentence quoted above: "It is not the Midrash that matters, but the act."¹⁴ But a Midrash, if well-directed, seeks God and finds Him. Its search is not inferior to the act.

The Heart of Midrash

The Midrash proceeds from God who seeks and wishes to be sought after. The man willing to be found will find God.

One could say that the beginning of Midrash is the silence which precedes the question, and its point of arrival is silence, the dissolution of the answer in God's presence. The silence of absence and the silence of presence come together in God.

The Importance of the Question¹⁵

Without a question, there can be neither a search nor an answer. Rabbi Pinhas ben Ya'ir (a Palestinian sage who lived about 150 A.D.), said, "Since the destruction of the Temple ... there is nobody who 'searches' (*doresh*), nobody who 'requests' (*mebakesh*), nobody who 'asks' (*sho'el*). Whom can we count on? On our Father in heaven."¹⁶ It is undoubtedly the searching, the requesting and the asking on the part of the disciple which provokes and activates the master's response, and thus the actualisation and renewal of the Torah. But the context and tone of Rabbi Pinhas ben Ya'ir's complaint give us to understand more than this: namely, that the disciple's question, which permits the Torah to live and to develop, originates with God, who asks for a search. The disciple's question is Torah: it appears in its time after a long series of questions and answers which preceded it, but when it does appear, it derives its legitimacy and force from God, who still today speaks from Sinai. This is what is expressed by the following tradition: "And the Lord said to Moses, 'Write thou these words ...,' (Exodus 34:27), and Scripture said, 'If I had written the multitude of the laws of my Torah for him, would they not be regarded as something alien?' (Hosea:8:12) When the Holy One, blessed be He, gave the Torah, He expounded it to Moses in the following order: *miqra* (what one reads, Scripture, or the written Torah), *mishnah* (what one repeats, the Tradition, or the oral Torah), *haggadah* (narrative teaching, homilectics), and *talmud* (study and teaching), as it is said, 'And God spoke all these words,' (Exodus 20:1). *Even what a tested disciple would ask his master*, the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses in that hour, as it is

¹⁴ See above, note 5.

¹⁵ See S. Safrai, 'Oral Tora', in *The Literature of the Sages*, First Part, Maastricht, Philadelphia, 1987, p. 66 ff.

¹⁶ Mishnah Sota 9:15. The continuation of this text quotes Rabbi Eliezer the Great, who said, "Since the destruction of the Temple ... the sages are become like scribes There is no one who 'requests' (*mebakesh*) ... Whom can we count on?"

said, ‘And God spoke all these words.’”¹⁷ Thus, the question is part of *mishnah*, or oral Torah.¹⁸ As for *midrash*, it is included in *talmud*, and is thus part of *mishnah*.¹⁹

The Experience of the One God

In accordance with its divine origin, Midrash is directed towards God and encounters God. Across the diversity of the words recorded in the Scriptures, it comes back to the One God. Thus, for example, the duality of the formulation of the fourth of the Ten Words (the Decalogue) - “Remember (*zachor*) the sabbath day ... ” (Exodus 20:8), and “Observe (*shamor*) the sabbath day ... “ (Deuteronomy 5:12) - is referred back to God’s original Word: “The two statements were made in one (single) statement.”²⁰ The Tradition, which provides this basic teaching regarding the Decalogue, extends it to other dualities in Scripture and in Jewish life referred back to Scripture. In all cases, the ascent to the One God overcomes the duality and the difficulties it causes.

The teaching given by this tradition has its source in an immediate experience of God, a fundamental and paradoxical experience: God is One and reveals Himself as such in a word which is multiple. The minimum of multiplicity being duality, it is the transition from one to two which is most fundamental. Psalm 62:11: “God has said one (word); I have heard these two (words),” is quoted as a conclusion of the traditional exposition of the duality-unity of the Word in the decalogue: it sums up all its teaching and confirms its content.²¹ This is not a theoretical declaration, made by intellectuals to intellectuals: in the diversity of manifestations, the believer who searches for God finds the One God and experiences Him as such. The continuation of this psalm: “For power belongs to God” (62:11) shows what this experience is. Indeed, it is the paradoxical power of God to say two Words which are but one. This, the Tradition points out, is impossible to man.²² The psalm continues: “To thee, O Lord, belongs steadfast love (*hesed*), for thou dost requite a man according to his work.” (62:12) God’s justice - requital - is thus the consequence of His love. This is once again paradoxical. How can one both love and requite a man according to his work? But the things that are impossible for man are possible for God. The unity of God proclaimed by the Shema Israel is the

¹⁷ Midrash Tanhuma Buber *ki tissa* on Exodus 34:27. In this collection of the post-talmudic period (6th - 7th centuries A.D.), the word *talmud* means study and teaching relating to practice; it is the equivalent of *halakhah*. The sequence given in the text is thus: *miqra*, *mishnah*, *haggadah* and *talmud*. A probably more ancient version of this tradition is given in the Jerusalem Talmud (Pe’ah 2:6,17 a). There the sequence of the areas of the Torah is *miqra*, *mishnah*, *talmud* (= *halakhah*) and *haggadah*. At an early period (that of the masters of the Mishnah before 219 B.C., see note 18), the word *talmud* meant study and teaching relating to Scripture, especially in the sphere of *halakhah*. It was the equivalent of *midrash*. *Halakhah* (norms of observance) and *haggadah* are the two great spheres of the Torah, and particularly of the oral Torah.

¹⁸ *Mishnah* is the repeated Word, or, that is to say, the Tradition, the oral Torah as a whole. After the destruction of the second Temple, the sages of Israel undertook the oral composition of a pedagogical summary which was orally published in about 219 at the latest by Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nassi (called ‘Rabbi’) and which bears the name ‘Mishnah’ (in the narrow sense). The Jews also call this Mishnah the “Mishnah of Rabbi” or “our Mishnah”.

¹⁹ See above, note 17.

²⁰ Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael on Exodus 20:8, p. 229.

²¹ Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael, *ibid*.

²² Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael, *ibid*.

unity of His mercy and justice: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord (YHWH = compassion = love) is our God (ELoHeinu = ELoHim = justice), the Lord (YHWH) is One.” (Deuteronomy, 6:4)²³

It was due to Rabbi Akiva, martyred in Caesarea in 135 A.D., that this paradoxical experience of the revelation of the One God which Israel had from Sinai onwards was made explicit. The theophany in which God pronounced the decalogue ended with a surprising statement: “The people saw the voices and the lights.” (Exodus 20:18) How can one see voices? Rabbi Ishmael, colleague and adversary of Rabbi Akiva in matters of interpretation, did not see any difficulty here. According to him, “The Torah spoke as in the language of men”, and it left out a word as men sometimes do. If one supplies the missing word, it is clear that “they saw what was visible and heard what was audible.”²⁴ Sight and sound at Sinai were distinct. The Torah given to men “spoke as in the language of men,” and likewise, in its written form, it gave no evidence of its transcendental origins. But Rabbi Akiva felt that the difficulty had to be confronted and the paradox maintained: “They saw and heard the visible (simultaneously, in one single act).” Here again, it is a psalm which confirms the nature of the experience of Sinai, at once paradoxical and spiritual: “The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire.”²⁵

Unity Justifies Plurality

The Word of the One God is voice and light all together. The people assembled at Sinai, and the people who afterwards, like Rabbi Akiva, sought the meaning of the theophany at Sinai, found the One God in an experience which transcended the multiple. Following this encounter with the One God, all resulting Midrash was relativized and valorized within a necessary plurality. If the Midrash sought and found God on the basis of diversity, the encounter with the One God restored to diversity, in an inexhaustible manner, all the legitimacy and variety that men require. The One God who spoke at Sinai manifested Himself in a multitude of voices and lights. It was again Rabbi Akiva and his disciples who interpreted the consequences of the encounter with the infinite richness of the Word of the One God. They asked: “How many voices and how many lights were there (in the theophany at Sinai)?” (Exodus, 20:18). They came to the conclusion that the Bible’s insistence on the multiplicity of voices and lights meant that each man heard what it was in his power to receive, as it is said: “The voice of the Lord in power” (Psalm 29:4).²⁶ This use of the psalm would seem to be something of a distortion of the literal meaning of the verse. The power here, in the literal sense, is surely the power of the Lord, who makes His voice heard. The Midrash of the school of Rabbi Akiva, however, wished it to be the “power” (in the sense of “potentiality”) of those who heard the voice of the Lord. But in reality, the switch from the literal to the midrashic sense is not as artificial as it seems at first sight. It was in fact the power of the Lord which, restraining

²³ Cf. P. Lenhardt, ‘La Miséricorde divine dans la Tradition d’Israël’, *La vie spirituelle*, 699, March-April 1992.

