

Introduction to Midrash

By Dena Salmon, Bnai Keshet, Montclair, NJ
and Rabbi Shai Gluskin, JRF, Philadelphia, PA

Concept/Topic to Teach: Teaching students to create midrash as an integral part of Torah study

General Goals:

- To get students excited about studying Torah texts by having the students author their own midrashim.
- Expose students to and develop appreciation for classical midrashim
- Learn the Garden of Eden story with its complexity

Specific Objectives:

- Students read Garden of Eden story with comprehension
- Students are able to identify a part of the text which they find puzzling, noteworthy or interesting.
- Students are able to create midrash based on the text they identified
- In reading a classical midrash, students are able to identify a problem in the Torah text that the midrash is trying to answer.

Required materials: Pens and paper for each child; markers, crayons and construction paper available for optional student use.

Anticipatory set: Students are given the status of “rabbis” in an imaginary Torah Academy which is named after their own synagogue. Teacher says something like, “Rabbotai: you, yes, **you** are about to take your seat in the great Torah Academy of Bnai Keshet. Many learned scholars have come before you and many will appear after you, but none will possess your unique insights into the text. To join the Academy, your first task is to begin to create your own midrash, the Jewish approach to Torah study.” Here’s how:

Step-By-Step Procedures:

1. Read the Garden of Eden story. ([See below for English text of this Torah story.](#)) “Focus your high beams on that old favorite, ‘The Woman and the Snake, or: Have a Nice Piece of Fruit, Darling.’ This text is otherwise known as Bereshit 2:15—3:24. Read the text out loud with a partner. Take turns reading each paragraph.”
2. “Once you’ve read the entire text carefully, select one or two aspects of the story that you find puzzling, troubling or interesting.”

3. “On a sheet of lined paper, put your name on the top and the verse numbers you’ve chosen. Then, write a summary of the verses in your own words. This will help you become more familiar with the text.”
4. “Create your own commentary. You can do this in a number of ways (Consider letting the students work in groups if they want to):”
 - Come up with your own creative explanation as to why things happen as they do.
 - Tell the story from another point of view (such Adam’s, the snake’s, or God’s).
 - Supply a missing piece to the text that makes it more understandable. For example, answering one or both of the following questions would provide information missing in the original text.
 - Why is the forbidden tree called “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” in 2:17 and “the tree in the middle of the garden” in 3:3?
 - Why does Eve add “touch” as something she shouldn’t do to the tree?
 - **DIFFICULT:** try to connect the story to another verse or story in the Torah in a way that sheds light on both. Or connect the story to some other story you may know about.”
5. “Illustrate or decorate your work if you have time.”
6. Ask students to share their work. Help the students take note of what parts of the story got the most attention. Help the students become aware of the differences and similarities of their responses.
7. When everyone has made his or her presentation, have the students read some traditional midrashim and compare them to their own. [See the three midrashim below](#). Feel free to use other midrashim as examples. The midrashim below are examples of how the rabbis of old disagreed with each other on the meaning of the texts. The third midrash below explains the serpent choosing Eve because she was more gullible than Adam. Teacher and students may disagree with this midrash and they should be encouraged to voice those feelings. Just like the rabbis of old could disagree, so we can respectfully disagree with an old text, or with each other.
8. (Optional.) Take the results of this midrash writing exercise and turn it into a “Garden of Eden Web Site”. You first make a “you-can-touch-it” web

site in the classroom. The “Home Page” is a poster which lists the titles each student has given to his/her work. Then you use string to make “hyperlinks” to the students midrashim that they wrote. Organize the material thematically or otherwise according to the students’ ideas. Then get older kids to come in and translate this “You can-touch-it” web site into a “You-can-click-it” one. See information at <http://torahquest.org> for more information on this technique.

Practice: Ask students to repeat the process. Students may comment on another part of the same text or be given a new text to study. In addition, students may collaborate in groups. Students may be given the following short handout when writing midrashim independently:

1. Read the text.
2. Find a problem or interesting part.
3. Summarize the problem or interesting text.
4. Ask questions of the text.
5. Write midrash which seeks to do one or more of the following:
 - a. Explain
 - b. Retell from different point of view
 - c. Fills in missing pieces
 - d. Bring humor
 - e. Connect story, verse or words to something else.

