From History to Literature: The Pedagogical Implications of Shifting Paradigms in the Study of Rabbinic Narratives

Jeffrey L. Rubenstein

The Initiative on Bridging Scholarship and Pedagogy in Jewish Studies

Working Paper No. 26
April 2010

Brandeis University
Mandel Center
for Studies in Jewish Education

MS 049
P.O. Box 549110
Waltham, MA 02454-9110
www.brandeis.edu/mandel
From History to Literature: The Pedagogical Implications of Shifting Paradigms in the Study of Rabbinic Narratives

Jeffrey L. Rubenstein

Abstract
The study of rabbinic sage-stories has undergone a Kuhnian paradigm shift during the last thirty years, from "historical" approaches that seek to reconstruct the lives and deeds of the rabbis to literary approaches that attempt to discern the lessons that the storytellers communicate. This paper explores the important pedagogical implications this methodological shift has for adult education and other educational settings.

I: Shifting Scholarly Paradigms in the Study of Rabbinic Narratives
The study of rabbinic sage-stories has undergone a Kuhnian paradigm shift during the last thirty years, moving from a predominantly historical and biographical focus to a literary approach. Earlier scholars accepted stories of the lives and deeds of sages as fundamentally reliable historical sources, on the basis of which rabbinic biographies and histories could be produced. These scholars were certainly aware of certain problems and challenges with this enterprise due to the nature of the sources. Nonetheless, scholars believed that they could overcome these difficulties through careful scholarship.

Three main problems confronted rabbinic historians: (1) Rabbinic stories that mentioned figures known from outside sources, usually classical literature, were often demonstrably mistaken in their portrayals of such characters. (2) "Parallel" versions of stories in different rabbinic compilations often contradicted each other. (3) The stories included supernatural events and miracles, clearly not the stuff of "history" in the sense of "what actually happened."

Jeffrey L. Rubenstein is Skirball Professor of Rabbinic Literature in the Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies of New York University. His research interests include rabbinic narratives, the history and development of Talmudic law, and the history of Judaism in late antiquity.

Some examples of each problem:

(1) The Bavli’s story of the destruction of the Temple claims that Nero aborted a military campaign against Jerusalem, fled and converted to Judaism—events that contradict the detailed historical information found in Greco-Roman sources, which knows nothing of Nero ever setting out to fight against Judea, let alone abandoning a military office and converting (bGit 56b). The same passage claims that a gnat (or mosquito) bored at Titus’s brain for seven years after the destruction of the Temple, and that Titus directed his ashes to be cast upon the “seven seas” in an effort to avoid divine punishment. Classical sources say nothing of these events.⁵ The Talmud relates that Alexander the Great bowed down to the High Priest Simon the Righteous during his travels through the Near East, and subsequently gave the Jews permission to destroy the Samaritans and their temple (bYoma 69a). Needless to say, classical sources say nothing of Alexander bowing down to an obscure religious functionary of the Jews. And in any case, Alexander died in the fourth century BCE, whereas rabbinic traditions place Simon the Righteous in the third century BCE, which makes it hard to see how the two could have met.⁶ Also, the destruction of the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim actually took place in the 120s BCE, during the reign of John Hyrcanus⁷.

(2) The Bavli account of Elisha b. Abuya’s apostasy relates that Elisha heard a voice precluding repentance coming from the heavenly temple, and he subsequently became a sinner, riding his horse on the Sabbath among other things (bHag 15a-b). In the Yerushalmi’s account, Elisha—having already become a sinner, and while riding on his horse on the Sabbath—hears the voice precluding repentance emanate from the earthly temple. R. Eliezer b. Hycransus, according to a story in Avot d’Rabbi Natan, was raised in an aristocratic household, from which he fled and began to study Torah at age 22.⁵ But according to a midrashic tradition, R. Eliezer b. Hycransus frequented the rabbinic schoolhouse in his youth and was even a child prodigy of sorts.

(3) Rabbis routinely perform miracles such as resurrecting the dead, splitting the waters of a river, turning their opponents into heaps of bones with deadly glances, causing rain to descend, and suchlike.⁶ They also engage in magic, hear heavenly (=divine) voices, and encounter the angel of death.⁷

