

## Introduction to Early Judaism

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Class 3: The World of Rabbinic Midrash

What is Midrash?

Rabbinic Theology, Rabbinic Authority

Midrashic stories about Abraham and Moses

### I. Introduction

#### 1. Babylonian Talmud; Tractate Bava Metziah 59 b: The Excommunication of Eliezer, son of Hyrcanus

It has been taught: On that day R. Eliezer brought forward every imaginable argument, but they did not accept them. Said he to them: 'If the halachah [law] agrees with me, let this carob-tree prove it!' Thereupon the carob-tree was torn a hundred cubits out of its place — others affirm, four hundred cubits. 'No proof can be brought from a carob-tree,' they retorted. Again he said to them: 'If the halachah agrees with me, let the stream of water prove it!' Whereupon the stream of water flowed backwards — 'No proof can be brought from a stream of water,' they rejoined. Again he urged: 'If the halachah agrees with me, let the walls of the schoolhouse prove it,' whereupon the walls inclined to fall. But R. Joshua rebuked them, saying: 'When scholars are engaged in a halachic dispute, what have ye to interfere?' Hence they did not fall, in honour of R. Joshua, nor did they resume the upright, in honour of R. Eliezer; and they are still standing thus inclined.

Again he said to them: 'If the halachah agrees with me, let it be proved from Heaven!'

Whereupon a Heavenly Voice cried out: 'Why do ye dispute with R. Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the halachah agrees with him!'

But R. Joshua arose and exclaimed: 'It is not in heaven.'

What did he mean by this? — Said R. Jeremiah: That the Torah had already been given at Mount Sinai; we pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice, because Thou hast long since written in the Torah at Mount Sinai, After the majority must one incline. R. Nathan met Elijah and asked him: What did the Holy One, Blessed be He, do in that hour? — He laughed [with joy], he replied, saying, 'My sons have defeated Me, My sons have defeated Me.'

It was said: On that day all objects which R. Eliezer had declared clean were brought and burnt in fire. Then they took a vote and excommunicated him. Said they, 'Who shall go and inform him?' 'I will go,' answered R. Akiba, 'lest an unsuitable person go and inform him, and thus destroy the whole world.' What did R. Akiba do? He donned black garments and wrapped himself in black, and sat at a distance of four cubits from him. 'Akiba,' said R. Eliezer to him, 'what has particularly happened to-day?' 'Master,' he replied, 'it appears to me that thy companions hold aloof from thee.' Thereupon he too rent his garments, put off his shoes, removed [his seat] and sat on the earth, whilst tears streamed from his eyes.

The world was then smitten: a third of the olive crop, a third of the wheat, and a third of the barley crop. Some say, the dough in women's hands swelled up. A Tanna taught: Great was the calamity that befell that day, for everything at which R. Eliezer cast his eyes was burned up. R. Gamaliel too was travelling in a ship, when a huge wave arose to drown him. 'It appears to me,' he reflected, 'that this is on account of none other but R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus.' Thereupon he arose and exclaimed, 'Sovereign of the Universe! Thou knowest full well that I have not acted for my honour, nor for the honour of my paternal house, but for Thine, so that strife may not multiply in Israel!' At that the raging sea subsided.

#### 2. Babylonian Talmud; Tractate Sanhedrin 68 a: The End of Rabbi Eliezer's Life

When R. Eliezer fell sick, R. Akiba and his companions went to visit him. He was seated in his canopied four-poster, whilst they sat in his salon... The Sages, seeing that his mind was clear, entered his chamber and sat down at a distance of four cubits. 'Why have ye come?' said he to them. 'To study the Torah', they replied; 'And why did ye not come before now', he asked? They answered, 'We had no time'. He then said, 'I will be surprised if

these die a natural death'. R. Akiba asked him, 'And what will my death be?' and he answered, 'Yours will be more cruel than theirs'. He then put his two arms over his heart, and bewailed them, saying, 'Woe to you, two arms of mine, that have been like two Scrolls of the Law that are wrapped up. Much Torah have I studied, and much have I taught. Much Torah have I learnt, yet have I but skimmed from the knowledge of my teachers as much as a dog lapping from the sea. Much Torah have I taught, yet my disciples have only drawn from me as much as a painting stick from its tube. .... His visitors then asked him, 'What is the law of a ball, a shoemaker's last, an amulet, a leather bag containing pearls, and a small weight?' He replied, 'They can become unclean, and if unclean, they are restored to their uncleanliness just as they are.' Then they asked him, 'What of a shoe that is on the last?' He replied, 'It is clean;' and in pronouncing this word his soul departed. Then R. Joshua arose and exclaimed, 'The vow is annulled, the vow is annulled!'<sup>1</sup>

