

THE MIDRASHIC WORKS OF THE JEWS OF YEMEN

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The Yemenite Midrashim and Midrashic Literature in Jewry

One of the major contributions of Yemenite Jewry is its midrashic creativity. This Jewry has given us important *midrashim* and midrashic collections: *Midrash Hagadol* (the Great Midrash) and such smaller midrashim as *Midrash Hefez* and *Midrash Or Ha-afelah*. Early halakhic midrashim such as the *Mekhilta of R. Simeon bar Yohai* and *Sifre Zuta* were also saved thanks to the *Midrash Hagadol*, while other Midrashic traditions as well were preserved in Yemenite collections. These were hidden for centuries in the Yemenite midrashim and only received historical confirmation during the last generation by the discovery of the Cairo geniza.

The methods of writing and editing of the Yemenite midrashim and collections are parallel to those of their writing and editing in European countries. As is known, the early midrashim, such as the *Midrash Rabba*, *Tanhuma* and *Pesikta* were edited in Palestine. In Babylonia there was no separate Midrashic creation, but their midrashim were included within the Babylonian Talmud. After original Midrashic work came to a halt, in about the 7th century, the era of collections (*yalkutim*) began. The first compiler of *yalkutim* was R. Moses ha-Darshan of France (11th century) who edited and composed *Bereshit Rabati*, *Bamidbar Rabba* and other collections.¹ Subsequently, the midrash *Lekah Tov* on the

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1. Compare Zunz-Albeck, *Die Gottesdienstlichen Vorträge der Juden*, (Heb., *Ha-derashot be-Yisrael*), Jerusalem, 1947, p. 126, 144-145; H. Albeck, Introduction to *Bereshit Rabati* (Heb.), Jerusalem, 1940.

Torah, by R. Tobias b. Eliezer of Greece (12th century)² and the *Midrash Sekhel Tov* on Genesis and Exodus, by R. Menahem b. Solomon (12th cent.) were composed. Greatest of all of these was the *Yalkut Shimoni* (approx. 12th cent.) attributed to R. Simeon of Frankfort, which includes *halakha* and *aggadah* on the entire Bible, based on both Talmuds as well as on early and late midrashim. The superiority of this collection is in its exactness, in that it quotes the exact language of each source. Next to each passage the source is cited — and these include midrashim which have disappeared over the course of time, such as *Sifre Zuta* and *Yelamdenu*.³ Partial collections were also compiled by R. Makhir b. Abba Mari (*Yalkut Mekhiri*),⁴ R. Yaakov Skili⁵ and others.

Both during and after the period of the *yalkutim* there was a flowering of sermonic works (*sifre drush*). Rabbis preached before their communities on Sabbaths and festivals, utilizing the earlier Midrashim as a basis for the development of their ideas, according to the needs of the hour. During the 13th and 14th century an entire genre of philosophical-allegorical sermons developed, in which the Torah was explained in terms of Aristotelian philosophy. These said that Abraham and Sarah symbolized form and matter, the twelve sons of Jacob the twelve constellations, etc. The book of the school master Jacob Anatoli belongs to this genre. This type of sermonics aroused considerable opposition in Spanish Rabbinic circles, led by R. Solomon b. Abraham Adret (RASHB" A), which culminated in the proclamation of a ban upon the study of philosophy in Barcelona in 1305.⁶

On the other hand, sermonic works influenced by the Kabbalah were written. One work of this type which had great influence throughout the Jewish diaspora, including Yemen, was R. Bahya b. Asher's commentary on the Torah, which contained a combination of Midrashim, philosophy, Kabbalah and ethics.

Yemenite Jewry followed the same pattern. First, the Palestinean midrashic literature became widespread: the midrashim on the Torah and the Five Scrolls (*megilot*), *Tanhuma*, etc. These were followed by the various *yalkutim* and sermonic works, in both the philosophical and Kabbalistic mode. All of the spiritual tendencies of Diaspora Jewry were reflected in Yemenite Jewry, while the Palestinean influence was also very great there. It is wrong to assume that Yemenite Jewry was primarily influenced by the Babylonian center and the *gaonim*. While

