INTERTEXTUALITY AND THE ORIGINS OF MIDRASH
PSALMS 73 – 89 AND THE HERMENEUTIC QUALITY OF LITURGY

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[1] When the Philistines Became Palestinian

It was the beginning of the summer of 1982 and the cursed excitement of war was in the air again. Equipped with cakes, sweets and cold juice we rushed from school to the soldiers' pick-up point in the western edge of Jerusalem, greeting them on their way to Lebanon. After the Morning Prayer in school we added Psalm 83:

> God, do not keep silent be not quiet, O God, be not still. See how your enemies are astir, how your foes rear their heads ... conspire against your people ... "Come," they say, "let us destroy them as a nation, that the name of Israel be remembered no more." With one mind they plot together ... Edom and the Ishmaelites, of Moab and the Hagrites, Gebal Ammon and Amalek, Philistia, with the people of Tyre ...

In those horrible but innocent moments of childish prayer the Hittite warriors of Tyre were merged with the Fatah warriors in Lebanon; the ancient Philistia were identified with the current Palestinians. The sense of danger and fear was charged with the mythical power of biblical memories, and as we said "Do to them as you did to Midian, as you did to Sisera and Jabin at the river Kishon" the word "them" was concrete and realistic. I recall this moment since it encapsulates a very old model of interpretation, in which the biblical text is read as referring to the actual reality of the interpreter. This model is particularly adequate for interpreting biblical poetry: prophecies, wisdom literature and Psalms. These genres tend to the abstract; they refer to conceptual entities: "the enemies", "the righteous", "the wicked", "wisdom", and so on. In an endless journey in search for relevant meaning readers of biblical poetry were occupied with actualization and concretization.

[2] Concretization and Actualization of Biblical Poetry: Second Temple Judaism

The modern experience I have presented goes back to pre-rabbinic Jewish models, in Second Temple Judaism. In the Apocrypha we find a rare quotation of Psalms 79, in a description of the murderous act of Alcimus, a wicked high priest in the Hasmonean period:

> […] he took of them threescore men, and slew them in one day, according to the words which he [=the Psalmist] wrote: "The flesh of thy saints have they cast out, and their blood have they shed round about Jerusalem, and there was none to bury them." (Psalm 79:2-3) (1ˢᵗ Macabees 7:16-17).[1]

The verses were read here as referring to the political reality, the gentiles are identified with Alcimus, and the group of Jews he murdered with the "Hassidim" – saints mentioned in the Psalms.

This model was later developed into a systematic hermeneutics. In the Pesher literature from Qumran various prophecies and Psalms are interpreted as referring to the sect and its enemies. Pesher Psalms 4Q171, for example probably identified the "poor of the land" in Psalm 37 with the sect; the "evil doers" are their enemies, and so on.[2] The first followers of Jesus continued this practice, interpreting biblical verses as referring to or prophesying about Jesus:

> "Brothers, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his *throne*." (Acts 2:30)

Though Peter is explicitly referring here to Psalm 16, we can hear an echo of Psalm 89, concretizing the oath and seeing it as referring to Jesus:

> I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to David my servant, "I will establish your line forever and make your *throne* firm through all generations." (Psalm 89:3-4).[3]

[3] The Rabbinic Pthira: Intra-Biblical Concretization

In three different pre-rabbinic texts we saw an ancient Jewish hermeneutics of actualization and concretization. However, in rabbinic Midrash there is a certain change: concretization: yes; actualization: no. Here a different model became dominant. This model is called פתירה Pthira (the same root in a different Semitic language פתר (Aramaic) – פשר (Hebrew)). In the Pthira, abstract notions from Biblical poetry are explained by concrete situations, but the concrete situation is not taken from contemporary political reality, rather from the prosaic parts of the Hebrew Bible. Here is an example. I deliberately offer here a verbatim translation, to preserve the intertextual sensitivities of such interpretations:

> "But it is God who Judges – he brings *this* one down; he exalts *this* one" (Psalm 75:8).
> ...
> The sages interpreted the verse as referring to Aaron.
> By the word "this" he was brought down, and by the word "this" he was exalted.
> By the word "this" he was brought down,
> "And I threw it to the fire and *this* calf appeared" (Exodus 32:24).
> By the word "this" he was exalted.
> "*This* is the sacrificing of Aaron and his Sons" (Leviticus 6:13).