## II. Abraham

### 1. Abraham and Nimrod: Genesis Rabbah 38:13

"And Haran died in the presence of his father Terah" (Gen. 11:28). Rabbi Hiyya the grandson of Rabbi Adda of Yaffo [said]: Terah was a worshipper of idols. One time he had to travel to a place, and he left Abraham in charge of his store. When a man would come in to buy [idols], Abraham would ask: How old are you? They would reply: fifty or sixty. Abraham would then respond: Woe to him who is sixty years old and worships something made today - the customer would be embarrassed and would leave. A woman entered carrying a dish full of flour. She said to him: this is for you, offer it before them. Abraham took a club in his hands and broke all of the idols, and placed the club in the hands of the biggest idol. When his father returned, he asked: who did all of this? Abraham replied: I can't hide it from you - a woman came carrying a dish of flour and told me to offer it before them. I did, and one of them said 'I will eat it first,' and another said 'I will eat it first.' The biggest one rose, took a club, and smashed the rest of them. Terah said: what, do you think you can trick me? They don't have cognition! Abraham said: Do your ears hear what your mouth is saying?

Terah took Abraham and passed him off to [King] Nimrod. They said [to the king]: let us worship the fire. Abraham said to them: [rather] let us worship water, for it extinguishes fire. Nimrod agreed: let us worship water. Abraham continued: if so, let us worship the clouds, which provide water. Nimrod agreed: let us worship the clouds. Abraham continued: if so, let us worship the winds that scatter the clouds. Nimrod agreed: let us worship the winds. Abraham continued: if so, let us worship humans who are filled with wind [air]. Nimrod replied: You're just speaking words - I only worship fire. I will throw you into it, and the God you worship can save you from it.

Haran was hidden and was of two minds, saying [to himself]: if Abraham is victorious, I will say I am with Abraham, and if Nimrod is victorious, I will say I am with Nimrod. When Abraham was through into the fiery furnace and saved, they asked him [Haran]: who are you with? He replied: I am with Abraham. They took him and threw him into the fire, and his insides burned up and he died before his father Terah, as it says: "And Haran died in the [lit.] on the face of his father Terah" (Gen. 11:28).

### 2. Abraham and Isaac: Genesis Rabbah 56:8-10

Rabbi Acha said: Abraham became surprised [and said]. "These words are confusing. Yesterday you said (Gen 21:12), 'For it is through Isaac that offspring shall be called for you.' Then, you went back and said, 'Take your son...' And now [your angel] says to me, 'Do not lay your hand upon the land' - I am

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<sup>1</sup> Trans. Soncino. The remainder of the translations in this sourcesheet are from [www.sefaria.org](http://www.sefaria.org).

bewildered!” The Holy One, blessed be He responded: “Abraham, ‘I will not violate my covenant or change what I have uttered’ (Pss 89:35). When I said to you ‘take your son’ I never said to slaughter him. I merely said to ‘raise him up.’ I said this to you to demonstrate your belovedness, and you did my bidding. Now take him down.”

...

[Abraham said to God:] “Sovereign of the universe! When you did order me, ‘Take your son, your only son’ (Gen 22:2), I could have answered, ‘Yesterday you promised me: “Through Isaac shall your descendants be named” (Gen 21:12), and now you say: “offer him there for a burnt offering” (Gen 22:2)?’ But, God forbid, I *did not handle it* so, but *suppressed my feelings of compassion* in order to do your will. Even so, may it be your will, O Lord our God, that when Isaac’s children are in trouble, you will remember that binding in their favor and be filled with compassion for them.”

### 3. Abraham and Sarah: Babylonian Talmud, Bava Batra 58a

Rabbi Bena’a was marking burial caves for the purpose of helping to prevent the contracting of ritual impurity. When he arrived at the cave of Abraham, i.e., the Cave of Machpelah, he encountered Eliezer, the servant of Abraham, who was standing before the entrance. Rabbi Bena’a said to him: What is Abraham doing at this moment? Eliezer said to him: He is lying in the arms of Sarah, and she is gazing at his face.

Rabbi Bena’a said to him: Go tell him that Bena’a is standing at the entrance, so that he should assume an appropriate position to receive a visitor. Eliezer said to him: Let [Rabbi Bena’a] enter, since it is known that there is no evil inclination in this higher world, so it is not inappropriate for Rabbi Bena’a to see Abraham and Sarah in this position. He entered, examined the cave in order to measure it, and exited.