---

⁵See e.g. Suetonius, Life of Titus, 10-11.
⁶See mAvot, chap. 1, which places Simon the Righteous six generations before Hillel and Shammai, who lived in the first century BCE. Josephus, Antiquities, 12.43, reports that Simeon the Righteous (assuming this is the same Simeon known to rabbinc sources) was a successor of the High Priest Onias, c. 300-280 BCE.
⁷See Josephus, Antiquities, 15.9.1.
⁹Resurrections: yShab 9:1, 38d; bMeg 7b; bBQ 117b; rivers: bHul 7a; turning opponents into bones: bShab 34a; rain: mTaan 5:9-12.
¹⁰Magic: bSanh 65b (Rava created a man), bSanh 68a; see too bSanh 17a where R. Yohanan claims that knowledge of magic is a prerequisite for serving in the Sanhedrin, the highest rabbinic court (granted there is some debate as to exactly what counts as “magic”); divine voices (=bat qol) bBM 59a-b and elsewhere; angel of death: bKet 77b.
Until recently, the general strategy was to attempt to delineate the “historical kernel” underlying a tradition by determining which version, or even which elements of each version, were most reliable. Supernatural aspects and miracles were rejected as “legendary” coloring or folk accretions. After collecting and sifting through all relevant traditions, the scholar could then reconstruct a rabbinic life or biography. We thus have numerous biographical works such as Akiba: Scholar, Saint and Martyr, Hillel the Elder: The Emergence of Classical Judaism, and R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus—a Scholar Outcast. 8

This approach eventually reached an impasse of sorts, as one scholar’s kernel was the other’s husk. 9 One scholar, for example, might claim that the version of a certain story in the Bavli was more reliable, and that of the Yerushalmi a later, corrupted account. Another scholar would claim the reverse. No scholar was able to articulate criteria that would allow one to separate out the historical kernel or determine which version of a story was most reliable. More troubling, even if one successfully ascertained the earliest or most reliable account, there was no guarantee that the account itself was “true.” If the legendary and supernatural aspects of the stories could not be taken at face value as real history, why trust the source at all? The earliest version of the story of George Washington cutting down the cherry tree is no more historically reliable than later retellings and embellishments.

There was also an interesting irony in that, as scholars authored more and more biographies, they tended to ignore more and more of the sources. If a scholar eliminated the legendary and supernatural elements of a source, and then discarded the versions he considered corrupt in favor of the more reliable version, the impact was to ignore a great deal of interesting material. While the account of a sage who turned his opponent into a heap of bones with a penetrating glance does not inform us “what actually happened,” it should still teach us something important.

Eventually scholars realized they had made a fundamental category error. They had misidentified the genre of the rabbinic stories as (what we would call) history, when in truth they are closer to (what we would call) fiction, while recognizing that these categories as such did not really exist in antiquity. 10 This error vitiates the whole historical-biographical project, for clearly the first question one must ask in analyzing any piece of literature is: “What is the genre of the text before me?” If one does not recognize parody for parody, a satire as a satire, a joke as a joke, clearly one’s interpretation will be inherently flawed. (A good example is the radio broadcast of H.G. Wells’ ‘War of the Worlds’, which some listeners took to be news [=history], and took actions they would not have taken had they recognized the broadcast as fiction [=story].)

This led to the Kuhnian paradigm shift mentioned above. Scholars in the main have rejected the historical approach to rabbinic sage-stories and consider the genre of these sources to be closer to didactic fiction. Such stories need not be seen as preserving any “historical kernel” or containing any

---


reliable information about the characters, but rather should be studied like other literary sources and approached with the same tools and methods. The focus accordingly shifts from the characters to the storytellers, and the key questions become: What lessons are the storytellers trying to communicate with this story? What values do they promote? With what tensions are they grappling? What literary techniques do they employ and how do these help transmit their meanings?

In addition, each story being an autonomous literary creation, there need not be any necessary relationship between the various stories about a given character; different storytellers may have portrayed characters in conflicting ways depending on their agendas. Therefore, each story should be interpreted on its own terms and need not be harmonized or reconciled with other stories about the same sage. Indeed, one of the key methods for analyzing a story is the comparison of the parallel versions. By seeing how versions differ one can see the different concerns and interests of the different storytellers, or gain a window into how they emphasized certain matters that their counterparts did not. Where past scholars harmonized conflicting versions in an attempt to understand “what actually happened,” or ignored conflicting accounts since they could not all be accurate, scholars now embrace the study of conflicting parallel versions in order to understand the conflicting values of different storytellers. This salient development has led scholars to “reclaim” many sources that had been ignored on the grounds that they were less reliable or inferior from a historical perspective.

Literary training was not deemed necessary in the past, when rabbinic narratives were approached as relatively reliable historical sources, as scholars were seeking to reconstruct the “true” history or biography, and therefore attempted to “get behind,” so to speak, the literary aspects of the story. Attention to literary techniques was therefore minimal, and even when literary artistry was recognized, it was considered almost unworthy of serious comment. Pedagogical approaches to rabbinic stories, to the best of my knowledge, were no different than scholarship: teachers used stories to demonstrate biographical or historical points, but did not treat them as outstanding literary texts worthy of study for their literary aspects, nor seek to understand how the structure, form and narrative art of stories contributed to the meaning.