²⁴ Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael on Exodus 20: 18, p. 235.

²⁵ Psalm 29:7. Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael on Exodus 20:18. This voice, which “flashes forth flames”, is *seen*.

²⁶ Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael on Exodus 20:18, p. 235.

itself in a paradoxical and incredible manner, was communicated to those who received His voice. The message is that every human being, man or woman, elderly person or child, already at Sinai and in the whole of subsequent history, received, to the degree that it was in his power to receive, a voice and a light which came to him from God at Sinai. Midrash, which sought and encountered God, gained from Sinai its divine power and its capacity of infinite diversification and actualization, in accordance with every person and every situation. The result of Midrash is always relative to the original unity. It is the very diversity of the evidence given by the community and under its control which guarantees that we are dealing with the One God. Uniformity, far from reinforcing the message, would weaken it by making it suspect.

Midrash and Perush

Midrash is a search for God leading to an encounter. The sense which Scripture receives from this encounter is undoubtedly unique to the person or community to which it is destined. This sense, however, as we have seen, is relative to other possible senses intended for other people and communities in other times, places and situations. Midrash is thus never finished, never definitive, never closed. It receives from the source it encounters a power of limitless actualization.

Perush, from the root *parash*, signifying separation, in the form *pi'el*, which signifies distinction, explanation, clarification, is not a search for God.²⁷ Perush is an activity which explains Scripture on the basis of the language, grammar and history which condition the text. Perush, which can be translated “commentary”, seeks to give the objective sense of Scripture, or the “plain” or “literal” sense.²⁸ Perush, in itself, seeks to establish a sense which can be regarded as the sole one, but we know that this is not possible. The literal sense, concerning which scholars disagree, eludes “scientific” interpretation, which never obtains the consensus required by its claim to objectivity. It thus comes about that perush, like Midrash, has no end, but not for the same reason. Perush can never end because the human spirit can never dominate the whole of reality. Midrash can never end because it can never exhaust the infinity of the One God who creates all reality, and who establishes and relativizes all words.²⁹

²⁷ From the root *parash*, which signifies separation, we get the word *parush* (plural *perushim*) = Pharisee. The Pharisee is someone who separates himself even from things that are permitted in order to sanctify himself and reflect the image of God’s holiness, in accordance with the command in Leviticus 19:2: “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” (cf. 1 Peter 1:15-16). Originally, the name Pharisee, which means “separated”, was a term of abuse used by the opponents of the Pharisees. Although the Pharisees adopted this name, giving it the positive sense we have described, they preferred the title “sage” (*hakham*) used for the master, while the disciple was called “the sage’s disciple” (*talmid hakham*).

²⁸ The “plain” sense, *pashut* in Hebrew and *peshat* in Aramaic, is the “literal” sense. This terminology only appeared in about 350 A.D. (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 63 a). Before that, the *mishma’* (or the *shamu’a*) was known, the sense understood on a first hearing. This sense had only a provisional value. It had to be confirmed by the community (by Midrash) in order to be accepted as coming from God. If it is accepted that Scripture can be understood “according to the sense understood at a first hearing” (*ke-mishma’o’* or *ki-shemu’o’*), this sense can be regarded as coming from God.

²⁹ This comparison of Midrash and perush is not intended to downgrade perush. It is indispensable, and there must always be a “plain” or “literal” sense underlying Midrash. The Tradition of Israel is aware of this

The Infinite Diversity of Midrash

The Tradition uses an image from Scripture to illustrate the infinite capacity for expansion and actualization which Midrash receives from its source. Jeremiah provides the image when delivering the following pronouncement of the Lord: “Is not my word like fire? This is a pronouncement of the Lord. Is it not like a hammer which breaks the rock (*sela*) in pieces?” (Jeremiah 23:29) The image of the hammer, which breaks the rock or brings infinite sparks out of it, is ambiguous. The primary sense of the image - probably the literal sense - is that the Word, mighty like fire or a hammer, destroys all obstacles. Its second sense, preferred by the Tradition, is that the hammer, the Midrash (the oral Torah, the master of exegesis) makes infinite sparks come out of the rock of Scripture.³⁰ Scripture, the written Word of the Rock (*tsur*) of Israel (Isaiah, 30:29) has an infinite power of actualization which it belongs to Midrash to manifest.³¹

All that we have seen concerning Midrash, its infinite developments and ramifications, brings us to the question of the authenticity of these results. Where are the boundaries to be drawn, if they have to be drawn, between the good results, which are oral Torah, and the bad results, the fruit of arbitrary individual cogitations, which have to be rejected? The answer to this question is neither to be found in a code, nor in a procedure defined by the Tradition which would tell one what to do. The Tradition provides numerous examples of discussions which can form the judgement of those who study them. It clearly recommends one to hearken to “the Midrash of the sages” (*midrash hakhamim*), which it represents as being the Word of God, with regard to Leviticus 26:14, for instance, (“But if you will not hearken to me ...”), which it interprets as meaning “If you will not hearken to the Midrash of the sages.”³² This priority given to the Midrash of the sages does not, however, imply any exclusivity, any distrustfulness of other results produced by people in Israel. Thus, “the lowly in Israel” can express the Word of God as if it had proceeded from the mouth of a sage.³³ The masters base this argument on the first verse of the second paragraph of the Shema Israel (Deuteronomy 11:13): “And if you will obey my commandments (literally, ‘If listening, you will listen to my commandments’) which I command you this day ... “ The repetition “listening, you will listen” (*shamo’a tishme’u*) can suggest a listening which is as much that of the humble in Israel as of more important people, or of a sage, or of the sages, or of Moses, or of Sinai or of God himself.³⁴ Other interpretations of Deuteronomy 11:13 are also possible.³⁵ The

proviso, which it expresses as follows: “Scripture does not depart from its plain sense” (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 63 a). This being granted, *perush* remains secondary, instrumental, in relation to Midrash.

³⁰ Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai was called the “hammer” by his disciples (Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 28 b in reference to Jeremiah 23:29).

³¹ Jeremiah 23:19 is quoted in the Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael on Exodus 20:8, p. 229, after Psalm 62:12 (see above, note 21). These two verses teach the diversity of the Word of God proceeding from the unity and power of the One transcendent God. In other contexts, the Tradition claims on the basis of Jeremiah 23:29 that there is a legitimate diversification of the Word of God in accordance with the different languages and nations (cf. Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 88 b).

³² Sifra Leviticus on Leviticus 26:14, 111 b. Concerning the title “sage”, see above, note 27.

³³ Sifrei on Deuteronomy 11:13, p. 86; Numbers Rabbah on Numbers 7:48, Par 14, § 4.

³⁴ See the commentaries of Sifrei and Numbers Rabbah.

³⁵ One can also, for example, draw this lesson from the word “today”: “Today when you will hear me speak through someone or other” (one does not always have the good fortune to hear a sage or a professor!)

main thing is the following idea, which, whether or not it is supported by this or that verse, is shared by everyone: the voice of each person, great or small, can be heard as the Word of God. The principle which seems to be involved here is: “He who is not against us is for us.”³⁶

It follows from what we have said that Midrash, as an activity and as a result, has the status of oral Torah. Linked to Scripture, to the written Torah, they form a single unit, as we learn from an anonymous tradition at least as old as the New Testament. This tradition is based on the Song of Moses, at the end of Deuteronomy (32:1-2): “Give ear, O heavens ... May my teaching drop as the rain.” Just as the rain falls on the trees and gives them different tastes according to their nature: the vine according to its nature, the olive-tree according to its nature and the fig-tree according to its nature, so the words of the Torah are one (one and the same thing), whether it is *miqra* (what is read, Scripture, the written Torah), *mishnah* (what is repeated, the Tradition, the oral Torah), *talmud* [some versions have *midrash* instead of *talmud*], *halakhot* (norms of observance), or *haggadot* (narrative traditions, homiletics).³⁷ Midrash (or *talmud*), here, is suitably placed between the Scripture it interprets and the spheres of halakhah and haggadah which it illuminates with its teachings. We will now speak of its resplendent power.

