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The Talmud: A Tale of Two Bodies

Sarra Lev

- I. *R. Yohanan opened [his exposition]: “You have beset me behind and before (ahor vakedem tzartani)” (Ps. 139:5) ...*
- II. *R. Yirmiyah b. Leazar said: ‘When God created (Heb. bara) adam, God created it an androgynus¹ as it says, “Male and female God created them and... called their name Adam.” (Gen. 5:2)’*
- III. *R. Shmuel b. Nahman said: ‘When God created adam, God created it double-faced, then split her/him and made him/her two backs, here and there.’*
- IV. *They objected: ‘But it is written, “God took one of his ribs (tzela) ...!” (Gen. 2:21)’*
- V. *He answered: ‘from [adam’s] sides, as it says, “And for the second side (tzela) of the tabernacle ...” (Ex. 26:20)’*
- VI. *R. Tanhuma in R. Banayah’s name and R. Berekhiah in R. Leazar’s name said: ‘God created [adam] an unformed mass [golem], and it was stretched from one end of the world to the other, as it says, “Your eyes saw my unformed substance (g-l-m).” (Ps. 139:16)’*
- VII. *R. Yehoshua b. R. Nehemiah and R. Yehudah b. R. Shimon in R. Leazar’s name said: ‘God created [adam] encompassing the entire world ...’*
- VIII. *R. Leazar said: ‘[Adam] was the last in the work of the last day, and the first in the work of the last day. R. Shimon b. Lakish said: The last in the work of the last day and the earliest in the work of the first day. That is the view of R. Shimon b. Lakish, who says: “And the spirit of God hovered” (Gen. 1:2) refers to the soul of the first adam ...’*
- IX. *Rav Nahman said: ‘Last of all of the deeds [of creation] and first in punishment.’*
- X. *Rav Shmuel b. R. Tanhum said: ‘So too, [human] praise is [uttered] last, as it is written, “Halleluyah. Praise God from the heavens” ... and after that,*

“Praise God from the earth”... and only after that, “Kings of the earth and all peoples.” (Ps. 148:1–11)¹

- XI. R. Simlai said: ‘Just as [human] praise comes only after that of cattle, beasts, and fowl, so too [human] creation comes after that of cattle, beasts, and fowl. First it says “And Elohim said: Let the waters crawl with live crawling creatures, and fowl shall fly over the land...”’ (Gen. 1:20) and after [the creation of] all of the others, “LET US MAKE ADAM...” (Gen. 1:26–27)’²

Do not be dismayed. What you read above is *midrash* (pl. *midrashim*), one of the most complex genres in Hebrew literature to negotiate, and one of the richest to mine. This chapter will do both, step by step. But first, a few words about *midrash* itself.

Midrash is a text *about* a text. Its purpose is to expound upon the biblical text and to bring to light what it ‘really’ says. Many *midrashim* seem to have little loyalty to the ‘plain meaning’ of the biblical text they are explaining. One could even claim that the closer a *midrash* is to the plain meaning of the text, the less ‘midrashic’ it really is. The underlying premise of *midrash* is that Scripture, having been written by God, is perfect. Thus, when Scripture *looks* imperfect, it is actually trying to tell us something. The *midrash* is used to reveal that hidden message. This has the potential to (and often does) open up what we might today think of as ‘unexpected’ readings.

‘Looking imperfect’ for the rabbis consisted of any number of possible factors. Something that could have been written more concisely, for example, is considered imperfect – if it could have been said in fewer words, the unnecessary words must convey information. The existence of these extra words (or even letters) must be explained, or expounded by *midrash*. So too, if a verse is unclear, seemingly out of place, or theologically untenable, it constitutes an opportunity for *midrash*. The biblical stories of creation are filled with these midrashic opportunities.

The first chapters of Genesis are usually read as a continuous narrative, but there are, in fact, *two* stories of creation. In the first (Gen. 1:1–2:4a), male and female are created together, while in the second (Gen. 2:4b–25), female is created out of male. The rabbis consider the stories separately at times, and together at times. The biblical stories of creation lay the foundation for patriarchy. The first prescribes human domination of the planet – God creates an ‘*adam*’, a word that functions both as a proper name (Adam) and as the word for ‘human’ or for ‘first human’ (*the adam*) in biblical and rabbinic literature.³

God gives the *adam* dominion over the earth and its inhabitants. The second Genesis narrative constructs men's domination of women – God creates a *man*, sees that *he* is lonely and, in response, creates *him* a woman, from *his* rib. Woman is subsequent to, derivative of and made for man.

