

Midrash is popularly understood as “atomistic”, or “versocentric”, meaning that it focuses on specific details of a text rather than seeking to understand the text as a whole. This understanding is generally cited to contrast midrash invidiously with “the literary method”, which looks for large structures and overall context.

Now this understanding is certainly simply wrong in one sense – the midrashists all saw the entire Torah as a theological unity, and thus never offered interpretations that conflicted with their sense of the whole. Midrashic atomization, certainly does not bear comparison with the atomistic techniques used by members of some sects of the Documentary Hypothesisarians, who attribute radical theological positions to fragments of comfortably unified text.

But I think it is wrong more fundamentally. I contend that midrash is actually deeply concerned with immediate and overall literary context. I suggest that the rabbis **read** with questions of literary context explicitly in mind, although at times they sacrifice *immediate* narrative or legal context for the sake of *structural* context, and that some scholars have mistaken these sacrifices for an independent justification of acontextual reading. I put this as a suggestion because I have not yet tried to test it broadly, but I hope the following example from this week’s parshah will stimulate you to conduct your own experiments¹.

ויקרא פרק יב: א-ב

וַיִּדְבֶּר יְקוֹקֵק אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא אֵל לֹא אִשָּׁה כִּי תִזְרֶיעַ וַיִּלְדֶּה זָכָר . . .”

Vayikra 12:1-2

Hashem spoke to Mosheh, saying: “Speak to Bnei Yisrael, saying: ‘A woman – when she is *mazria* and *yaldah* a male . . .”

The standard midrashic reading here begins from the extraneity of *כי תזריע*; whatever physiological phenomenon it refers to presumptively occurs in all pregnancies, and therefore the text should simply have said “אשה כי תלד זכר”. As a result, the Rabbis translate זכר וילדה as declarative –

“she will (subsequently) give birth to a male” –
rather than as part of the conditional
“. . . and give birth to a male”.

This raises the question – what are the prior conditions that will generate the birth of the male? The answer from direct context is *אשה כי תזריע*, and this generates a somewhat risqué discussion on Niddah 31a as to how husbands can ensure that their wives are *תחלה*.² However, Shavuot 18b records three other answers:

- a) If husband and wife separate close to her projected *niddah* time, rather than waiting for her to actually become *temeiah* (Rabbi Chiyya bar Abba in the name of Rabbi Yochanan)

¹ As with many of my comments on midrash, I am influenced by shiurim given by my friend Rabbi Nachman Levine, but I of course am responsible for any errors and for all elements of the specific examples here..

² Rashbam may have thought that the question was *כי תזריע* is connected to the birth of the זכר rather than the נקבה, and accordingly seeks to forestall the midrash by asserting that *כי תזריע* relates both to the immediate זכר וילדה and the later נקבה תלד זכר. In my understanding, however, the Rabbis knew that possibility well, but rejected it as failing to explain why *כי תזריע* is in the text at all.

- b) If he makes *havdalah* over a grape beverage on Saturday night (Rabbi Chiyya bar Abba in the name of Rabbi Yochanan)
- c) If he sanctifies himself (makes himself קדוש) during intercourse (Rabbi Binyamin bar Yefet in the name of Rabbi Elazar)
- a) and b) are claims that this verse follows directly from the preceding verse, which reads:

לְהַבְדִּיל בֵּין הַטָּמֵא וּבֵין הַטְּהוֹר וּבֵין הַנֶּאֱכָלֶת וּבֵין הַחַיָּה אֲשֶׁר לֹא תֹאכְלֶה: פ

To separate between the *tamei* and the *tahor* and between the beast that is eaten and the beast which must not be eaten.

Each of them claims that זכר וילדה is a consequence of being טמא לטהור, although they offer different examples of *how* one can be טמא לטהור. מבדיל בין טמא לטהור. מדרש אומר cites a version in which the issue is care regarding immersion, and Tanchuma a version that inter alia includes concern for not eating forbidden animal species, which is not only the last topic, but its overall topic. For our purpose, it should be obvious that each of these versions reads the verse in context, and that the examples are non-exclusive of one another, but rather choices of emphasis – a) and b) are from the same person, after all.

What about c)?

It relates two or three verses back.

כִּי אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם
וְהַתְּקַדְּשׁוּתָם וְהַיִּיטָבָה קְדֻשָּׁתָם
כִּי קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי
וְלֹא תִטְמְאוּ אֶת נַפְשֵׁיכֶם הַשֶּׁרֶץ הַרְמֵשׁ עַל הָאָרֶץ: ז'
כִּי אֲנִי ה'
הַמַּעֲלֶה אֶת כָּמֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לְהִיטָב לָכֶם לְאֱלֹהִים
וְהַיִּיטָבָה קְדֻשָּׁתָם
כִּי קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי:
זאת תורה תהבדיל ונהעוף וכל נפש החיה הרמשת במים ולכל נפש חשצת על הארץ: ז'
לְהַבְדִּיל בֵּין הַטָּמֵא וּבֵין הַטְּהוֹר וּבֵין הַנֶּאֱכָלֶת וּבֵין הַחַיָּה אֲשֶׁר לֹא תֹאכְלֶה: פ

Why does Rabbi Binyamin bar Yefet skip the immediate context? Professor Richard Steiner has argued powerfully that “Rashbam discovered inclusion” among the rishonim; I contend here that Rabbi Binyamin bar Yefet preceded Rashbam. The chapter opens

וַיְבִר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר אֵלֵיהֶם: ז' בְּרוּ אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְאִמָּאת הַחַיָּה אֲשֶׁר תֹּאכְלוּ מִבְּלִמָּה אֲשֶׁר עַל הָאָרֶץ: ז'

and ends

זאת תורה תהבדיל וכל נפש החיה הרמשת במים ולכל נפש השרץ צת על הארץ: ז'
לְהַבְדִּיל בֵּין הַטָּמֵא וּבֵין הַטְּהוֹר וּבֵין הַנֶּאֱכָלֶת וּבֵין הַחַיָּה אֲשֶׁר לֹא תֹאכְלֶה: פ

Rabbi bar Yefet saw the inclusion, realized that זאת תורה הבהמה was a summary of the preceding chapter, and went one stop further, arguing that the next chapter should therefore be read in the context of the last *new substantive* point in the preceding chapter.