The Power of Midrash

Midrash Halakhah, Midrash Haggadah (Midrash Aggadah)³⁸

The Torah is a law for life. Moses calls it a commandment (*mitsva*), and says in the name of the Lord God : “For this commandment (*mitsva*) which I command you this day is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven ... “ (Deuteronomy 30:11-12). Without forgetting the pre-eminence of *talmud torah* over all activities, the sages of Israel

³⁶ Mark 9:40; Luke 9:50. One already finds this principle in Moses: Numbers 11:29. However, note the opposite principle: Matthew 12:30 and Luke 12:23, which cannot be overlooked. On the oral Torah being open to all, see S. Safrai, ‘Oral Tora’, op. cit., pp. 36, 38, 69-71.

³⁷ Sifrei on Deuteronomy 32:2, p. 339. At the period of this tradition, *talmud* and *midrash* were interchangeable (see above, note 17. See above also, the interchangeability of *beit ha-talmud* and *beit ha-midrash*). There are also other lists giving the two main parts of the Torah - *miqra* and *mishnah* - and the different disciplines of the *mishnah*. See, amongst others, the list of disciplines in which Yohanan ben Zakkai was eminent (Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 28 a). See also the shorter lists, with three items, like that of Sifrei on Deuteronomy 32:2 given here: Jerusalem Talmud, Shekalim 5:1, 48 c; Abot de-Rabbi Nathan A, chapter 18:34 a; Mishnah Nedarim 4:3; Exodus Rabbah, Par. 47:87; Tanhuma Yitro, § 10. See S. Safrai, ‘Oral Tora’, op. cit., pp. 37-38.

³⁸ The term “*haggadah*”, the *hif'il* form of the root *ngd* which is hardly used except in this form, signifies first of all the act of relating, declaring, narrating, and then authorized homilistic teaching. The Hebrew form “*haggadah*” became “*aggadah*” under the influence of Aramaic. It survives, however, in the formula “*haggadah shel pesah*” (Passover haggadah) and in many ancient texts.

gave priority to action - a priority already asserted by the people when they accepted the covenant (Exodus 34:7): "All that the Lord has spoken, we will do and hear."³⁹

We can therefore understand why the sages of Yavneh, after the destruction of the Second Temple, gave priority to working on the midrashim which deal with the norms of action, with the halakhah. From the time of the research on the subject by the Jewish scholar David Hoffman at the end of the nineteenth century, these midrashim have been called "halakhic midrashim" (*midrashei halakhah*).⁴⁰ They deal mainly with the halakhah connected to the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The exegetical traditions relating to the Book of Genesis were not worked on at Yavneh, because these traditions were not concerned with the commandments given to Israel, the first of which was the commandment to observe the neomenia given in Exodus 12:2. Thus, the Midrash on Exodus, which was edited at Yavneh, begins with Exodus 12:2, although in one of the two collections we possess it is introduced by a grandiose haggadah, based on Exodus, chapter 3, on the burning bush and the calling of Moses.⁴¹

Haggadah is thus present in the halakhic midrashim. It has an important and very significant place there, although not a preponderant one. It is not until the conclusion of the Mishnah (about 220 A.D.) and of the compilation of the halakhic midrashim (220-250 A.D.) that collections consisting entirely of haggadah began to be assembled. These collections returned to the old haggadah which had not previously been edited, adding to it the contemporary haggadah. At least since the Middle Ages, these collections have been known as "aggadic midrashim" (*midrashei aggadah*).⁴²

The Aggadic Midrash Gives a Knowledge of God

The noun "*haggadah*" means first of all the act of relating and then the result of this action, the teaching that is related. The participle "*maggid*", from the same root, appears in a very significant way in the Bible, for example: "The firmament relates (teaches) the work of His hands" (Psalm 19:1), or again, "He relates (teaches) His word to Jacob, His statutes and ordinances to Israel." (Psalm 147:19) This same participle is employed by the Tradition in the formula *maggid ha-katuv* ("Scripture relates [teaches]," giving the result of Midrash, and which should thus be understood as meaning; "Scripture, correctly interpreted by Midrash, teaches ..." In the Passover Haggadah, the word "*maggid*" is the mnemotechnic sign which marks the beginning of the narration, the *haggadah*.⁴³ This Passover Haggadah is the Midrash, or rather the assemblage of midrashim, by which the Tradition complies with the Lord's injunction in Exodus 13:8: "And you shall tell (*we-*

³⁹ *Talmud*, as we have seen, was regarded as greater than action. But that was because *talmud* led to action. Cf. Sifrei on Deuteronomy 11:13, p. 86 (See above, note 5).

⁴⁰ D. Hoffmann, *Zur Einleitung in die halachischen Midraschim*, Berlin, 1886-1887.

⁴¹ These magnificent traditions on the burning bush are to be found at the beginning of the Mekilta de-Rabbi Shime'on ben Yohai, called the "Mekilta of the Bush", edited by J. N. Epstein and E. Z. Melamed, Jerusalem 1955.

⁴² Cf. Rashi on Genesis 3:8. For the form *aggadah*, see above, note 38.

⁴³ The retention of such mnemotechnic signs in the Passover Haggadah shows that the liturgy, like all the oral Torah, was meant to remain oral.

higgadeta) your son on that day ...”⁴⁴ The Passover Haggadah, an integral part of the liturgy, has a special authority. It is truly the teaching which gives one a knowledge of God and His love for Israel. It makes clear to one the significance of the Lord’s “passage” in the night of Egypt (Exodus 12: 13, 27). It is the teaching which brings the people to the praise of the Hallel and the joy of the paschal meal.⁴⁵

The power of the aggadic Midrash also emerges in other contexts. If, for example, one wants to know how to love God and cleave to Him as Moses prescribes in Deuteronomy (11:22), the “searchers of traces” (*dorshei reshumot*) suggest: “You want to know ‘Him who said, and the world was’? Study the Haggadah, and you will then know ‘Him who said, and the world was,’ and cleave to Him.”⁴⁶

The Halakhic Midrash Manifests the Coherence of the Torah

As we have seen, the aim of the halakhic Midrash is to relate halakhah (the norms of observance) to Scripture. In so doing, it manifests the coherence of the Torah, which declares in the Scriptures what the oral tradition prescribes elsewhere. An example of this coherence is an interpretation given to Exodus 15:22: “They went three days in the wilderness and found no water.” Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Eliezer, disciples of Rabban Yohanan Ben Zakkai (who, like him, taught both before and after the destruction of the Second Temple) discussed this passage. Rabbi Yehoshua saw it as simply the statement of a fact: for three days, the Israelites, going in the desert, found no water. Rabbi Eliezer, however, thought that in the lack of water there was an anomaly to which the Torah wished to draw attention in order to teach something important. Following the lead of Rabbi Eleazer, the anonymous author of the Midrash alluded to the “searchers of traces”, who said, “‘They found no water’[means that they did not find] any words of Torah,

⁴⁴ This verse is used to justify the custom of relating the exodus from Egypt on the night of Passover. See Maimonides (1135-1204), positive commandment no. 157. In Israel, the Haggadah is thus recited in every Jewish family before the festive meal on the night of the 14th to the 15th of Nissan. In the diaspora, the liturgy is repeated on the following night.

⁴⁵ The Hallel consists of psalms 113 to 118 and psalm 136. It frames the Passover night meal. In the time of the Temple, they ate the flesh of the paschal lamb (the peace offering = the sacrifice of communion), and there was no joy without the consumption of the flesh of the sacrifice from the Lord’s table (see Babylonian Talmud, Pesahim 109 a and Rashi on Babylonian Talmud Sukkah 42 b, *we-ha-simhah*, and Babylonian Talmud Sukkah 9 a and Rashi on *sukkah le-shem hag-al-hagigah*). Now that the Temple is destroyed, there are no more sacrifices or paschal lamb, and the joy is provided by the four cups of wine on Passover night (see Babylonian Talmud, Pesahim 109 a). With regard to the connection between the teaching and the prayers of praise, see, for example, Rav Nahman of Bratslav (1772-1811) who said, “It is good to make Torah (teaching) a prayer” (Likkutei Moharan II, 25).