The early rabbis used their interpretations of biblical text to establish and maintain their hold as experts on the Bible, and thus, their authority. One might (rightly) assume, therefore, that it would be in their interest to uphold these patriarchal underpinnings of human mastery and male primacy. And yet, counter-narratives and openings for counter-narratives do appear in rabbinic literature. This chapter will explore a single text that exemplifies the ongoing tension between rabbinic narratives that construct or uphold patriarchy, and those that contest it.

The text that we will study is called a *petihta* (homiletical *midrash*). It appears in *Bereshit* (Genesis) *Rabbah*, a fifth-century C.E. compilation of *midrash* from the Land of Israel. Each chapter of *Bereshit Rabbah* (BR) begins with several *petihta'ot* (pl.), each of which opens with a verse from the *Ketuvim* and weaves a homily that closes with a verse (or verses) from the *Torah*.⁴ That verse from the *Torah* is the key to every *petihta*. In our case, the closing verse establishes *adam's* (humans') dominion over all the earth and continues to describe the creation of the *adam*:⁵

(26) And Elohim said, "Let us make *an adam* in our image, as our likeness and let *them* have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the skies, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth. (27) So God created *the adam* in *His* image, in the image of Elohim *He* created *him*; male and female *He* created *them*." (XI).

Several midrashic 'problems' appear here. Most notably, the *adam* is described using both singular and plural pronouns, and as both 'man' and 'male and female'. This ambiguity is revisited in the individual *midrashim* that make up the *petihta*.

The verse from *Ketuvim* that opens the *petihta* is Ps. 139:5: 'Behind and before you have closed me in (*ahor vakedem tzartani*)' (see I). This *petihta* is composed of a series of short *midrashim*⁶ about the creation of the first human, in which the rabbis play on the Hebrew word for 'closed me in', (*tzartani*) because of its similarity to the word for 'formed me', (*yetzartani*). Thus, they read the verse as if to say, 'You have *formed* me behind and before', (also translated '*early and late*' or '*west and east*') linking the verse from Psalms with the formation of the first human. The play on *tzartani* carries through the individual *midrashim*, each one providing a different understanding of what it means to be formed

‘behind and before’, ‘early and late’, or ‘west and east’. These *midrashim* alternate between a more traditional patriarchal trope (describing humanity (and/or man) as superior), and the notion that humanity is distinctly common, or even inferior. These narratives with their patriarchal outlook and their counter-narratives form the warp and woof of this colourful tapestry, in which no sooner has the reader followed one thread, than she encounters another of an entirely different colour.

The interlaced counter-narratives were not necessarily intentional disruptions of the rabbis’ patriarchal values, nor do they demonstrate a different value system. However, through the rabbis’ commitment to the enterprise of *midrash*, counter-narratives were created, whether intentional or not.⁷ Let us then examine the *midrash* above, in order to understand the narrative and counter-narrative that appear in this rabbinic homily. In his opening to the *petihta* (I), R. Yohanan explains this contradiction through the Hagiographic verse (Psalms 139:5): if one merits, one is superior – one receives a reward in this world (‘behind’) and in the world to come (‘forward’). If one does not merit, one is inferior (will be held accountable).

However, one need not accept the framing of R. Yohanan as that which guides these individual *midrashim*, even if that is how the redactor of the *petihta* combined them. Rather, each *midrash* can also be read individually as a statement about the creation of (hu)mans as told in Genesis, and thus, as a statement about patriarchy. In what follows, we will walk through the *midrashim* that appear in the *petihta*, concentrating on the first parts (II–V), which directly speak to the patriarchal framework of male dominion over female.

The *midrash* of R. Yirmiyah ben Leazar (II) is arguably the most radical, explaining that the first human, the *adam*, is created as a single body composed of male and female. R. Shmuel b. Nahman’s statement (III) is ostensibly a follow-up to that declaration, describing the creation in more detail: *How* was this two-sexed *adam* created? With two faces, back to back (‘behind and before’), so that God could split the ‘double body’ down the middle and come out with two human bodies.

This story of creation closely resembles that which Aristophanes proposes in Plato’s *Symposium*, in which humans were created back to back in a single body with two faces, two sets of limbs and two sets of genitals. In his version, some were male and female (these were called *androgynus*), some male and male, and some female and female. In order to reduce the strength of humans, Zeus halved these bodies, creating what are now (single-sexed) humans. According to Aristophanes, each individual human has for evermore been drawn to the particular sex from which he or she was initially separated.⁸

But why does R. Yirmiyah posit this story? His interpretation is based on a textual problem, similar to that which we noted in Genesis 1:26. Genesis 5:1–2 reads: ‘In the day when Elohim created *adam*, in the likeness of Elohim God created *him*; male and female God created *them*, and blessed *them*, and called *their* name *adam*, in the day when *they* were created.’ Is *adam* a ‘he’ or a ‘they?’ What does it mean to say that God created *them* male and female and then ‘called *their* name *adam*?’ R. Yirmiyah resolves these questions by ignoring the patriarchal tropes of the secondary and derivative creation of woman, and offering a different story of creation, one that brilliantly explains the enigmatic verses.