Closure: Ask the students to reflect on the process. What parts of the exercise were hard, easy, most interesting? Emphasize to the students that they are joining a great Jewish tradition of becoming commentators on the Torah. You may then conclude with: “You have succeeded well as rabbis in the Bnai Keshet House of Study. You have studied the text with great concentration. You have asked difficult questions and posed your own answers. You have noticed holes in the text, but you have dutifully and playfully filled them in. You have disagreed with each other and with the sages, but this was always done with respect. You are seeking the truth, and your search must be honest. Go out into the world and live, for this will aid your wisdom. I look forward to welcoming you back next week.”

Assessment Based On Objectives: Student performance during the exercise will determine achievement of objectives. Students should be able to produce a written midrash which has some connection to the main text. An associative connection to the main text without a clear coherence is fine. The classic midrashim often had limited or obtuse connections to the main text.

Examples from Classical Midrashim

From Genesis Rabba 15:7, What Kind of Tree Was It?

What kind of tree did Adam and Eve eat of? Wheat, according to R. Meir. When a man has no understanding, people say of him: He has never put bread [the source of wisdom] into his mouth. Rabbi. Samuel son of Rabbi Isaac put the following question to Rabbi Ze'era: "How can you say it was wheat?" "Nevertheless, it was so," R. Ze'era replied. R. Samuel argued: "But Scripture speaks of a tree." R. Ze'era replied: "In the Garden of Eden stalks of wheat were like trees, for they grew to the height of cedars of Lebanon."

Adam ate grapes, according to R. Judah bar Ilai, for Scripture says, "Grapes of pain, they have clusters of bitterness" (Deut. 32:32)-those grape clusters brought bitterness into the world.

According to R. Abba of Acco, it was the etrog, for it is said, "And the woman saw that the tree [its wood] was good for food" (Gen. 3:6). Go forth and see what tree there is whose wood, like its fruit, may be eaten. You will find none but the etrog.

The sages taught in the name of Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, "Heaven forbid [that we should try to guess the identity of the tree.] The Holy One did not reveal it, nor will God reveal it, for God who is everywhere saves [the honor of a tree, even as he saves] man's honor.

From Genesis Rabba 19:3, Where Was Adam?

"And the woman said unto the serpent" (Gen. 3:2). Now, where was Adam during this conversation? Abba bar Guria said: He had fallen asleep. But the sages said: At that time the Holy One was taking him around the entire world, saying to him, "Here is a place fit for planting trees, here is a place fit for sowing grains."

From Genesis Rabba 19:4, Why Did the Serpent Go to Eve?

"Now the serpent was very shrewd." (Gen 3:1). The serpent reasoned to himself: If I go and speak to Adam, I know that he will not listen to me, for it is difficult to lead a man away from his own mind. So I shall go and speak to Eve, for I know that she will listen to me, since women are light-headed and easily led by everybody.

Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden from Genesis 2:15 – 3:24

Chapter 2:15: The Adonai God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and care for it. *16:* And the Adonai God commanded the man, saying, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; *17:* but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

18: Then the Adonai God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper opposite of him." *19:* So out of the ground the Adonai God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. *20:* The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper fit for him.

21: So the Adonai God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh; *22:* and the rib which the Adonai God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. *23:* Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." *24:* Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh.

25: And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

Chapter 3:1: Now the serpent was more shrewd than any other wild creature that the Adonai God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, `You shall not eat of any tree of the garden'?" *2:* And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; *3:* but God said, `You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, neither shall you touch it, or you die.'" *4:* But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die. *5:* For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

6: So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her man, and he ate. *7:* Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves clothes.

8: They heard the sound of the Adonai God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his woman hid themselves from the presence of the Adonai God among the trees of the garden. *9:* But the Adonai God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" *10:* And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself."

11: [God] said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" *12:* The man said, "The woman whom you put here with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate."

13: Then the Adonai God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate."

14: The Adonai God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all cattle, and above all wild animals; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. *15:* I will put hatred between you and the woman, and between your children and her children; they shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise their heels."

16: To the woman he said, "I will greatly multiply your pain in giving birth; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you."

17: And to Adam he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your woman, and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; 18: thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. 19: In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

20: The man called his woman's name Eve, Hava, because she was the mother of all living. 21: And the Adonai God made for Adam and for his woman garments of skins, and clothed them.

22: Then the Adonai God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever" -- 23: therefore the Adonai God sent him forth from the Garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. 24: He drove out the man; and at the east of the Garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.