The Psalm offered an abstract description of God as exalting people and bringing them down. The sages explained it as referring to a concrete person, and to specific events in his life. Aaron was brought down when he made the golden calf, and Aaron was later exalted when he was nominated as a high priest, in charge of sacrificing in the temple. We should not see this as a mere analogy, technically bringing together various verses in which the frequent word "this" is found. The Midrash offers a gentle and deep hint about the nature of the temple cult as a sublimation of idol worshipping. Though only one verse from Psalm 75 is interpreted, one may find here a co-

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[1] See Devorah Diamant, "Use and Interpretation of Mikra in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha," *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. Martin Jan Mulder & Harry Sysling [CRINT 2; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1988], 379-419.

[2] Brant Pitre, *Jesus, the Tribulation, and the End of the Exile: Restoration Eschatology and the Origin of the Atonement*, Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005, pp. 96- 98.

[3] See Ben Witherington, *Letters and Homilies for Jewish Christians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Hebrews, James and Jude*, Nottingham: Intervarsity Press, 2007, p. 112.

herent reading of the whole Psalm. The Psalm refers to challenges against the choice of Aaron to the priesthood; the Midrash supports the choice.[4]

The rabbinic hermeneutic model offers intra-biblical concretization of abstract images in the Psalm.[5] This model involves a magnificent dialectics, in which the abstract is concretized, but it is concretized through figures from the biblical narrative, which already carry some mythical, symbolic, even abstract features and meaning. As such they already serve as emblems or symbols. The concrete is at the same time a realization of an abstract notion. And at the very same moment it might still carry the old model of the Pesher and imply an actual social group: the support of Aaron as representative of a political statement in favour of contemporary priests. We may now return for a moment to the story I began with. It was not an abstract notion that was concretized by us, but rather a reference to concrete ancient nations that were actualized. The actualization was only possible by the mediating power of the rabbinic Pthira model. The concrete is abstracted, the Philistines are representative of a threatening nation, as such they can easily become 'Palestinians' in the mind of a naïve Israeli boy.

[4] Psalms 73 – 89 as the Cradle of the Pthira Model

I have presented this rabbinic model because Psalms 73 – 89 are not merely a reservoir for examples of the rabbinic way of interpretation. They are, to a certain extent, its cradle. The interplay between the abstract and the concrete is embedded in these Psalms, and in their bringing together into one sequence in the book. These Psalms offer a mixture of abstract notions, such as the wicked and righteous, and concrete hints, echoes and references to biblical figures and peoples. This mixture of the abstract and the concrete is a reflection of its prospected merger. It offered itself to the rabbis, and was taken as a model by them.

It is not coincidental that our Psalms were an inspiration for a model of biblical interpretation. There is another feature of the Psalms as liturgy which is very important. The liturgical performance is also an interpretive act. The recitation of the Psalms I began with included implied interpretation; the Psalms themselves, as we shall soon see, were already moments of biblical interpretation; the liturgy has hermeneutic undertows.

However, I would like to introduce you to those moments, in which our Psalms can be read as interpretations of biblical prose, through another mediating stage: the use of our Psalms in later Jewish Liturgy. Since I am turning now a slightly complicated stage of my lecture, let me introduce you to what follows:

First we shall see how our Psalms were used in later Jewish liturgy. In these uses we will note how the interplay of abstract and concrete was carried on. Furthermore, we will learn that an act of interpretation was embedded in this later liturgy. Just as the Psalms have interpretive weight, so has the later liturgy that refers to them. This will take us back to the dialectics of the abstract and the concrete. The implied interpretation of the Psalms when they are used in later Jewish liturgy is exposing, or re-enacting this dialectics.

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[4] A much wider intertextual network might also be at work here, as the verbs used here for exalting and bringing down are the same that are found in the Song of Hanna (I Samuel) elsewhere interpreted as related to Korach and his arguments against the authority of Moses and Aaron.

[5] For further reading see Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature: Indiana, 1990.

[5] The Interpretive Power of Liturgy: From Psalms to Piyyut

In the events I recalled from my childhood we saw how the worshipper attributes his thoughts, intentions and even intimate feelings to the words he recites. The liturgical recitation carries an interpretive quality. The interpretive quality of liturgy is not only that of the individual, but rather of former generations that have shaped fixed prayers, chosen specific Psalms for recitation in specific contexts, or established new liturgy with references to the Psalms.

Let us consider a few examples from our selection of Psalms. The first verse of Psalm 74 is quoted in a lamentation liturgy of the Kalir (6th-7th century?) for ninth of Av. The poet based his work on a choice of biblical verses. He concluded one strophe with our opening verse:

Where is the "So" that the aforesigned (God) said to a father, when he proclaimed	איה "כה" אומר כרות לאב בפצח
(during) the Covenant of the Pieces, that "so" it will be forever?	ברית בין בתרים כה יהיה נצח
But now my bones are murderously swallowed,	והן עתה בולעו עצמי ברצח
O, God, why do you cast us off forever?	למה אלוהים זנחת לנצח

This poetry – *Piyyut* – typically uses hints and codes. The poet refers to the covenant that God has aforesigned with Abraham. God has used the word "so" when he gave a promise to Abraham, but where is this "so" now, after the destruction of the temple and the neglecting of the people of God? The last line of this argument is a quotation from our Psalm: O God, why do you cast us off forever?