R. Yirmiyah’s solution is not benign. In his version of the story, the first creation consists of a single male-and-female body. Woman’s creation does not emerge from man, or even follow that of man. The creation of man and woman is simultaneous, throwing a wrench into the entire story of human creation.

But that is not all that R. Yirmiyah achieves through his interpretation. He also manages inadvertently to disrupt another baseline understanding that patriarchy has always taken for granted – the hierarchical binary. If patriarchy is based on the premise that there are males and females, and female is secondary, then any suggestion of a third sex/gender option is itself a disruption of the norm. And yet, R. Yirmiyah’s story of human creation integrates the intersexed *androgynus* into the very origin of creation, making his/her creation primary, preceding the secondary ‘two sex’ arrangement.

As we said, this *petihta* is composed of warp and woof, and thus R. Yirmiyah’s narrative does not hang in the air for long before his radical reformulation of woman’s creation is challenged. An anonymous ‘they’ objects (IV): Your egalitarian story doesn’t hold! The biblical text clearly says that the woman was taken from one of *adam*’s ribs!

There are two objections here – one textual and the other ideological. The textual problem is simply that R. Yirmiyah’s story (supported by R. Shmuel) is a far stretch from the text of the second chapter of Genesis, in which woman is built from man’s rib following *his* creation. However, the genre of *midrash* frequently veers from the main story, so that textual problems alone should hardly provoke this reaction. This is where the ideological objection enters the picture, balking at the idea that women and men may be formed from precisely the same cloth at precisely the same moment.⁹ R. Yirmiyah and R. Shmuel have strayed not only from the biblical text, but also from the *status quo*.

R. Shmuel’s response to the anonymous objection (V) elegantly draws on the description of the building of the tabernacle in Exodus 26. Verses 18–19

describe the plans for the south wall of the tabernacle – twenty boards with two silver sockets each. Verses 20–21 then state: ‘And for the second side (*tzela*) of the tabernacle on the *north* edge, there shall be twenty boards, and their forty sockets of silver ...’ The word *tzela* thus has *two* meanings, one anatomical (‘rib’) and the other architectural (‘side’). The ‘objectors’ read *tzela* in its anatomical sense, but R. Shmuel reads the word in its architectural sense. R. Shmuel’s answer plays several functions. To begin with, the body of the first human is analogized to the tabernacle. But more importantly, that body (like the tabernacle) is symmetric – one side male, one side female – and *both* sides, analogized to God’s holy dwelling place.

With all of this, it is important to remember that although R. Yirmiyah’s counter-narrative significantly undermines certain elements of patriarchy, it assumes and supports other elements of that system, in particular, heteronormativity. In contrast to Aristophanes’ story where bodies were initially sometimes ‘double male’ or ‘double female’, in R. Yirmiyah’s *midrash* there is no suggestion of more than one (male/female) original body. Although his *midrash* does not include Aristophanes’ claim that the split bodies are eternally drawn to one another, the rabbinic narrative is based directly on the biblical one in which ‘a man shall leave his father and his mother and cleave to his wife, and they shall be one flesh’ (Gen. 2:24). This *midrash* cannot be separated from that larger narrative in which those two (male and female) bodies (again) become ‘one flesh’.

Following R. Yirmiyah and R. Shmuel’s *midrash*, comes another that potentially contests the patriarchal narrative, though it too has multiple interpretations. R. Tanhuma and R. Berekhiah suggest that the *adam* was not a human body at all, but a *golem*, stretched from one end of the earth (or universe) to the other (VI). The root (*g-l-m*) of the word *golem* means raw material. In this *midrash*, the *adam* is presented as a giant mass of raw material, covering the planet. While this *midrash* does not directly call into question the traditional gender paradigm, it does challenge some basic tenets of the biblical creation story, including its presentation of a sovereign (male) human. In this description, *adam* is not ‘human’ at all, but simply raw material. Rather than master and ruler, *adam* must be formed and worked by one more powerful. The image of *adam* as *golem* also raises the possibility that neither sex nor gender is original to creation. That is to say, the initial creation that was to become human was an undifferentiated blob – unsexed, and certainly un-gendered.

The suggestion that this *golem* stretches from one end of the world to the other is again an interpretation of ‘behind and before’. In this *midrash*, however,

the words *ahor vakedem* are more aptly translated ‘west and east’, evoking a vast horizontal expanse. Thus, despite its characteristics as counter-narrative, this *midrash* does lend itself to a patriarchal viewpoint as well – painting the *adam* as larger than life (*all* life, quite literally). While this *midrash* demotes the *adam* from its status as ruler, it allows this *golem* to occupy *all possible* space.