⁴⁶ Sifrei on Deuteronomy 11:22, p. 115. The “searchers of traces” are exegetes who are able to interpret allusions, the traces left by the Lord in Scripture. The “searchers of traces” like Rabbi Akiva, like Jesus in Matthew 5:18, attach importance to every detail of the written Torah. Only those who love are able to decipher these hints. This tradition concerning the Haggadah, which claims that it gives one a knowledge of God and makes one cleave to Him although He is transcendent, is echoed in John 1:18, where Jesus Christ is said to “give one a knowledge of” God, whom no one has ever seen. The verb used for “give knowledge,” *exegesato* (John 1:18) means to relate, to give knowledge by relating. The words *exegesis* in Greek and *haggadah* in Hebrew are exact equivalents. From a Christian point of view, one can say that Jesus Christ is the living Word, the oral Torah, the *haggadah* which brings one to a knowledge of God.

which are compared to water, as it is said (Isaiah 55:1): ‘Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters’.”⁴⁷ The searchers knew that water, when mentioned, signifies Torah. Thanks to them, the anonymous tradition was able to conclude - thus skilfully revealing an impressive coherence - “It was because they had been without words of Torah for three days that they rebelled (a reference to the murmuring of the people against Moses: Exodus 15:24). That is why the prophets and elders decreed that they (Israel) would read the Torah on the Sabbath (Saturday), on the second day (Monday) and on the fifth day (Thursday).”⁴⁸ The linking of the norms of the public reading of the Torah with the three days without water and the wanderings in the desert did not convince Rabbi Yehoshua, nor will it convince everyone today. Without wanting to impose this interpretation, the Tradition, however, proposes it as an impressive justification of the non-Scriptural obligation to read the Torah on Sabbaths, Mondays and Thursdays so that three days will never pass in Israel without such a reading.

This example not only demonstrates the coherence of the Torah, made up of Scripture and tradition, but also the intimate union of haggadah and halakhah. The aggadic Midrash of the “searchers of traces” was taken up by the halakhic Midrash; it fused with it in order to bring forth its conclusion.

From this example, one is able to perceive the greatness of the Midrash, and one can already glimpse its limits. The Midrash enlightens those who are already in some way accepting of the coherence one is trying to demonstrate. It does not convince Rabbi Yehoshua, nor those who, like him, believe that Scripture, in Exodus 15:22, does not say anything beyond its literal sense. Rabbi Eliezer, on the other hand, and the “searchers of traces” - who fortunately have successors in Israel and in the Church - felt that the spiritual sense of the three days’ lack of water ought to be recognized for the sake of the encouragement of piety and the strengthening of observance.⁴⁹

The Midrash as The Fulfilment of Scripture

⁴⁷ Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael on Exodus 15, 22, p. 154. Concerning the “searchers of traces”, see above, note 46.

⁴⁸ Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael, *ibid.*

⁴⁹ Midrash, we see, has a great capacity providing one sees it as the support for an already-established norm or an already acquired conviction and not a means of determining the norm or arriving at a conviction. The question of whether Midrash is a support or a source is debated in Judaism, and we clearly have no intention of making an independent judgement. It is enough to point out that such a debate exists, and we permit ourselves to side with those who, like Maimonides (1135-1204), think that Midrash, unless there is a specific statement to the contrary, is a support and not a source. Maimonides (*Sefer ha-Mitsvot*, principle 11) limits the innovative function of exegesis as far as possible. This position, which is in the line of Rabbi Ishmael, is strongly contested by Nahmanides (1194-1270, *Hassagot on Maimonides’ Book of Commandments*). Nahmanides, in the line of Rabbi Akiva, gives importance to all ancient exegesis which, in the absence of proof to the contrary, he considers a source of halakhah and not simply a support for it. We believe, however, that Maimonides’ point of view better demonstrates the strength of Midrash. One might say that if, being only a support, it has a great capacity, how much greater is its capacity if it is a source of the practice and faith of Israel! It must be said, however, that extending the Midrash in this way banalizes it and actually weakens it. It takes away from it the support of faith which makes it more splendid. In our opinion, Midrash is more impressive when it only has the role of a support.

Midrash can “fulfil” Scripture, or, in other words, it can find in Scripture a sense which supports Israel’s observance, its faith and hope. The word “fulfil”, here, is the English translation of the Hebrew *le-qayyem*, the *pi’el* form of the root *qum*, which means “to stand up.” The *pi’el*, the intensive form of this root in rabbinic Hebrew, like the *hif’il*, the causative form in biblical Hebrew, means “to cause to stand up.”⁵⁰ Without the Midrash which fulfils it, Scripture remains recumbent on the parchment or paper, non-operational for action or for life. Fulfilled by its interpretation, however, Scripture prescribes what one should do, believe or hope for here and now.

In Leviticus 26:3-4, Scripture says, for example, “If you walk according to my statutes and if you observe my commandments and do them, then I will give you your rains in their season ... “ This verse, at first sight, is confusing in its superabundance. But, according to Rabbi Akiva, the anonymous tradition assumes that every word counts, and he asks: “How can I fulfil, ‘If you walk according to my statutes’ (which comes before ‘if you observe my commandments’)?” Fulfilling “If you walk according to my statutes” is to realize that Scripture, before mentioning the observance of the commandments, prescribes a knowledge of them. Fulfilling “If you observe my commandments,” is first of all “to apply oneself to the study of the Torah” and to know what it prescribes.⁵¹ This interpretation of Leviticus 26:3 would seem at first sight to violate its literal sense, as “walking according to statutes” is not exactly “applying oneself to the study of the Torah.” Here one must presume there was an accepted teaching that action has to be preceded by study.⁵² For someone familiar with this sequence, “walking according to statutes” would signify the training and study which precede action as such and which make it satisfy the Lord’s intention. “Fulfilling” the beginning of the verse (“If you walk according to my statutes”) is to ensure that this beginning does not remain an empty formula, a dead letter without application. The verse is “fulfilled”, “made to stand up” when it prescribes study with a view to action. The same teaching is given later on with regard to Leviticus 26:14: “But if you will not hearken to me, and will not do all these commandments“ How can I fulfil, “But if you will not hearken to me”? The answer is: “By not applying myself to the Torah.”⁵³ Here the fulfilment does not violate the literal sense: “hearkening to the Lord” may well mean studying the Torah. Whatever the case, the fulfilment of Leviticus 26:14, like that of Leviticus 26:3, has been achieved by the Midrash through a realization that Scripture prescribes study previous to action and with a view to action.

It should be pointed out that the fulfilment of a verse does not exhaust the meaning of the verse. The interpretation which “fulfils” it remains one interpretation among others. We have seen that Midrash can find an infinite number of meanings in Scripture. Taking

⁵⁰ In rabbinic Hebrew, “*le-qayyem*”, to fulfil, is opposed to “*le-battel*”, to render null and void: cf. Mishnah Avot 4:8. In biblical Hebrew, the form *hif’il* is used to indicate the fulfilment of the covenant in Leviticus 26:9 and Ezra 16:60. On this fulfilment, see P. Lenhardt, ‘Le renouvellement ...’, op. cit., pp. 149-151.

⁵¹ Sifra Leviticus on Leviticus 26:3, 110 c.

⁵² See above, note 5.

⁵³ Sifra, *ibid.* The answer, in the Midrash, is literally “by applying oneself to the Torah.” This version is quite authentic: it is typical of the laconic nature of the oral Torah as preserved in its written form. In order to understand the text, one has to paraphrase, and at the very least, add the negative omitted in order to shorten and “simplify”.

the passage we have just quoted - "But if you will not hearken to me" - the anonymous tradition "fulfils" it in two ways: "If you will not hearken to me" is understood as meaning "If you have not applied yourselves to the Torah," but also "If you do not listen to the Midrash of the sages." Although "not listening to the Midrash of the sages" is on the same lines (not recommended) as "not applying oneself to the Torah," there are other ways of "not applying oneself to the Torah" apart from "not listening to the sages." One fulfilment does not exclude the other. The fulfilment never suppresses either what precedes it or what accompanies it, nor, even less, what follows it. The midrashic sense which fulfils Scripture does not abolish the literal sense.⁵⁴ The fulfilment never gets in the way of another sense which has already been proposed or which could be proposed in the future.