2. See S. Buber's introduction to his edition of *Midrash Lekah Tov*, Vilna, 1880.

3. Compare Zunz, *Ibid.*, p. 148–149.

4. Compare S. Buber, Introduction to *Yalkut Mekhiri* on Psalms, Berditchov, 1900.

5. See S.H. Kook, "R. Jacob Skili and his Works," (Heb.) in his *Iyunim u-Mehkarim*, Jerusalem, 1963, p. 273–290.

6. Compare Graetz, *History of the Jews*, Philadelphia, 1956, v. 3, 566–567 and v. 4, p. 37–45.

this is true with regard to vocalization, the Biblical textual tradition and the system of cantillation, the ancient connections between Yemenite Jewry and Palestine are testified to by the discovery of a burial vault in Beth-Shearim belonging to the Hamir family of southern Arabia.⁷ During the gaonic period as well as afterwards, there was a struggle between the *yeshivot* of Babylonia and of Palestine over influence upon Yemen.⁸ Jewish merchants, including emissaries of the *yeshivot*, passed through Yemen on their way to India, and thereby maintained the connection between Yemen and other diaspora Jewish communities.⁹ An echo of the Maimonidean controversy, concerning the allegorical interpretation of Scripture, is also to be heard in Yemen. A document published by R. Simha Assaf describes a controversy which broke out between the communities of Sa'dah and San'a. The latter banned a certain preacher because of his allegorical sermons, while the former supported him and suggested that they turn to the Palestinian sages to settle the dispute, writing: "do you not know that we rely principally upon the books of *Eretz-Yisrael*?"¹⁰ Moreover, during the course of time, particularly under the influence of Maimonides, the Tiberian scriptural tradition became widespread throughout Yemen, and only the system of vocalization remained Babylonian. Thus, the Palestinian influence overruled the earlier Babylonian tradition.¹¹

Midrash Ha-gadol

The crowning glory of the Yemenite *yalkutim* is the *Midrash Ha-Gadol*, composed by R. David Adani (ca. 13th cent.), a splendid palace constructed by a skillful architect. All of the spiritual riches of the Jewish people from the time of the sages of the Talmud to his own day are collected in this work: the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds, the *halakhic* and *aggadic* midrashim, writings of the *geonim*, Maimonides, etc. As we have already mentioned, like the *Yalkut Shimoni*, it contains entire midrashim which have disappeared over the course of time, such as the *Mekhilta of R. Simeon b. Yohai*, the *Sifre Zuta*, as well as portions of other midrashim.

However, the purpose of this work was not merely the collection of sources, but their reworking and editing, and their connection to verses of Torah. R. David

7. Compare S. Morag, *The Hebrew Language Tradition of the Yemenite Jews* (Heb.), Jerusalem, 1963, p. 16.

8. S.D. Goitein, "The Contribution of the Jews of Yemen to the Maintenance of the Babylonian and Palestinian Yeshivot and of Maimonides School" (Heb.), *Tarbiz* 31 (1962), 366-370.

9. Ibid; Goitein, "The Jews of Yemen between the Gaonate of Egypt and the Exilarchy of Babylonia" (Heb.), *Sinai* 33 (1953), p. 225.

10. See his article, "On the Connections of Yemenite Jewry with the Babylonian and Palestinian Centers" (Heb.), in *World Congress of Jewish Studies*, v. 1, Jerusalem, 1952, p. 390-395. The defense itself was published by Y. Kafah in *Kobez al Jad*, n. s. 5 (15), (1951), p. 39-63.

11. Compare Morag, *Ibid.*, p. 17-21.

Adani had an elevated goal, which may be compared to that which R. Moses Maimonides set himself in the *Mishneh Torah*. "At this time," wrote Maimonides, "extraordinary troubles overwhelm us, it is a time of distress, and the wisdom and understanding of our wise men is lost... None but a very few understand them (i.e. the Talmudic works) ...therefore I saw fit to compose a work which will clarify all of that literature... In sum, so that a man should need no other work of Jewish law, but that this work will be a summary of the entire Oral Torah... from the time of Moses our teacher, through the composition of the Talmud, and until the interpretations of the *geonim*."¹² R. David Adani did for the *midrashim* of the Sages what Maimonides did for Jewish law. His goal was to assemble all of the Midrashim of the Sages and the *geonim*, in both *halakha* and *aggadah*, "until the entire Oral Torah will be ordered" adjacent to the verses of the Torah itself, "so that a person will need no other work."