How beautiful is the artificial verb form כרות that the poet used an epithet for God. כרות is a passive form of כרת, meaning "signed a contract". God has signed the contract with Abraham and now he is obliged. This single word is emblematic for the argument implied in the lament, and it is this argument that is carried into the lament by the quotation from Psalm 74. God is expected to be committed to the people of Israel and not to cast them off.

This quotation of liturgy within a liturgy is also an interpretive moment, a hermeneutic occurrence. The Psalm was brought into the prayers of this specific day – the ninth of Av –, because it was interpreted as referring to the destruction of the temple "they have sent fire in your temple" (Psalm 74:7). The suffering is presented as part of the effort to persuade God to act differently, to provoke His commitment. This commitment is implied in the covenant in verse 20 (הבט לברית – look at the covenant). One explicit quotation of the Psalm in the Piyyut lament encapsulates a coherent reading of the entire Psalm.

הבט is found in the following Selichot liturgy for Yom Kippur: You may read the text.

Now, for many Jews the formula הבט לברית sounds quite familiar, since a reversal of it is found in the following petition from Yom Kippur prayer. You may read the translation while the music is playing. (URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lXAP_eMtapg)

> As clay in the hands of the potter
> to be moulded and shaped at his will
> so are we in Your hands, O God of love.
> Look on Your covenant and not our imperfection.
>
> As stone in the hands of the mason
> to be saved or shattered at his will
> so are we in Your hands, O God of life and death.
> Look on Your covenant and not our imperfection.
>
> As iron in the hands of the smith
> to be held in the flame or held back at his will
> so are we in Your hands, O God of the poor and weak.
> Look on Your covenant and not our imperfection.

As a tiller in the hands of the helmsman
to pull or ease at his will
so are we in Your hands, O God of forgiveness.
Look on Your covenant and not our imperfection.

As glass in the hands of the blower
to be cooled or melted at his will
so are we in Your hands, O God who overlooks folly and sin.
Look on Your covenant and not our imperfection.

As cloth in the hands of the weaver
to be plain or patterned at his will
so are we in Your hands, O God who demands and repays.
Look on Your covenant and not our imperfection.

As silver in the hands of the smelter
to be fused or refined at his will
so are we in Your hands, O God who heals all wounds.
Look on Your covenant and not our imperfection.

The English translation by Jonathan Magonet is taken from *Seder HaTefillot: Forms of Prayer for Jewish Worship. Volume III: Days of Awe* (London: Reform Synagogues of Great Britain, 1985), p. 97.

The poem did not quote Psalm 74. It only hinted at one expression. Yet, once again, the later Piyyut liturgy also functions as an act of interpretation. The argument provoking God's commitment is taken from the political arena of the Psalm into the personal sphere of the Selichot prayers. The Selichot are penitential poems and prayers, used for more than a millennium for the period before the Jewish New Year and the Day of Atonement. The experience is existentialist. It is not the wreck of the gentile that inflamed the distress, but rather the sense of total dependence on the hand of God.

[6] Laments and Petitions: the Merger of Individual and Historical Perspectives

The same expression from Psalm 74 was used in a lament for Ninth of Av and in a petition for Yom Kippur. These two different uses reflect a transformative interpretation. Namely, the specific stand before God expressed in the Psalm is transferred from one realm to another; from the national and political sphere of the lament to the individual and existentialistic sphere. However, even when used in the context of Yom Kippur, the national and political aspects are not entirely erased. The quoted verses and the echoing words continue to carry with them the atmosphere of the original context from which they were taken. The prayer of the individual asking for forgiveness is blended, merged with the faint memory of the nation praying for its political salvation. Indeed, the Selichot prayers were originally used for days of fasting, many of them commemorating the destruction of the temple, like the Ninth of Av.[6] The interplay of abstract and concrete continues.

[7] Selichot Liturgy Re-enacting the Pthira Implied in the Psalm

So far I have demonstrated how the uses of our Psalms in later liturgy continued the interplay of the abstract and the concrete. In the following example we will see how later liturgy re-enacts this interplay which was already embedded in the Psalms themselves. Amitai b. Shfatia, an 8th century poet referred to Psalm 77 (Sound: http://www.piyut.org.il/textual/566.html):

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[6]   See Lawrence A. Hoffman, *The Canonization of Synagogue Service*, Notre Dame: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1979.