An example of this can be given in connection with Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, of whom the Tradition says that he excelled in all areas of Torah - *miqra, mishnah, gemara (talmud and midrash)*, etc. - in order to fulfil what is said: "In order to endow with wealth those who love Me, I will fill their treasuries." (Proverbs 8:21)⁵⁵ The Lord undoubtedly endowed Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai with wealth and filled his treasuries with all the treasures of the Torah. The verse was thus fulfilled in his case. But is conceivable that the verse was not fulfilled in the case of other sages and saints of Israel such as Hillel the Elder or Rabbi Akiva?

To fulfil Scripture is to prepare the action which must follow, and which constitutes a second fulfilment based on the first. Thus, Rabbi Akiva, dying as a martyr while reciting the words of the Shema Israel, fulfilled on the level of action what he had fulfilled on the level of interpretation, when he taught: "'You will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul ...' (Deuteronomy 6:5) With all your soul, even if He takes your soul."⁵⁶

On the basis of these two levels - that of exegesis and that of action - there is also a third level: that of the fulfilment of the prophetic promises of redemption, peace and happiness for Israel and all peoples.⁵⁷

Midrash thus has great power. It leads to action and prepares the coming of the Messianic era. There is neither action nor history without the light of Scripture ceaselessly questioned and fulfilled by the Midrash. This power, however is not absolute, and it is only great because it is open to diversity, discussion and renewal.

Through Midrash, the oral Torah fulfils the written Torah. That does not mean that the latter is inferior to the former. It does mean, however, that, without Midrash, Scripture would remain incomplete and inoperative. This is obvious to the Pharisee masters and their disciples down to this day: the Scriptures alone cannot be "the whole Torah". As Hillel said: "*What is hateful, do not do unto others.* That is the whole Torah and the rest is commentary. Go and study!"⁵⁸ In order to summarize "the whole Torah" in a golden

⁵⁴ According to the principle, "Scripture does not depart from its plain sense." See above, note 29.

⁵⁵ Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 28 a (see above, note 37).

⁵⁶ Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot, 61 b.

⁵⁷ Babylonian Talmud, Makkot 14 a-b (see P. Lenhardt, 'Le renouvellement ...', op. cit., pp. 149-151).

⁵⁸ Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31 a.

rule which is neither in the Hebrew Bible nor even specifically Jewish, one must presume that the Scriptures are not the whole Torah. It is Midrash which brings it about that Scripture interpreted, fulfilled by the Tradition becomes the “complete Torah” (*torah shelema*). The Pharisees prized their “complete Torah”, which they opposed to the “vain conversation” of the Sadducees.⁵⁹ It is because the “whole Torah” embraces both Scripture (the written Torah) and tradition (the oral Torah) that it is “complete”. “The whole Torah,” “the complete Torah” - these terms relate to the Torah of the Pharisees as against those who, in all periods, contest the value of the tradition and deny it the status of the Word of God.⁶⁰ A third term, “the perfect Torah”, taken from Psalm 19:8, shows how far Midrash can go. Its culmination is to demonstrate that “the Torah of the Lord is perfect,” that “it restores the soul” (it restores life). As the masters of Israel said: “it is perfect because it restores life,” and “it restores life because it is perfect.”⁶¹

The Culmination of Midrash

Midrash manifests the coherence of the Torah, it fulfils Scripture. It goes even further, if that is possible, when it “opens the Scriptures,” or when it “opens the mind to the understanding of the Scriptures.” (Luke 24:32, 45) The disciples at Emmaus and later the apostles had the experience of such an “opening” in hearing the Midrash of their master Jesus.⁶² It is significant that this experience completes the teaching of Jesus at the end of the Gospel of Luke, before the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). There is a correspondence between the burning hearts of the disciples and the fire which rested on the apostles (Luke 24:32; Acts 2:3). This fire is known in the Tradition of Israel. It is the fire of Sinai which sometimes bears witness to the supreme success of the Midrash.⁶³

“To open” (*patah*), “opening” (*petihah*): these key words appear in many different contexts in rabbinic literature.

In the sphere of halakhah, one could say that Scripture itself has been given to “open” the mind, not to “close” it. That is true, providing one grants that Midrash makes this “opening” manifest by explicating Scripture. For example, one “opens” Scripture - or one opens the mind to the understanding of Scripture - when one grasps that “days”, in the plural, in Leviticus 15:25 (“If a woman has a discharge of blood *for several days*, not at the time of her impurity ...) must be limited to the minimum: that is to say, to two days. “Days,” then, must signify two days, and “several days” - applying the rule of the minimum again - signifies “three days”. The function of Scripture is to “open”: thus, “several days” must be a utilizable fact. Scripture was no doubt capable of providing a

⁵⁹ Babylonian Talmud, Menahot 65 b.

⁶⁰ After the Sadducees, the Karaites, from the eighth century onwards, denied that the Tradition is Torah. Other groups, easily identified, oppose the Pharisaic-rabbinic tradition today.

⁶¹ Midrash Tehillim on Psalm 19:8, p. 171. These two complementary statements admirably make the point that the Torah is perfect because it is both human and divine.

⁶² Concerning “opening” (*petihah*) and fashioning a necklace (*harizah*) in the Tradition of Israel and the New Testament, see A. Avril and P. Lenhardt, ‘Trois chemins, Emmaüs, Gaza et Damas,’ *Cahiers Ratisbonne*, no. 4, June 1998.

⁶³ The fire of Sinai demonstrates that the Midrash makes the revelation once given at Sinai into a reality.

solution by itself, but it was nevertheless the Midrash which “opened” the text by applying the rule of the minimum.⁶⁴

In haggadah, “opening” is immensely important. One opens the mind to an understanding of Scripture by opening the meaning of the verse to be interpreted through another verse taken from another part of Scripture. One thus strings together a “necklace” of words of Scripture taken from the Torah (Pentateuch), the Prophets and the Hagiographa (especially the psalms). The words of Scripture, like the pearls of a necklace, give light to each other, and their different lights converge on the particular point which the Midrash is attempting to make. The assembling of the necklace - a process known as *harizah* - when particularly successful creates a fire which burns in the hearts of the listeners (Luke 24:32) and which is interpreted as the fire of the revelation at Sinai (Deuteronomy 4:11).⁶⁵ Through *harizah*, known both before and after the destruction of the second Temple, the Midrash of the Pharisee masters and Jesus manifests the unity and divinity of the Torah as a whole.⁶⁶ The necklace is not fashioned by simply stringing pearls together: it becomes a necklace through Midrash which is able to choose the pearls, pierce them and assemble them. It is the entire necklace - pearls and thread - it is the entire Torah which, through Midrash, radiates in its unity and divinity. Thus, Midrash can recreate the unity of the Word of God. It regains the unity and divinity it had for Israel in its first manifestation at Sinai.

Harizah is much employed in homiletics. It is also used in the liturgy, for instance in the blessings of the additional service for the festival of Rosh ha-Shana.⁶⁷ It is also used for teachings in the house of study, particularly when scriptural support is sought for the specifically Pharisaic Jewish doctrine of the resurrection of the dead. The attempt is not always successful, and rabbinic literature sometimes shows itself unenthusiastic about an unconvincing *harizah*. If, in certain cases, the Midrash is clearly uninspired, the oral Torah is careful to say so and to explain why this is so.⁶⁸

It must be said, finally, that the importance we have given to the experience which sometimes accompanies the *harizah* does not mean that this experience is essential to establish the validity of the Midrash. When this experience takes place, one can say that

⁶⁴ The rule of the minimum clearly has a value in interpretation. According to Rashi, it also has a social and spiritual value: “If you take the minimum, one cannot take it away from you” (Rashi on *tafasta merubbeh*. Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 5 a); see also Luke 14:7-10.

⁶⁵ See A. Avril and P. Lenhardt, ‘Trois chemins’, op. cit.

⁶⁶ Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Eliezer made a *harizah*, creating a fire, before the destruction of the Temple (cf. Jerusalem Talmud, Hagigah 2:77 b). Jesus made a *harizah* twice: first for the disciples at Emmaus, and the second time for his apostles, before the destruction of the Temple (cf. Luke 24:27,44). Ben Azzai (beginning of the second century A.D.) and Rabbi Abahu (end of the third century) made *harizot*, creating a fire, after the destruction of the Temple.

⁶⁷ In the “*zikhronot*” benediction in this service, a very elaborate *harizah* dwells on the theme that throughout all the pacts that the Lord remembered according to the Torah, the prophets and the psalms, “He remembered the covenant.” There was in fact only one covenant, which was revealed in stages and went from realization to realization (see P. Lenhardt, ‘Le renouvellement ...’, op. cit., pp. 131-137).