What comes next in the sequence of *midrashim* (VII) is ambiguous. R. Yehoshua b. R. Nehemiah and R. Yehudah b. R. Shimon state: ‘[God] created [the *adam*] encompassing (*maleh*) the entire world.’ What does the word ‘encompassing’ mean here? Do we hold onto the image of the *adam* stretching over the entire world, filling all space, or might the original *golem* body *include* that world within it? That is, does that first *adam*, in fact, *contain* the raw material for the *entirety* of creation, plant, animal, water and sand? The Hebrew word ‘maleh’ indicates that *adam* is *filled with* the entire world, not separate from it, or lord over it, but composed of it.

Once again, however, it is also possible to read R. Yehoshua and R. Yehudah (VII) not as asserting *adam*’s embodiment of all things, but rather *his* immensity in comparison with all things. If there is nothing outside of that *adam*, then *golem* or not, *he* is the locus of all power, or in essence, *he is everything*.¹⁰ What follows adopts this very interpretation, reading *maleh* not as ‘being filled by the world’, but as ‘filling the world’. A series of biblical verses is proffered, ‘proving’ that the *adam* filled every space on earth, including the space between the earth and the heavens. This is followed by a *midrash* (not quoted) in which R. Leazar suggests that *adam*’s creation took place both at the earliest and at the latest moment of the last day.¹¹ R. Shimon ben Lakish (VIII) pushes this idea to its limits: *adam*’s creation was ‘the earliest act of the *first* day’. The combination of these three *midrashim* positions the *adam* as spanning all existing space, and all existing time – elevating human primacy to mythical proportions.

It is directly following this grandiose description of *adam*’s vastness that Rav Nahman steps in (IX) to reclaim the words ‘behind and before’ as counter-narrative. The *adam*, he asserts, is ‘last (“behind”) of all of the deeds [of creation] and first (“before”) in punishment’. Rav Nahman’s terse statement instantly (and quite literally) shrinks the massive *adam* down to size. The *adam* is not first in creation, but last! The only thing for which *adam can* claim primacy, according to Rav Nahman, is punishment – not a legacy of which to be proud, and certainly not one that either explicitly or implicitly vests humans or men with power or authority.

The *petihta* ends on a similar note, not by praising the grandeur of men or humans, but by setting them in their ‘rightful place’ in creation – last. Rav

Shmuel b. Rav Tanhum (X) points to humans as having been the last of all the creations to praise God. God's *quid-pro-quo* response, says R. Simlai (XI), is to create humans *last*, not as the grand finale of all creation, but as a castigation.¹²

The *petihta* does not close with an image of the superiority or power of *man* over all others (women, other-sexed/gendered and all creatures who roam the earth). However, although *man* loses his privileged place in creation in these last three *midrashim*, woman fares no better. For Rav Nahman (IX), Rav Shmuel (X) and R. Simlai (XI), she does not even appear any longer as the final stage of creation. If these last three *midrashim* diminish 'man' by positioning him last in the order of creation, then woman's inferior status (and certainly that of a 'third sex/gender') is highlighted both by her assumed place in that order and by her outright absence in the *midrash*.

As we noted, the key to a *petihta* is its closing verse (XI), in our case two verses – Genesis 1:26–27: 'And Elohim said, "Let us make *an adam* in our image... and let *them* have dominion... So God created *the adam* in *His* image, in the image of Elohim *He* created *him*; male and female *He* created *them*."' The confusion that this verse in Genesis evokes is twofold. We noted already that it calls into question the sovereignty of men over women: Did God create *adam* a 'him' or a 'them?' But by the end of this *petihta*, we are left wondering not only about *adam's* place in relation to gender, but also about *adam's* place in relation to all creation. Are humans truly meant to be sovereign over the earth and all her creatures? While the *petihta's* closing Biblical verse (Gen. 1:26) describes the dominion of *man*, these last few *midrashim* leave us in doubt. *Man* is last in creation, last to praise God and first to be punished – not really the material for a supreme ruler.

BR 8:1 leaves us sitting in a moment of tension between the archetypal (patriarchal) creation narrative and alternatives to that narrative. Although we rarely find evidence that the rabbis of late antiquity advocated for (or even contemplated) fundamental changes to societal patriarchy, the genre of *midrash* did present some unique opportunities to express alternative world views. Through *midrash* the rabbis wrestled with biblical texts that did not 'make sense', and sometimes produced alternative narratives as a by-product of that enterprise. *Midrash* thus had the potential to open up worlds that the rabbis' legal and social systems did not. While it is true that none of these alternative worlds is wholly free from the patriarchal paradigm, each of them cuts away at the overgrowth and offers us a glimpse of the road not taken.