For both scholars and teachers, the shift from positivist historical study to literary analysis requires the development of a new set of analytical tools and opens new interpretive possibilities.

**II: Pedagogical Implications**

This methodological shift from historical to literary study has important pedagogical implications for adult education and other popular educational settings. While sage-stories, in principle, can be analyzed with any literary method from the arsenal of the modern literary critic, a logical first step should involve a “close reading” in the fashion of the New Criticism. Indeed, a “close reading” is

---

indispensable as we generally lack detailed knowledge of the author, provenance and historical context of these stories that would provide the data necessary for readings grounded more in the biography, psychology or historical climate of the author. But even non-scholars can make some headway in this new endeavor, which is no different in principle than interpreting other fictional literature or poetry. The key questions listed in the previous section, shifting the focus to the aggadic storytellers and the meanings, values, tensions, and techniques reflected in their stories, can be posed to a non-scholarly audience and generate a healthy discussion. The interpreters do not have to know other traditions about the sage-characters, as they generally would have to know were they attempting to understand the story as reporting a historical event in the sage’s life. The frame of reference for study accordingly can be limited to the story at hand.12

In other words, the shift from historical to literary approaches in the study of sage-stories provides an opportunity for non-specialists in the same way as New-Critical approaches to literature of the 1930s and 1940s provided opportunities for non-experts.13 Prior to the advent of New Criticism, literary scholarship generally involved erudite study of narrowly historical and biographical details that shed light, in the critic’s opinion, on the literary work. The New Critics, in contrast, argued that all such recondite scholarship was essentially irrelevant; by focusing on the poem or literary work itself—on its structure, form and use of language and other literary qualities—the critic could elucidate its meaning. Comprehensive knowledge of the historical context of a literary work, of the biography of its author, of prevailing intellectual and cultural conflicts, of the direct and indirect influences—these were no longer prerequisites for engaging in literary criticism, and therefore the enterprise was open to those without such advanced knowledge. In both literary criticism and rabbinics, the shift in approach meant that interpretation no longer absolutely required a scholarly background. And just as New Criticism became popular, at least in part, in response to (or even to cater to) the growth in the number of students entering universities at that time, many of whom lacked requisite knowledge and ability to engage in the “old” criticism, we who teach rabbinic literature can capitalize on the turn to literary criticism of rabbinic narratives, in order to appeal to a wider audience.

Of course, not all readers command the same literary competence.14 The instructor must therefore provide the audience with basic “New-Critical” tools, helping them appreciate the structure and literary artistry of the story, including irony, wordplay, symbolic names, reversals, ambiguity etc. Second, the instructor needs to help fill in the background of any specialized knowledge of rabbinic terms or concepts presupposed in the story, as well as pertinent information about the historical context. Literary critics of rabbinic stories would not deny that the stories—like all literature—ex-

---

12 Other stories or sources that deal with the same themes sometimes will be helpful in understanding a given story, but are generally not indispensable. Indeed, other stories may present ideas opposed to those in a given story, even if told of the same characters, which reflect the different concerns of different storytellers. To fill in this background is part of the instructor’s role.


14 Similarly, not all instructors will possess the same literary training or expertise. I am suggesting that those who wish to teach rabbinic stories effectively, and in keeping with contemporary scholarship, should obtain literary competence one way or another.
From History to Literature (Bridging Initiative Working Paper No. 26) • 6

ist within a historical context, and that the context, at some level, conditions the interpretation. For example, if the story is about the intercalation of the calendar, the instructor will probably have to provide some background about the nature of the rabbinic calendar and its operations. If a student ventures an interpretation that is obviously anachronistic—based, say, on medieval or later developments—the instructor will have to explain why such an interpretation is implausible. Finally, the instructor will have to provide knowledge of rabbinic literary conventions, stock phrases and idioms.

In sum, the shift from the understanding of the genre of rabbinic sage-stories from historical testimonies to didactic fiction provides new pedagogical opportunities and requires new strategies. Of course, the potential benefits of such study depends on one’s pedagogical goals. In adult education settings, mine include:

(1) Familiarizing lay people with rabbinic texts, including the Talmudim
(2) Providing an interesting and engaging learning experience such that the audience will find rabbinic texts worthy of future study
(3) Teaching some Jewish values, topics and general content

That is, I see the main function of Jewish adult education as a type of intellectual “keruv” drawing the audience into the world of rabbinic study as a step to further study and involvement in Jewish life. I have always in this context found it easier to teach Talmudic stories than legal sugyot, with their complex argumentation, specialized terminology, and halakhic details. Likewise, midrash with its unfamiliar exegetical assumptions and, in many cases, requirement of detailed knowledge of Hebrew language, can be daunting to the neophyte. Stories, in contrast, are much more accessible.