R. David Adani succeeded in his goal. Until 200 years ago, the *Midrash Ha-gadol* was the daily fare of Yemenite Jewry, pushing aside all other halakhic and aggadic midrashim.¹³ In times of trouble, they found consolation in this work, in the sense of the verse, "If thy law had not been my delight, then I should have perished in my affliction." (Ps. 119:92) Adani was a marvelous editor. Each section begins with a poem, which relates to the portion of the week (according to the custom of Babylonia and Yemen) and concludes with a prayer for the redemption of Israel and the ingathering of exiles. The Midrashic material is connected to each verse without mention of its source, and is tied together with great artistry. At times, the first line of a passage may begin with a citation from the *Sifre Zuta*, pass on to a quotation from the Mishnah, and conclude with the words of Maimonides. At other times, one finds entire pages composed of various sources woven together in such a way that one does Talmuds, various late midrashim, the geonic literature and last and dearest to him: Maimonides.¹⁴

Both revealed and hidden treasures are preserved in the *Midrash Ha-Gadol*, and therein lies its great value. Unknown midrashim quoted in the liturgical poems of Yannai are cited in *Midrash Ha-gadol*, despite the gap of seven hundred years between the Palestinian poet, Yannai, and R. David ben Amram Adani. This is a sign that ancient Palestinian traditions were known in Yemen, and that contact was simultaneously maintained between the two communities. For example, in *Midrash Ha-gadol*, on the portion *Lekh Lekha* (Gen. 12), there is an account of

12. Maimonides, Introduction to *Mishneh Torah*; Compare Z.M. Rabinowitz, Introduction to *Midrash Haggadol*, Numbers, Jerusalem, 1967.

13. Compare Y. Razhabi, "The Authorship of Midrash Haggadol (Heb.), *Tarbiz* 34 (1965), p. 263 (-27).

14. On the sources used by the author of *Midrash HaGadol*, see Rabinowitz, *Ibid.*, p. 7-13.

how Abraham came to the knowledge of God through contemplating the creation.

“To what may this be likened? To one who was walking along a road and saw a very large, high palace. He wished to enter, but walking all about it could find no entrance... He looked up and saw red woolen garments stretched upon the roof... Later, he saw white linen garments. He said to himself ‘there is certainly someone living in the palace, for otherwise how could these have been removed and these put in their place?’ When the master of the palace saw that he was disturbed by this, he said to him ‘Why are you disturbed? I am the master of the palace.’”¹⁵

This allegory is originally found in Gen. R. 39:1, but the passage dealing with the red and white garments by means of which Abraham inferred the existence of the ‘master of the palace’, is lacking there. In Yannai’s *piyyutim* the same story is referred to:

“When that mighty one (i.e. Abraham) was three years old he looked at the appearance of colours and knew that there is a ruler.”¹⁶

Another example of this may be found in the same section of *Midrash Ha-gadol*, on the passage in which Abraham is told, “Go from your country and your kindred.” (Gen. 12:1)

“To what is this likened? To a maiden whom they are persuading to marry a certain man. They say to her, ‘daughter, set your mind to serving your husband, and do not think of your father’s house’... So the Holy One, blessed be He, persuaded Abraham to leave his land and his birthplace and to follow his service.”¹⁷

Here, too, we find a parallel in Yanai’s *piyyutim*.

“The Pure One (i.e. God) knew him among the ugly ones persuaded him with the training of youth.”¹⁸

In a later period, other midrashim were compiled which served as supplements to *Midrash Ha-gadol*, such as R. Yisrael Ha-Kohen’s *Segulat Yisrael*, composed in 1619, which supplements the material in *Midrash Ha-gadol* with allegorical and, primarily, Kabbalistic commentaries. This book remained in manuscript, and was only recently (1972) printed. The Yemenite midrash, *Hemdats Yamim*, attributed to Shalom Shabazi (17th cent.)¹⁹ is also a collection of midrashim, influenced largely by the *Midrash Ha-gadol*, with the addition of Zoharic and other Kabbalistic passages.

15. *Midrash HaGadol*, Genesis, Margoliot ed., Jerusalem, 1947, p. 210.

16. *Piyyute Yannai: Liturgical Poems of Yannai* (Heb.), Zulay ed., Berlin, 1938, p. 19; Compare S. Lieberman, “Yannai’s *Hazanut*” (Heb.), *Sinai* 4 (1939), p. 237; Z.M. Rabinowitz, *Halakhah and Aggadah in the Liturgical Poetry of Yannai* (Heb.), Tel-Aviv, 1965, p. 264.

17. *Midrash HaGadol*, Genesis, *Ibid.*, p. 216; S. Lieberman, *Ibid.*

18. *Piyyute Yannai*, p. 17.

19. See Y. Kafah’s introduction to *Midrash Hemdat Yamim*, Jerusalem, 1956; S. Lieberman, *Yemenite Midrashim* (Heb.), Jerusalem, 1940, p. 32–39.