⁶⁸ For instance, in the case of an unsuccessful *harizah* made by Rabbanan Gamaliel to support the idea of the resurrection of the dead by Scripture (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 90 b).

the Midrash brings one into the presence of Sinai,⁶⁹ but the absence of such an experience does not mean that the Midrash has not achieved its aim. It must be pointed out that all searching for God and the Torah, not only in the sphere of haggadah but also in that of halakhah, can be a fulfilment of the revelation at Sinai. As the scholar Ephraim Urbach said in his brilliant study, *The Religious Significance of Halakhah*: “In accordance with his faith that the Torah was given to Moses on Mount Sinai in all its particulars and details (Sifra on Leviticus 26:46, 112 c), the sage comes, searches and innovates; he adjudicates and decides with the assurance that he is fulfilling revelation. He brings it from potentiality to act and reveals to the people of his generation what is suitable for them and what they need. The intelligence of man shares in the divine intelligence above, and he can thus work with the same intention as Him who endowed man with a knowledge in conformity with the revelation made on Mount Sinai.”⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Other, similar manifestations are known, apart from the *harizah*, for example the one the Tradition relates concerning Yonathan ben Uziel, a disciple of Hillel (beginning of the first century A.D.), the presumed author of the Targum of the Prophets (Pseudo-Yonathan): “When he was sitting and occupied with Torah, any bird which flew over him was burnt” (Babylonian Talmud, Sukka 28 a). The unfortunate bird showed by being burnt to death that the fire of heaven (Sinai) rested on Yonathan when he studied the Torah.

⁷⁰ E. Urbach, *The Religious Significance of Halakhah* (in Hebrew, *ha-mashma'ut ha-datit shel ha-halakhah*) in *Al yahadut ve-hinnuch*, Jerusalem, 1966, p. 130. We quote a further passage from the same work: “Those who studied halakhah always had the feeling that they were doing the work of the Lord, and that their Torah - given their understanding of the concept of revelation - was the Torah of Moses. Through his capacity for reflection, man is able to judge and innovate, for ‘it (the Torah) is not in heaven’ (Deuteronomy 30:12). According to Rabbi Yose, son of Rabbi Hanina, ‘When the Torah was given, the Word spoke to each person according to his capacity, and each person received it according to his capacity’ (Pesikta de-Rav Kahana, Pirq. 12 § 25, p. 224). In his sermons, Rabbi Nissim said, ‘Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who has given us the true Torah (literally, “the Torah of truth.” This is the blessing recited after the public reading of the Torah). [This was said] because He gave us His Torah in accordance with our intelligence.’ The study of Torah thus realizes the project of revelation conceived by the Most High. The Holy One, blessed be He, devotes Himself to Torah and Himself directs the heavenly yeshiva (rabbinical academy) (Babylonian Talmud, Avoda Zara 3 b; Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metsia 86 a). At the same time, the Master of the universe, who has in His power the things above and those below, prescribes halakhah for ‘flesh and blood’ (Pesikta Rabbati, Pirq. 14 § 13:64, quoted by E. Urbach, *ibid.*, p. 135).” We quote again: “The religious significance of halakhah is that faith is based on action, and on study which leads to an understanding of action. Faith is not the property of an individual; it does not depend on some special inspiration which the believer has. It does not require any intermediary between the source of inspiration and the believer; is not the result of any special enthusiasm due to external or internal causes. In faith and its modes of expression, in man’s relations with his creator and his ways of approaching Him, it is still the precept and judgement which are most important. If halakhah restricts the believer through a series of imperatives and if it channels his feelings and the way he expresses them, it at the same time broadens the boundaries of faith. It introduces itself into all areas of life. Faith no longer intervenes only on the level of man’s relationship with the Place (God); it also intervenes in his relationship with his fellow-man and with his wife ... Faith is not moribund, it does not remain inactive. Its nature obliges it to grow with life, to spread out and enlarge itself, to be transformed in accordance with life’s changes and mutations. The enlargement and development of halakhah are left to man, but the believer who submits to halakhah becomes a prince of Torah and a master of that Torah, for its innovations, ordinances and decisions become an integral part of revelation. The man who studies is an instrument of revelation, and when one sees things as they truly are one realizes that devoting oneself to the study of Torah and searching it is worshipping God with enthusiasm and love” (E. Urbach, *ibid.*, pp. 133-134). One sees how far, according to Urbach, study and action in the sphere of halakhah can extend. Finally, we should mention the teachings of a great predecessor of Urbach, Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhyn (1757-1821), a disciple of the celebrated Gaon of Vilna (1720-1797). In his book, *The Soul of Life*, Rabbi Hayyim quoted a great deal from the Zohar (an essential

II. The Limits of Midrash

Midrash is Torah: it comes from Sinai and ends at Sinai. Its limits are not to be found in its essence, nor in its comprehension, but in its scope: Midrash is part of the oral Torah, but it is not the whole of the oral Torah. The latter embraces Midrash, it is larger. This is not only a fact: it is a religious necessity which the people of Israel, the bearer of the oral Torah, expresses as and wherever needed.

We have seen previously that the search for coherence caused the sages, especially of the school of Yavneh, to seek to support halakhah by Scripture. Their systematic efforts are attested by numerous complex, spectacular exercises throughout the halakhic midrashim. These exercises are often artificial, and different versions are even contradictory. They are sometimes elaborated to the point of absurdity and only end because eventually one has to. Some of them, however, have been retained in collections of Midrashim and in the Talmuds because of the religious value attached to study and the strenuous “gymnastics” with which it is accompanied.⁷¹

Little Scripture and Many Halakhot

In reality, one cannot close the gap which has grown larger in the course of the centuries between an observance independent of scriptural teachings and a Scripture which has remained fixed in its form. An especially typical example of this gap is provided by the liturgy performed at the time of the destruction of the Temple and given in full in the *seder avodah* of the additional service on Yom Kippur. This liturgy is very different from the one given in a short version in chapter 16 of the Book of Leviticus and read on Yom Kippur. No interpretation has ever been able to reconcile them and none ever will. There is a similar problem with regard to the Sabbath, as the Tradition says in a picturesque manner: “Annulations of vows float in the air without having anything to rest on. The halakhot on the Sabbath, on the sacrifices of the festivals and on irregular changes to sacred property are like mountains hanging from a hair, for they contain little Scripture and many halakhot.”⁷² This formulation is interesting: certain halakhot have no scriptural foundation to rest on. The halakhot concerning the Sabbath have at least some Scripture to support them, but very little. Scripture, which places the Sabbath on a very high level, does not provide precise instructions on how to keep it. It is the Tradition, the oral Torah, which gives the details. The abundance and the punctiliousness of the halakhot can lead

work of Jewish mysticism dating from the end of the 13th century A.D.) in order to illustrate the religious value of study and action, of halakhah. The assumption in all this is that Torah is above all a matter of commandments (*mitsvot*), a law of life, in accordance with Deuteronomy 30:11. Urbach, like all the masters, adopts this view of the Torah. He mentions the question asked by the anonymous tradition about the Ten Words (the Decalogue): “Why were the Ten Words not cited at the beginning of the Torah?” (Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael on Exodus 20:2, p. 219), and he answers: “The very question ... flows from the view that the whole concern of the Torah is the precept” (E. Urbach, *The Sages, their Concepts and Beliefs*, Magnes Press, Jerusalem 1975, p. 317).

⁷¹ See, for example, the endless elaboration of an exercise in the Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 4b-5b on the minimal height of a sukkah.