	אֶזְכְּרָה אֱלֹהִים וְאֶהֱמָיָה
I remembered, O God, and am troubled,	בִּרְאוֹתִי כָּל עִיר עַל תִּלָּהּ בְּנוּיָה
When I see every city built on its own heap,	וְעִיר הָאֱלֹהִים מֻשְׁפֶּלֶת עַד שְׁאוֹל תַּחְתִּיָּה
And the city of God degraded to the lowest degree.	וּבְכָל זֹאת אָנוּ לְיָהּ וְעֵינֵינוּ לְיָהּ
Yet, for all this, we cleave to God, and our eyes turn to God.	

Once again, the destruction of the temple is recalled during Yom Kippur; the first line is a quotation of Psalm 77:4. Nothing in this Psalm may suggest a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem. So why did Shfatia correlate Psalm 77 with the destruction of the temple?

Psalms 77 and 74 share the same language. Both refer to God as neglecting Israel, and to the fear that he will never return: הלעולמים יזנח אדוני (77:8) – למה אלהים זנחת לנצח (74:1). In doing so both also recall the language of Lamentations (למה לנצח תשכחנו ... ותזנח – Lamentations 3:17-18; ואומר אבד נצחי – Lamentations 5:20). The biblical lamentations are found in Psalms 77 and 74. These intertextual associations are the basis for the connection made by the poet Shfatiah between the abstract language of Psalm 77 and the concrete historical situation of the destruction of Jerusalem.

However, even without turning to Lamentations Shfatiah could find sufficient support in Psalm 74 that recalls the actual destruction and not only an abstract situation of suffering. The turn from the abstract to the concrete has already happened within it. The two facets of existentialist and individual experience of the annual cycle of recurring time on one hand and the political and national experiences of the historical and linear path of the time on the other hand is already rooted in it.

[8] Psalm 77 as a Rabbinic Pthira of Anicient Near Eastern Myth

Psalm 77 may offer us with another example for the co-presence of the abstract and hints of the concrete. It begins with general praise for God:

I will consider all your works and meditate on all your mighty deeds.
Your ways, God, are holy. What god is as great as our God?
You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among the peoples.

These praises are concretized in the following verses, where the concrete people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph are referred to, and God walks through the sea. Explicit references to the Song of the Sea and to the Exodus experience are suggested, culminating in an explicit reference to Moses and Aaron: מי אל כ, ימין, עשה פלא עוז, גאלת, זרועך, נחית, יחילו, ים, מים, תהומות – all imply Exodus 15:

Exodus 15		Psalm 77	
יְמִינְךָ ה	Your **right hand, God**	The **right hand of God**	**ימין עליון**
מִי כָמֹכָה בָּאֵלִים	Who among the gods is like you, God?	What god is as great as our God?	**מי אל** גדול **כאלהים**
תְּהֹמֹת יכסימו	they sank to the **depths**	**Depths** were convulsed	ירגזו **תהומות**
נָחִיתָ בחסדך **עַם** זו	**You led** with your kindness the **people**	**You led** your **people** like a flock	**נחית** כצאן **עמך**
עָזִּי וזמרת יה	God is my **strength** and	you display your **strength** among the peoples	הודעת בעמים **עוזך**
בגדול **זְרוֹעֲךָ**	By the power of your **arm**	With your mighty **arm** you redeemed your people	גאלת **בזרוע** עמך
עם זו **גָּאָלְתָּ**	the **people** you have **redeemed**	With your mighty arm you **redeemed** your **people**	**גאלת** בזרוע עמך

No wonder that the Psalm became an example for intra-biblical Midrash.[7]

The internal move from the abstract to the concrete in Psalm 77 is the archetype for the rabbinic model of interpretation Pthira. Just as the Pthira refers to an abstract notion in the Psalm and interprets it as referring to concrete biblical events and figure, so is the Psalm moving from the abstract notion of God's power to explicit references to its historical demonstration of the sea. But this is not only an internal move within the Psalm; it is also an act of interpretation of the mythical tradition implied in it. Psalm 77 can also be read as referring to a mythical war of God on the sea. This myth is also referred to in the last Psalm of our unit: "You crushed Rahab like one of the slain, with your *strong arm* you scattered your enemies" (אתה דכאת כחלל רהב בזרוע עזך פזרת אויביך – Psalm 89:11).