When he arrived at the cave of Adam the first man, who is buried in the same area, a Divine Voice emerged and said: You gazed upon the likeness of My image, i.e., Abraham, who is similar to the image of Adam the first man. Do not gaze upon My image itself, i.e., Adam the first man, about whom the verse states that he was formed in the image of God (see Genesis 1:27).

## III. Moses

### 1. Moses and the Rabbis: Babylonian Talmud, Menahot 29b

Rab Judah said in the name of Rab, When Moses ascended on high he found the Holy One, blessed be He, engaged in affixing coronets to the letters. Said Moses, ‘Lord of the Universe, Who stays Thy hand?’ He answered, ‘There will arise a man, at the end of many generations, Akiba b. Joseph by name, who will expound upon each tittle heaps and heaps of laws’. ‘Lord of the Universe’, said Moses; ‘permit me to see him’. He replied, ‘Turn thee round’. Moses went and sat down behind eight rows [and listened to the discourses upon the law]. Not being able to follow their arguments he was ill at ease, but when they came to a certain subject and the disciples said to the master ‘Whence do you know it?’ and the latter replied ‘It is a law given unto Moses at Sinai’ he was comforted. Thereupon he returned to the Holy One, blessed be He, and said, ‘Lord of the Universe, Thou hast such a man and Thou givest the Torah by me!’ He replied, ‘Be silent, for such is My decree’. Then said Moses, ‘Lord of the Universe, Thou hast shown me his Torah, show me his reward’. ‘Turn thee round’, said He; and Moses turned round and saw them weighing out his flesh at the market-stalls. ‘Lord of the Universe’, cried Moses, ‘such Torah, and such a reward!’ He replied, ‘Be silent, for such is My decree’. (Trans. I. Epstein, Soncino Talmud)

## 2. Moses and the Israelites, Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 32a

R. Samuel b. Nahmani said in the name of R. Jonathan. From where do we know that the Holy One, blessed be He, in the end gave Moses right? Because it says, And multiplied unto her silver and gold, which they used for Baal. And the Lord spoke unto Moses, Go, get down. What is meant by 'Go, get down'? R. Eleazar said: The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: Moses, descend from your greatness. Have I at all given to you greatness save for the sake of Israel? And now Israel have sinned; then why do I want you? Straightway Moses became powerless and he had no strength to speak. When, however, [God] said, Let Me alone that I may destroy them, Moses said to himself: This depends upon me, and straightway he stood up and prayed vigorously and begged for mercy. It was like the case of a king who became angry with his son and began beating him severely. His friend was sitting before him but was afraid to say a word until the king said, Were it not for my friend here who is sitting before me I would kill you. He said to himself, This depends on me, and immediately he stood up and rescued him.

Now therefore let Me alone that My wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them, and I will make of thee a great nation. R. Abbahu said: Were it not explicitly written, it would be impossible to say such a thing: this teaches that Moses took hold of the Holy One, blessed be He, like a man who seizes his fellow by his garment and said before Him: Sovereign of the Universe, I will not let you go until You forgive and pardon them. And I will make of thee a great nation etc. R. Eleazar said: Moses said before the Holy One, blessed be He: Sovereign of the Universe, seeing that a stool with three legs cannot stand before Thee in the hour of Thy wrath, how much less a stool with one leg! And moreover, I am ashamed before my ancestors, who will now say: See what a leader he has set over them! He sought greatness for himself, but he did not seek mercy for them!

And Moses besought [*wa-yehal*] the Lord his God. R. Eleazar said: This teaches that Moses stood in prayer before the Holy One, blessed be He, Until he [so to speak] wearied Him [*hehelahu*]. Raba said: Until he remitted His vow for Him. It is written here *wa-yehal*, and it is written there [in connection with vows], he shall not break [*yahel*] his word; and a Master has said: He [himself] cannot break, but others may break for him. Samuel says: It teaches that he risked his life for them, as it says, And if not, blot me, I pray Thee, out of Thy book which Thou hast written. Raba said in the name of R. Isaac: It teaches that he caused the Attribute of Mercy to rest [*hehelah*] on them. The Rabbis say: It teaches that Moses said before the Holy One, blessed be He: Sovereign of the Universe, it is a profanation [*hullin*] for Thee to do this thing.