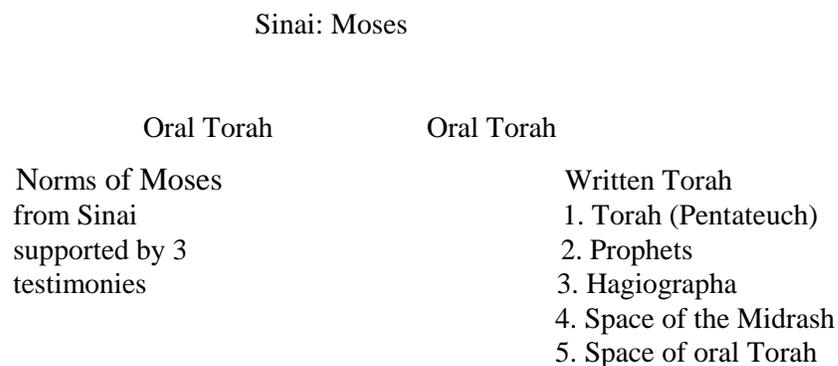
⁷² Mishnah Hagigah 1:8.

to a grave misunderstanding. The aim is not to crush the Israelites under the load of innumerable precepts. For those who know the reality of the matter, the multiplicity of halakhot unconnected with Scripture is necessary in order to preserve the dual aspect of the Sabbath: to be first of all devoted to God, and, owing to that very fact, to be devoted to man. (Exodus 31:14-15) The Sabbath, sacred to Israel and God, ought not to be banalized, but it should also not, owing to the details, become inhuman.

The Midrash, Like Scripture, is Within the Oral Torah

The gap between tradition and Scripture is inevitable. It is even necessary, for a living tradition has to adapt to circumstances and innovate, if necessary, independently of Scripture. The most normal thing for it to do is to develop and innovate in the space surrounding and enveloping Scripture, and in which Scripture clearly has no authority.

The reader may find the following diagram instructive:



The top of the cone is the point of origin (the One God has no dimension) of the Torah given through Moses at Sinai (Leviticus 26:46)

Scripture, traditionally divided into three sections, is situated within the cone, whose space - the whole of whose space - represents the oral Torah.⁷³ One sees that the oral Torah is anterior to Scripture, that the oral Torah envelops, engenders, transmits and interprets Scripture.

Some lines start at the top and do not pass through Scripture. These are the halakhot not based on any Scripture, the “norms of Moses from Sinai” which we will discuss in due course. Other lines do pass through Scripture. These are the halakhot which engender Scripture and which are subsequently influenced or supported by Scripture through Midrash. We see that Midrash, situated within the oral Torah, is limited in its scope by the Scripture it interprets. This limit, in the diagram, is represented by the lines from the top of the cone to the points of Scripture farthest apart.

Halakhah Can Circumvent, Supplant and Uproot Scripture and Midrash

Some especially difficult cases can occur. It can happen that halakhah “circumvents”, “supplants” or “uproots” Midrash or Scripture. All these terms have been used in this context and they are all equal in value.⁷⁴ They all testify to the fact that whenever there is a conflict between Scripture - whether heard directly (*mishma*) or already interpreted by the Midrash - and an accepted practice, it is the practice that is recognized by the community as halakhah and oral Torah, and as such it overrides Scripture. Thus, it is possible, for the good of the people, to overrule not only the letter of Scripture but also its interpretation. The Tradition is thus wider than either Scripture or Midrash. It is a fortunate circumstance that the word “circumvent” is mentioned together with “supplant.” The word “circumvent” gives one to understand that it is not really a matter of uprooting or supplanting Scripture or Midrash. Both of them, momentarily circumvented, remain available for an eventual re-evaluation.

The limitation of Midrash is thus in no way a downgrading of Scripture and of the Midrash attached to it but a judicious upgrading of an oral Torah entrusted to living and responsible people. As the great scholar J. Z. Lauterbach said: “With all their submission to the Law as the sole and absolute authority, the Pharisaic teachers did not become the slaves of the Law, but rather the masters of it.”⁷⁵ For all those, Jews or Christians, who believe that tradition is the Word of God, these bold formulations of a Jewish tradition which has been transmitted to this day express an obvious fact.⁷⁶

⁷³ The whole of its space, for Scripture was clearly oral Torah before being written down.

⁷⁴ Jerusalem Talmud, Kiddushin 1:2, 59 d; Babylonian Talmud Sotah 16 a and Rashi on Sotah 16 a on *'okevet*.

⁷⁵ ‘The Sadducees and Pharisees’, in *Rabbinic Essays*, Cincinnati 1951, p. 47.

⁷⁶ On the capacities of halakhah, see the fine book by E. Berkovits: *Halakhah, Its Power and Its Function (ha-halakhah, kohah ve tafqida)*, Jerusalem 1981. An abridged version of this book exists in English: *Not in Heaven: The Nature and Function of Halakha*, Ktav, New York, 1983. Every Jew knows the conclusion later added to Mishnah Berakhot (9:5) (Psalm 119:126): “It is time to work for the Lord, for they have violated your Torah.” Rabbi Nathan said: “They violated your Torah because it was time to act.”

Norms of Moses From Sinai

With all their desire to manifest the coherence of the Torah and to base halakhah on Scripture, the sages recognized that in the Jewish tradition there were traditions which were never reflected in Scripture and which do not need its support. These traditions are called “norms of Moses from Sinai” (*halakhot le-moshe mi-sinai*). The nature of these “norms” is well known, and one therefore cannot presume that the Jewish masters of the past and present have been so naïve as to believe that a “norm of Moses from Sinai” was literally dictated by Moses and transmitted, just as it was, from master to disciple from Sinai down to our own days.⁷⁷ When Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua, in the period of Yavneh, said: “I have received it from Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, who heard it from his master, and his master heard it from his master, as a norm of Moses from Sinai, that ...”, he only guaranteed three links in a chain of transmission which they received as immemorial.⁷⁸ On the basis of these three links one can, at least in imagination, draw a line which goes back to Moses at Sinai. The diagram we have given places a norm of this kind outside Scripture and within the oral Torah.

A Mosaic origin for the “norm of Moses from Sinai” is postulated. The claim can be supported in the case of an immemorial tradition of unquestioned validity which is known never to have been connected with Scripture. This explains why Rabbi Akiva resorted to the explanation of a “norm of Moses from Sinai” when, out of respect for the received Tradition, he had to forego suggesting to his disciples a scriptural support for the norm he was teaching.⁷⁹ Thus, we see that Rabbi Akiva, whose Midrash explored and gave value to every detail of the written Torah until he was able to base all halakhic developments on Scripture, confirmed the limits that all Midrash has to respect: one cannot attempt to derive from Scripture, or base on Scripture, a “norm of Moses from Sinai.” The Midrash, here, had a theologically designated limit. The ancient masters discussed the question of whether such-and-such a norm was truly a “norm of Moses from Sinai”, or whether it could not in some way be connected with Scripture. They also, in certain cases, preferred to speak of a prophetic derivation or “custom of the *prophets*” rather than a “norm of *Moses* from Sinai.”⁸⁰ The fact that these discussions took place is more important than the result of such discussions. It enables us to see that the sages were aware of the problems posed by borderline cases. Such cases had the virtue of clearly establishing the position of “norms of Moses from Sinai” in relation to Scripture and Midrash. The fact that such norms were taught in the period of Yavneh by masters as authoritative and as conservative as Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua demonstrates the existence, before the

⁷⁷ W. Bacher, *Tradition und Tradenten in den Schulen Palästinas und Babyloniens*, Leipzig, 1914, and recently, S. Safrai, ‘Halakah to Moses from Sinai’, in *The Literature of the Sages*, Part One, *Compendia Rerum Judaicarum ad Novum Testamentum*, Van Gorcum, 1987, pp. 180-185.

⁷⁸ Mishnah Yadaim 4:3; Mishnah Ediot 8:7.

⁷⁹ Babylonian Talmud, Menahot 29 b.

⁸⁰ Cf. Tosefta Sukkah 3:1. Ed. Liebermann, p. 266; Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 44 a. It concerns the willow-branch carried in procession and beaten on the ground on the seventh day of the festival of Sukkot.

destruction of the Second Temple, of an immemorial vision and coherent theology of the oral Torah. The limits of the Midrash serve once again to show the breadth of the oral Torah of which it is part. The oral Torah, ontologically and chronologically previous to the written Torah, could not do otherwise than to include “norms of Moses from Sinai.” At the beginning of the second century A.D., the pupils of Rabbi Akiva took the Pharisee coherence to its ultimate conclusion by declaring that the entire Torah, Scriptures and tradition were a “norm of Moses from Sinai.”⁸¹

Midrash is Not Always Necessary or Helpful

The teaching of the “norms of Moses from Sinai” is reflected in various domains: for example, liturgy, tithes and the role ascribed to the prophet Elijah on his return.⁸² The existence of such norms shows that the oral Torah can teach halakhah and haggadah without recourse to Scripture when Scripture and Midrash have nothing definitive to say on the subject concerned. Thus, the Tradition, in discussing resurrection, can refer to Scripture, but in certain cases apparently prefers to avoid doing so. It is as though Midrash is considered good and even necessary providing it remains in its place under the control of the oral Torah and in the area which the latter assigns it.

