Dirshuni: Contemporary Women's Midrash, edited by Tamar Biala. Brandeis University Press, 2022.

Reviewed by Iscah Waldman

Winston Churchill is reported to have said, "You will never reach your destination if you stop and throw stones at every dog that barks." Still, I wonder about Churchill's concern even more than I worry about the negative consequences for our canine friends. The greatest distractions are those that lead us down multiple pathways, allowing for discovery and new insight along the way. I often feel this way when I learn traditional midrashic texts, peppered with biblical and intertextual rabbinic references that need their own study and context to fully comprehend both the meaning and the method of the authors. In these moments, the distractions *are* the destination. Similarly, when reading the new English language volume of women's midrashim, *Dirshuni*, I found myself in a state of nearly constant distraction as I rushed to check sources that were either completely new to me or that were completely turned on their heads by the many Israeli women found in this volume. *Dirshuni* is the latest in a long chain of opportunities for the student of Torah to become wonderfully distracted by the loving and insightful telling and retelling of our tradition.

This new English version of *Dirshuni* is based on two earlier volumes in Hebrew, published in 2009 and 2018. Each volume featured contemporary midrashim written by Israeli women who are grappling with some of the most difficult and compelling texts of the Torah. As Tamar Biala explains in her "Editor's Introduction," as women around Israel began to gain fluency in the tools and techniques of traditional Jewish text, they began filling in gaps "between their feminism and the patriarchy of the sacred texts" (xxxiv). Biala met Nehama Weingarten-Mintz, and the two shared women's midrashim that they had been collecting through the years, editing them into what would become the first volume of the Hebrew compilation of *Dirshuni*. Volume 2 would be published more than ten years later, with help from Tamar Kadari. As these volumes gained popularity in a number of academic and other settings inside and outside of Israel, Biala explains that she realized that an English version would have far greater reach for the many students who would welcome a compilation of women's midrashim. The result is a thematically organized resource for students and scholars of rabbinic literature to access and use for a myriad of purposes.

Midrash is first and foremost

an expansive enterprise. As Kadari writes in her introduction, "[the midrashic authors] brought forth rich and diverse innovation of a multiplicity of meanings by way of imagination and creativity" (xiv). *Dirshuni*'s many authors do not hide behind established Jewish law and interpretation but face it head on in an attempt to open old wounds so a healing process might begin. Kadari's introduction to midrash eloquently describes its true nature in the first few lines as an "exercise in creativity, with an element of play and pleasure in which sweep and imagination are conjoined" (xii). While midrash certainly brings innovative possibilities into dialogue with even the most apparently rigid biblical texts, the Torah always remains central to the rabbinic authors, whose goal was to "forge a strong, lively connection between the Torah and their lives and make it meaningful and relevant to their contemporaries" (xiv). And so it is with *Dirshuni*—while each author quotes and honors the biblical text, they also do not shy away from the boldest of innovations, hoping to inspire future generations to first name the pain, and then to consider new ways of thinking about the sacred texts. This is what is so compelling about *Dirshuni*, as the midrashim use the methodologies that the rabbis typically use throughout the Talmud and midrash, thus allowing the conversation to continue and not stagnate in the volumes of the *beit midrash*.

Consider the story of Dinah, daughter of Jacob, whose rape we read about in a few short sentences in Genesis, whose voice is unheard throughout the story, and whose name is degraded by later rabbinic commentary as one who brought the rape upon herself. Using traditional midrashic methods of interpretation, Rivkah Lubitch goes line by line through the passage, setting her midrash in "Bruriah's *beit midrash*," where we hear multiple women's words highlighting Dinah's own voicelessness during her early life in a household full of people who would not listen to her. Dinah is again rendered mute after her rape, which conjures another painful passage in Deuteronomy 22, in which a woman who is assaulted in a town is assumed to have been raped only if she cries out. Finally, Lubitch juxtaposes the rape of Dinah to that of Tamar by Amnon, reclaiming a well-known rabbinic phrase: "and their silence resounded from one end of the world to the other" (49). These bold contrasts of so many different pieces of biblical and rabbinic tradition indeed give voice to the voiceless—even to the point that the imagined scholars in the *beit midrash* of Bruriah are not relegated to

merely one voice but are afforded the luxury of dissent as were their male counterparts.

Biala plays with the concept of humanity being created in the image of God in "The Ever-Turning Sword," using a classic midrashic form known as a *petiḥta* and beginning with a verse from Psalms that will be woven back to into Genesis 3:24, which describes the ever-turning sword that is left to guard the tree of life. Biala's midrash asks us to confront God's intense desire to alleviate God's own loneliness by creating Adam for companionship. Unwilling to tolerate Adam's sadness reflecting that loneliness, God uses the ever-turning sword to alleviate Adam's pain by cutting him in half and allowing him to meet his other "half," thus intensifying God's own solitude. At the end of this midrash, God calls out for the one "created in My image" to take similar mercy and alleviate the crushing pain of loneliness with that same sword. This midrash brings rich nuance to the idea of God needing (and waiting in vain for) humanity to be a true partner, or at least to facilitate God finding a true partner.