Other important midrashim are: *Midrash Or Ha-Afelah* by R. Nethanel b. Isaiah (14th cent.) whose author lists the positive and negative commandments in each section. quotes passages from Palestinian and from unknown midrashim in *halakh* and *aggadah*. cites many allegorical interpretations and relies greatly upon the works of Maimonides;²⁰ *Midrash Ha-hefetz* of R. Zechariah b. Solomon-Rofe (15th cent.), a compilation from various early and late midrashim;²¹ the midrash *Ner Ha-sekhalim*, and others.

The Scholarly Value of the Yemenite Midrashim

Prof. Saul Lieberman discusses the scholarly value of these works in his book, *Yemenite Midrashim* (Heb.). He distinguishes between *Midrash Ha-gadol* and other midrashim. The latter include worthless material and even parodies and mockery of the words of the sages. Thus, for example, the following passage from the *Midrash Ha-hefetz* of Yahyâ ibn Suleiman al-Tabib (R. Zechariah b. Solomon-Rofe): "I am the atonement of Israel, who do not eat wheat in its husk nor barley in its husk, but eat garlic in its shell. And why do they do this? Because one does not mix one joy with another."²² Or, for example, another "sermon": "Another thing. "Who found the hot springs in the wilderness." (Gen. 36:24) Nahum Ish-Gam-Zo expounded every *et* in the Torah until he came to *et ha-hamorim* ('and the donkeys' — Ibid) and was silent. They said to him, 'Why are you silent?' He said, 'I have learned from Solomon, who said, 'answer not the fool by his foolishness.' Until R. Akiba came and expounded, '*et*- to include all species of donkeys.'²³ In the end, Dr. Lieberman comes to the conclusion that "There is no value to the citation of sources in the Yemenite midrashim... We need to exercise extreme caution with them. ...They copied whatever came to their hands — and this is at times the value of these 'midrashim,' that they did not pass through the selection and refining process of the *yeshivot* and the scholars. While those midrashim which moved north from Egypt were purified of their dross, these, which were 'exiled' to the Yemenite communities absorbed the dross and refuse of the Midrashic literature and preserved for us a number of things, of interest from a historical perspective, which the Sages had banished and hidden away."²⁴

Lieberman's statement is true with respect to the accuracy of the later Yemenite midrashim, their citation of sources and the names of the tannaitic and amoraic

20. See Y. Kafah's Introduction to *Midrash Or HaAfelah*, Jerusalem, 1957.

21. See Lieberman, *Ibid.*, p. 22–32; Kafah's introduction to the *Five Scrolls*, Jerusalem, 1962, on the commentary of Raz" H: Y.N. Levy, *Hasifat Genuzim miTeman*, Holon, 1971, p. 180; on Yemenite Midrashim generally, see Y. Razhabi, "The Literature of Yemenite Jewry" (Heb.), *Kiryat Sefer* 28 (1952–53), p. 255–278, 394–409 and in *Areshet* 5 (1972), p. 145–160.

22. *Yemenite Midrashim*, p. 23.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

authorities quoted there. However, these midrashim were not written for academic purposes, but for the people and for the sake of the literary play, like those preachers who pepper their speech with homilies and folk-tales. Literature of this sort is not absent among Jews of other communities, as well: for example, the *Alphabet of Ben-Sira*, *Masekhet Purim*, and last and strangest of all, *Midrash Peliah*, 'the Wondrous Midrash,' which contains satire and peculiar midrashim which never were. This book spread among the Jews of Eastern Europe, and a number of commentaries were written on it, in which various scholars earnestly discuss it as though it were an authentic ancient Midrash. Moreover, a "New" *Midrash Peliah* was composed, with pilpulistic commentaries.²⁵ The early Yemenite midrashim, such as *Midrash Ha-gadol*, *Midrash Or Ha-Afelah* and others are of value, and are deserving to atone for the failings of the later Yemenite midrashim.

To summarize: the process of Midrashic creation in Yemen underwent the same process as in other diaspora communities, beginning with early Palestinian midrashim, and proceeding to *yalkutim* (compilations), sermonics, philosophy and Kabbalah. The Yemenite midrashic output was preserved for us early Palestinian midrashim and spiritual treasures which were lost to us in their original form. Their value to Jewish religion and to Jewish scholarship is priceless.

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25. Compare Friedberg, *Bei Eked Sepharim, Bibliographical Lexicon* (Heb.), v. 2, Tel-Aviv, 1952, p. 559.