## 3. Moses and Pharaoh: Exodus Rabbah 1:25

"And the child (Moses) grew" - Twenty four months she nursed him, and you say "and the child grew"?! Rather he grew, not in the way of the [rest] land. "And she brought him to the daughter of Pharaoh..." The daughter of Pharaoh would kiss and hug and adore him (Moses) as if he were her own son, and she would not take him out of the king's palace. And because [Moses] was so beautiful, everyone yearned to see him. One that would see him would not leave his presence. And it was that Pharaoh would kiss him (Moses) and hug him, and he would remove Pharaoh's crown and place it on his own head...And some of the observers sitting among them were the magicians of Egypt that said, "We are wary of this, that he is taking your crown and placing it on his head, that he not be the one we say (i.e. prophesy) that will take the kingship from you." Some said to kill him, and some said to burn him. And Jethro was sitting among them and said to them, "This child has no intent [to take the throne]. Rather, test him by bringing in a bowl [a piece of] gold and a coal. If he outstretches his hand towards the gold, [surely] he has intent [to take the throne], and you should kill him. And if he outstretches his hand towards the coal, he [surely] does not have intent [to take the throne], and he does not deserve the death penalty." They immediately brought the bowl before him (Moses), and he outstretched his hand to take the gold, and Gabriel came and

pushed his (Moses') hand, and he grabbed the coal. He then brought his hand along with the coal into his mouth and burned his tongue, and from this was made (Exodus 4:10) "slow of speech and slow of tongue."

Cf. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 2.232

#### 4. Moses and God: Midrash Tannaim Deuteronomy 34:5:

Another explanation: "And Moses died there" [Deut 34:5]: Moses said before the Holy One, Blessed be He: "Master of the World, although you decreed death upon me, do not give me over to the Angel of Death." God said to him, "By your life, I will care for you and hide you [from the Angel of Death." And the Holy One, Blessed be He showed him his place [in heaven], as He had shown Aaron his brother. And when [Moses] saw his seat in Gan Eden, his mind grew cold [i.e. he became fearful]. At that moment the Holy One, Blessed be He said to the Angel of Death, "Go and bring me the soul of Moses." [The Angel of Death] went all around the world and could not find him. He went to the Sea and said to it, "Have you seen Moses?" [The sea] answered him, "I have not since him since the day that he brought Israel out from me." He went to the mountains and hills and said to them, "Have you seen Moses?" They said to him, "We have not seen him since the day that the Torah was accepted on Mount Sinai." [The Angel thought,] "Perhaps he is standing and praying before God that he might enter the Land of Israel." He went to the Land of Israel and said to her, "Perhaps the soul of Moses is here?" She answered, "You will not find it in the land of the living" [Job 28:13]. He went to the Clouds of Glory and said to them "Perhaps the soul of Moses is here?" They said to him, "It has disappeared from the eyes of the living [Job 28:21]." He went to the ministering angels and said to them, "Perhaps the soul of Moses is here?" They said to him, "From the birds [*'ofefin*] of the sky it is hidden [Job 28:21]." And these ministering angels are called *me'offefin*. He went to the abyss and said to him, "May the soul of Moses is here?" He said to him, "No, as it says, 'The abyss says, 'It is not in me'" [Job 28:14]. He went to *She'ol* and *Avadon* and said, "Have you seen Moses?" They said to him, "We have heard him [but] we have not seen him, as it says, "Avadon and Death said, ['We have heard a rumor of it with our ears']" [Job 28:22]...He went to the ministering angels and said, "Have you seen Moses?" They said to him, "He is with humankind." He went to humankind and said to them, "Have you seen Moses?" They said to him, " 'God knows his path and he knows his place' [Job 28:23], and He concealed him in the World to Come, and no creation knows [where he is], as it says, "And Wisdom, where might it be found?" [Job 28:12-14]. He went to the abyss and said to him, "May the soul of Moses is here?" He said to him, "No, as it says, 'The abyss says, 'It is not in me'" [Job 28:14]. He went to *She'ol* and *Avadon* and said, "Have you seen Moses?" They said to him, "We have heard him [but] we have not seen him, as it says, "Avadon and Death said, ['We have heard a rumor of it with our ears']" [Job 28:22]...He went to the ministering angels and said, "Have you seen Moses?" They said to him, "He is with humankind." He went to humankind and said to them, "Have you seen Moses?" They said to him, " 'God knows his path and he knows his place' [Job 28:23], and He concealed him in the World to Come, and no creation knows [where he is], as it says, "And Wisdom, where might it be found?" [Job 28:12-14]."