A memory of this myth is even recorded in a late legend in the Talmud:

> Rav Judah said in the name of Rav: When the Holy one, Blessed be He, wished to create the world, he said to the minister of the sea: open your mouth and swallow all the water in the world. He said to him: Master of the universe, it is sufficient for me to stay in my current position. Immediately he [God] kicked him and killed him, as it is written "He stirreth up the sea with His power, and by His understanding He smiteth through Rahab" (Job 26:12). Rabbi Isaac said: you should learn from this that the name of the minister of the sea is Rahab, and unless the water covers him, no creature could have faced his smell (Talmud, Bava Bathra 74b).

Psalm 77 is probably based on ancient poetry about the Myth. However, the intertextual system implies that the myth is transferred from the mythical sphere to the historical one. The Psalm interprets it as referring to the crossing of the sea during the Exodus, and the reference to Moshe and Aaron makes this interpretation explicit. Materials from a mythical poetical reservoir were taken and correlated with a concrete biblical story. The abstract myth became a concrete event within the Biblical corpus. Here we find that the Psalmist was already involved in the same interpretive model that was later to become dominant in rabbinic literature.

[9] The Move from Abstract to Concrete in the Redaction of the Whole Unit

This move is also enacted by the redaction of the whole unit in Psalms, as a sequential reading of Psalms 74 and 75 for example offers a parallel comparison. The first speaks about "the nation you purchased long ago, the people of your inheritance" vs. "the enemy ... your foes ..."; the second uses an utterly abstract language of the righteous vs. the wicked. The same language is used in Psalm 82, and immediately thereafter Psalm 83 includes the specific list of people I mentioned before in the story from my childhood, "Edom and the Ishmaelites, of Moab and the Hagrites, Gebal, Ammon and Amalek, Philistia, with the people of Tyre" (83:7-8).[8] This implied merger of the wicked and the nations, the righteous and Israel becomes explicit in rabbinic literature. For example, the cup given to the wicked in Psalm 75:11 is correlated by the rabbis with the cups given to the Babylonians in Jeremiah 51:7 (Midrash Psalms 75). Psalm 75, which tends toward an abstract binary of wicked and righteous, is understood as referring to a concrete schism of Israel vs. specific Nations.

I hope I have been able to show how our Psalms reflect liturgical occurrences that are already embedded within the interpretation of biblical events. As such they inspired both later Jewish hermeneutics and liturgy that continued the paths of concretization and actualization through

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[7] See John S. Kselman, "*Psalm 77* and the Book of Exodus," JANES 15 (1983), p. 53; Brian D. Russel, *The Song of the Sea: The Date of Composition and Influence of Exodus 15:1-21*, New York: Peter Lang Publishing, pp. 115- 117.

[8] For the scholarly turn towards interpretation of Psalms as a collection see Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100*, English translation by Linda M. Maloney, edited by Klaus Baltzer (Hermeneia), Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005.

intextual reading of the Bible. However, one cannot be enthusiastic about methodological developments without being sensitive to their potential ethical and moral implications.

[10] Concluding Reflections: The Ethics of the Move from Abstract to Concrete

My last examples explored the shift from the universal division of good and bad to the more concrete and specific division of Israel and the nations, implying identification of Israel and the righteous, the Nations and the wicked. This shift is dangerous. It might be a source for hatred and for a loss of the moral sensitivity. People might be judged according to their belonging and not according to their deeds. Misdoing might be justified only since it is done by the members of the group that are now categorically identified with the righteous.

My rabbi and master, Rabbi David Bigman, told us last summer, that he was frequently told off by his wife, for the sense of relief on his face, as soon as soldiers that died in Lebanon were named, and none of his students were among them. Is the pain of your inner circle of belonging stronger than the pain on the loss of another soldier? There are circles of belonging in human society, an intimate circle of the love of a couple, a larger circle of the nuclear family, the larger family, one's neighbours and place of abode, and those circles do not only separate the person from those who do not belong to them, but also create a unified universe of circles of belonging, up to the holistic circle, the universal one, the one that contains us all. However, one cannot really exercise an intimate sense of love and care to all – to the whole. The cosmopolitan, universe circle might be cold and remote, preaching universal ethic and commitment, but lacking the sense of intimacy. The larger circle should not annul the smaller circle, and the smaller circles should not annul the larger. The particular should foster the universal, and the universal should strengthen the particular. Only if I am able to accept my intimate pain on a lost soldier, might I be able to understand the pain of the Lebanese mother for her lost son. This is a semantic instability, in which the ability to love and to mourn is found in the most intimate circles of belonging, and only then is expanded to larger circles. The sense of universal and cosmopolitan fraternity can only be developed through the expansion of this intimacy. The hermeneutics of the abstract and the concrete that was born in our Psalms becomes an ethical key for humankind.