Let me provide here an example of a story that I have taught successfully in many adult-education settings, but which could work equally well in Hebrew high school or even day school settings. This brief story is found in Bavli, Bava Qama 50b. (Although it is not itself a rabbinic sage-story, this brief text succinctly and elegantly illustrates the literary aspects of rabbinic stories generally and the benefits of approaching them as didactic fiction, rather than as primary sources for reconstructing history or historical biography.)

Once a man was removing stones from his field [and putting them] into the public domain. A certain holy man (baśid) came upon him and said, “Scoundrel (reika)! Why do you remove stones (mesaqel) from a domain that does not belong to you [and put them] into your domain?”
He [the man] laughed at him.
After some time that man was in need and he sold his field.
He was walking in that very place and he stumbled (nikshal) on those very stones.
He said, “That holy man (baśid) spoke well to me when he said, ‘Why do you remove stones from a domain that does not belong to you [and put them] into your domain.’”

מכשטי באדום שליה מסקל מרסות קולה, ומשי הדרים משאר, אמר: איך.
מכשטי באדום שליה מרסות קולה, ומשי הדרים משאר, אמר: איך.
_algul_ ליימש עלים ומרשוץ קולה, אמר: איך.
I will generally read the story through once, then read it again pausing to make sure the audience understands the basic thrust of and issues in the story, i.e., before any analysis. E.g. Why is the man throwing stones out of his yard over the wall? Why does he laugh at the hasid’s words? Why did he sell his field? What did he come to realize with his final words? I then pose the question: What is the message that the storyteller wishes to communicate with this story?

Usually the first answers will include: What you do might come back and hurt you. Don’t litter. Don’t do to others what you would not want done to you. Fortune is fickle and can change rapidly. After some discussion I will try to focus on what I think is the key message by asking the audience to think about the hasid’s words, which the man repeats at the end, indicating that it is the moral of sorts. Now the audience generally will not understand the first time through the story: I think the reader inevitably reacts, at first, to the hasid’s words: “Wait a minute! That is not what the man was doing at all. He was removing stones from his domain and throwing them into a domain that did not belong to him, the public domain.”

This is why the story is so effective: we begin by sharing the same perspective as the protagonist and come around to the same insight. In this way the audience comes to sense that the lesson has something to do with possessions and ownership: Possessions are always ephemeral, vulnerable. It is natural to feel that our lawfully acquired properties, especially real estate, are ours—our possessions, that belong to us, and no one can take them away. But changes of fortune are always possible, and what we own one day can be taken away the next. Some things, however, can never be taken away from us—that which we share with all others. Public spaces, public parks, all public areas, paradoxically, are our true possessions. Only that which we share with all others can never be taken away.

In this way the hasid moves the man, and the audience with him, to a deeper understanding of reality, as opposed to superficial appearances. This is often the case in Talmudic stories: the stories contrast a superficial view of reality with a deeper, spiritual, rabbinic view, often articulated by a rabbi, sage or hasid, and attempt to communicate that deeper view to the audience.

During the course of the discussion the audience will generally observe some of the literary devices and aesthetic points of the story, but if they don’t I will generally point them out, such as:

(1) the beautiful Sophoclean irony: trying to avoid a certain situation the man ends up bringing it about.
(2) the man’s repetition of the hasid’s words at the end, this time with understanding.
(3) the middah keneged middah or measure-for-measure theme.
(4) The image of throwing stones is very evocative and as such appears often in sacred and secular literature—such as, “Let him who is without sin cast the first stone” (John 7:8).

I will also mention a few other literary aspects to audiences who don’t know Hebrew, including these:
There may be an interesting rhyme or alliteration in mesaqel and nikhshoal. (In the version of this story found in the Tosefta, which is the source of the Bavli, in place of nikhshoal we find nikhshal).

Nikhshoal probably evokes the verse, “Do not put a stumbling block (mikhshol) before the blind.” This man did create stumbling blocks, and stumbled, and perhaps he was spiritually blind.

Mesaqel in Hebrew can mean both to stone or to remove stones, and there may be a play on that, as the man removes stones but ends up getting stoned, so to speak.

The word for “scoundrel,” reika, from reik, empty, thus “empty one,” may also play on the many emptying his field of stones.

This story, of course, does not involve named rabbis like Hillel, R. Akiba, and so forth, so it is very conducive to literary, rather than, historical analysis. But all the stories of rabbis can be approached in the same manner very effectively. In sum, then, the shift from understanding genre rabbinic sage-stories as historical testimonies to viewing them as didactic fiction provides new pedagogical opportunities. As literature, such stories can be very effective in adult-education settings as an entry into the world of rabbinic literature.