The Pharisees, as we know, unlike the Sadducees, specifically taught the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead.⁸³ In its original form, the tradition received and transmitted by the Pharisees taught the doctrine without any reference to Scripture. This is what is said by the Mishnah Sanhedrin (10:1): “The following are those who will have no part in the world-to-come: those who say, ‘There is no resurrection of the dead’ and those who say, ‘The Torah is not from heaven ...’ ” To the original text of this Mishnah there was later added a preface and an after-word, both of which introduce Scripture. The preface is: “All Israel has a part in the world-to-come, as it is said (Isaiah 60:21): ‘Your people shall be all righteous; they shall possess the land for ever, the shoot of my planting, the work of my hands in which I glory.’” This preface added to the Mishnah obviously implies a Midrash on the verse from Isaiah in which the inheritance of the land signifies eternal life. The after-word added to the Mishnah, for its part, changes the original curse into: “Those who say, ‘There is no resurrection of the dead *on the authority of the Torah.*’” It was thus decided that one not only has to believe in the resurrection, but also also that this doctrine can be based on the Torah: in this case, on the written Torah, and, strictly speaking, on the Pentateuch.⁸⁴

These additions show that the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead was originally taught without recourse to Scripture, and that the Midrash came later to support the teaching. Developments of this kind no doubt go back as far as the time of the writing of

⁸¹ Babylonian Talmud, Niddah 45 a. Cf. P. Lenhardt - M. Collin, ‘La Torah orale des Pharisiens’, supplement to *Cahier Evangile* 73 Cerf, Paris, 1990, pp. 29-31.

⁸² With regard to liturgy, see above, note 80, on the willow-branch carried in procession and beaten on the ground. With regard to tithes, see Mishnah Yadaim 4:3; and with regard to Elijah, see Mishnah Ediyot, 8:7.

⁸³ Cf. Josephus Flavius, Jewish War II, 8:14; Jewish Antiquities XVIII, 1:3-4; Mark 12:18-27 (Matthew 22:23-33; Luke 20:27-40); Acts 23:6-7.

⁸⁴ The written Torah, of course, can only provide such a teaching if it is searched, interpreted and “fulfilled” by Midrash.

the synoptic Gospels, for there Jesus appeals to scriptural evidence in a very similar way to the rabbinic tradition.⁸⁵ The fact remains that these appeals to Scripture are later additions and are only one of the means used by the Tradition to support its teachings. In fact, rabbinic literature demonstrates with great evocative power that an observation of the life with which God has endowed His creatures can support a belief in resurrection as convincingly and effectively as Midrash, if not more so. One can give as an example the argument used by Gebiha ben Pesisa - a forerunner of the Pharisees, who lived before the period of the Hasmoneans (about 200 B.C.) - to disprove the argument of a “heretic”, a forerunner of the Sadducees, who said: “Woe to you wicked people who say the dead shall live! The living die, and shall the dead live?” He answered: “Woe to you wicked people who say that the dead shall not live! Those who did not exist are alive: how much more will the living be alive!”⁸⁶ This *a fortiori* argument draws its strength from the evidence of life, which is stronger than the evidence of death invoked by the heretic. This way of reasoning is fully analogous to that of the mother of the seven Jewish martyrs in the Book of Maccabees when she urges her sons to die.⁸⁷

Everyone is free to prefer this kind of supporting argument to one based on Scripture; or, as against this, to prefer the Midrash. It cannot be claimed that Midrash does not teach the resurrection. That would be contrary to the teaching of the Tradition in the amplified and completed Mishnah. It must be said that in one way or another, and above all through its coherence, the complete Torah comprising Scripture and tradition does teach the resurrection. One may nevertheless prefer arguments not based on Scripture, and it is always advisable not to impose a specific biblical reference. The Tradition is careful not to do so when it teaches the resurrection in prayers and through prayer three times a day. The second blessing of the daily Amidah (the eighteen blessings of communal prayer) declares: “Blessed art thou, O Lord, who maketh the dead live.” It refrains from quoting Scripture or saying that this teaching is supported by Scripture. One cannot risk disturbing a believer at the moment of prayer by inserting a biblical reference which he might not find convincing.⁸⁸

Thus, Midrash has an important place and is even indispensable, but it is not suitable in all places and is not used in the prayer dealing with resurrection. The oral Torah controls Midrash and determines its limits.

⁸⁵ Concerning the Gospels, cf. Mark 12:26; Matthew 22:32; Luke 20:37; concerning rabbinic literature, cf. Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 90 b.

⁸⁶ Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 91 a.

⁸⁷ 2 Maccabees 7:22-23, 28-29.

⁸⁸ See P. Lenhardt and M. Collin, ‘La Torah orale ...’, op. cit., p. 36. Here we must mention E. Puech and his criticism in *La croyance des Esséniens en la vie future...*, *Etudes Bibliques* (New Series, no. 21), Gabalda, Paris, 1993, pp. 210-211. E. Puech has not understood the nature of the prayer taught by the Pharisees, nor what we have said about the subject. This prayer does not explicitly quote Scripture. That is precisely the point. The scriptural echoes clearly heard by every praying Jew and all average listeners are not scriptural references. As for the Pharisaic teachings on the resurrection, they clearly received them from a tradition which preceded them, attested to by the second Book of Maccabees and Gebiha ben Pesisa - sources we have discussed (See ‘La Torah orale ...’, pp. 37-38). We regret these misunderstandings, of which we intend to speak again on another occasion.

The Limits of Midrash Enhance Its Greatness

Rabbi Levi bar Hiyya said: “He who leaves the synagogue (*beit ha-knesset*) and enters the house of searching (*beit ha-midrash*) and devotes himself to Torah deserves to behold the face of the divine Presence (*shekhinah*), for it is said (Psalm 84:7):”They will go from height (strength) to height (strength): God will appear (to them) in Zion.”⁸⁹ This is indeed the case: Torah sought in the house of searching causes God to be encountered in Zion. One cannot go any higher than Zion (the divine Presence), and no path leads higher than Midrash. In a similar vein, Rabbi Hiyya bar Ashi said in the name of Rav: “The disciples of the sages have no rest either in this world or in the world-to-come, for it is said (Psalm 84:7): ‘They will go from height to height: God will appear (to them) in Zion.’” Rashi comments: “‘They have no rest’ (because they go) from yeshiva (study session) to yeshiva, from Midrash to Midrash.”⁹⁰

Thus, Midrash has no end or limit as it leads one to God and eternal life. It attains this height when there is still a search for God among the people that has searched for Him generation after generation.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 64 a.

⁹⁰ Sifrei on Deuteronomy 17:8, p. 206; Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 87 a. “The verse ‘You shall arise and go up to the place which the Lord your God will choose’ (Deuteronomy 17:8) teaches (*maggid*, that is, *melammed*) that the sanctuary is higher than the land of Israel and that the land of Israel is the highest of all lands.” Rashi, on Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 87 a *melammed*, comments: “From the verse ‘You shall arise and go up to the place’ one understands there is no town in Israel in relation to which Jerusalem is not higher.” As for the land of Israel being higher than all other lands, the Talmud asks how one can know this. The answer is given in Jeremiah 23:7-8: “Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when men shall no longer say, ‘The Lord lives who brought the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt,’ but ‘the Lord lives who brought up and led the descendants of the house of Israel out of the north country and out of all the countries where he had driven them so that they will dwell in their own land.’”

⁹¹ Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 38 b. According to Resh Lakish, the verse “This is the book of the generations of Adam” (Genesis 5:1) teaches: “The Holy One, blessed be He, showed Adam each generation and its seekers, each generation and its sages. When he reached the generation of Rabbi Akiva, Adam rejoiced at his Torah and was sad at his death. He said: ‘How difficult for me are thy thoughts!’ (Psalm 139:17)” The sages are those who, generation after generation, seek the face of the Lord (Psalm 24:6), those for whom Midrash remains a search for God, the exegetes who are not content to be “like the scribes,” like simple experts in Scripture. (See Rabbi Eliezer’s complaint after the destruction of the Temple, note 16, above).