

bookSMART



JLI FLAGSHIP
LESSON 2
—WINTER 5783

Key Points

1. **The Meaning of “Midrash”:** *Midrash* means “to seek out” and “to expound.” Midrash is the process by which the additional layers of meaning contained within the words—or between the lines—of the Written Torah are expounded. “Midrash” is also the general name given to a number of works that cite the Midrashic teachings by the sages of the Talmudic era (approximately 100 BCE to 500 CE).
2. **Halachah and Agadah:** Midrashic literature falls under two general categories: Halachah and Agadah. The Halachic Midrashim document how the laws governing the observance of the *mitzvot* are derived from the biblical text. “Agadah” is a term that describes all non-Halachic Midrashic material: moral, philosophical, and mystical teachings, as well as parables, historical narratives not explicitly recorded in the Written Torah, stories from the lives of the sages, and so on.
3. **The Mystical Element in Midrash:** The Midrash contains many of the deepest secrets of the Torah. This is particularly the case with the stories and parables of the Agadah, which encapsulate ideas that are too abstract and too complex to communicate by direct teaching.
4. **The Methodology of Torah Exposition:** A central component of the Oral Torah and the Sinaitic tradition is a set of Midrashic rules outlining the methods by which the Torah is expounded. These methodologies include: (1) logical deduction, (2) textual exposition, (3) association, and (4) alternate readings.

5. **Logical Deduction:** One example of “logical deduction” is the a fortiori argument; namely, “If A is the case, then B is certainly the case.” A corollary to this argument is the rule that if Case B is derived from Case A, the derived law cannot be stronger than the source law. Thus, when the Torah instructs in Exodus 23:5 that we are obligated to help unload the overburdened donkey of an enemy, we know that we are certainly obligated to help unload a friend’s donkey. On the other hand, the obligation to unload a friend’s donkey cannot be greater than the obligation to unload the enemy’s donkey, from which it is derived.
6. **Textual Exposition:** The particularities of the wording and spelling of the Torah’s text also serve as sources for the derivation of additional laws. For example, the repetitive wording in Exodus 23:5, “assist you must assist with him,” teaches us to assist even multiple times with the same animal. On the other hand, the qualifying clause “with him” in that verse teaches us that the obligation is limited to assisting along with the owner’s own efforts.
7. **The “Association” Methods:** When two laws are placed next to each other in the text, or when identical wording is used in two different laws, this tells us to apply what we know about one law to the other. A number of details regarding the placement of the *tefilin* (i.e., that the head-*tefilin* are placed on the top of the head rather than literally “between your eyes,” and that the hand-*tefilin* are tied to the upper arm of the weaker hand) are derived by “association” methods.
8. **Alternative Readings:** While the Sinaitic tradition includes, as part of the “Oral Torah,” the pronunciation and syntax for the text of the Tanach, the Written Torah itself consists of consonants only, without vowels or punctuation marks. This means that in addition to the basic meaning of the text, every word and sentence in the Written Torah can be read in a number of different ways, each expressing a different meaning.
9. **The Paradox of Goodness and Truth:** One example of an “alternative reading” is the way that a verse in the book of Psalms (61:8), containing a prayer by King David for closeness to G-d, also reads as a philosophical dialogue on the seeming unfairness of life. The insights gleaned from this dialogue also shed light on the deeper meaning of a mysterious Midrash describing a “battle of the angels” over the creation of the human being, and the way that our materialistic existence holds the key to resolving the cosmic paradox of goodness and truth.