In addition to the narrative interpretations throughout this volume, there are many innovative halakhic approaches to be found in *Dirshuni*, including a chapter with several midrashim by Lubitch, who has served as an advocate to many rabbinical courts, addressing "unsolvable" problems in Jewish law such as *mamzerim*, *'agunot*, and the lack of parity in women's oaths and in their own biblically assessed value. Throughout this volume readers will find midrashim that will speak to them as readers of text and others that will not. This is precisely the project of midrash, though—it is one that welcomes multiple voices and allows us to delve into the layers of meaning for ourselves and react as one does to any art form.

What I appreciate most in this volume is the commentary of Biala, who highlights some of the rabbinic methodology employed by the authors and explains each midrash's intertextual references. What would be even more helpful is a more organized approach to this, more conducive to learning with students. Some suggestions for a teachers' edition include a glossary of midrashic methodology in the back, using both English and Hebrew terms; endnotes with references to the rabbinic texts that are cited in each passage (Biala does this, but it is not fully comprehensive); and perhaps a few focusing questions for discussion. What is clear is that this is a volume that could and should be used by both teachers and students of midrash. Pirqei Rabbi Eliezer 34 teaches us that "the voices of five (including

an infant being born and a woman getting divorced) go from one end of the world to the other, and their voices are not heard," while Yalqut Shimoni on Nakh (remez 475) teaches that for three days before the Messiah comes, Elijah will cry out on a mountaintop and "his voice will be heard from one end of the world to the other." As this review was being written, *Dirshuni* in Hebrew became available on Sefaria.org, allowing many more people easy access to these and other midrashim, as well as to the cross-references readily available online. May this English language version encourage us to lift and proliferate more voices that cry out from one end of the world to the other, and may those voices be heard.

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Rashi's Commentary on the Torah: Canonization and Resistance in the Reception of a Jewish Classic by Eric Lawee. Oxford University Press, 2019.

Reviewed by Efrem Reis

Rashi's Commentary on the Torah by Eric Lawee is a historical journey telling the tale of the origins, evolution, and acceptance of Rashi's now canonical commentary on Torah. Lawee's research takes the reader from Rashi's background learning in Worms and the magnitude of his work, creating commentaries on Talmud Bavli and Tanakh, to the reception of his commentary throughout the medieval period by both devotees and detractors, and finally through the deluge of supercommentaries created as his work achieved its status as the essential Torah commentary.

While Lawee's aim is to express the evolution and codification of Rashi's Torah commentary among the elite rabbinic works in Jewish history, through his research he details the evolution of medieval commentary on the Torah. We learn not only about the origins and acceptance of Rashi's work, but also about the great sages who were impacted by his scholarship. One learns about how Ibn Ezra challenges Rashi's midrashic style but chooses to object to Rashi's commentary only subtly, so as not to alienate potential readers already enamored with Rashi's work. We hear how kabbalists latch on to Rashi's work and how kabbalistic scholars, such as Nachmanides, transform Rashi's ideas and grow them for their esoteric means.

As Rashi has become essential to Torah study, we may assume that the midrashim and methods he used to create his work were already mainstream, commonly accepted ideas.

Lawee investigates this assumption and shows that Rashi frequently would use a midrash that was either not previously mainstream or perhaps more obscure than modern readers would assume. Because Rashi used gematria, one might assume it was a standard tool to elucidate text. *Rashi's Commentary on the Torah* challenges these assumptions. One of the most informative theories that Lawee posits is that Rashi's Torah commentary was bolstered by his Talmud commentary. As his work on the Talmud becomes essential for basic reading of Talmud, and his grandchildren's work on the Tosafot becomes codified, Rashi's Torah commentary becomes commonly read as well.

Lawee takes us on a journey around Europe and the medieval Jewish world to discuss how Rashi's commentary was received and postulates why different aspects of Rashi's work were highlighted in different regions. It also becomes apparent that Rashi's text was constantly being reviewed and received based on the historical tides of its time. Rashi's words travel with Jews fleeing the Spanish expulsion and grow to new heights in new regions they are settling. Meanwhile, as Christian society uses challenging comments by Rashi as a polemic against the Jewish communities, we hear Jews of the time reinterpret those comments as a means for their survival.

Ultimately, we learn about the rise of Maimonides's (and to some extent, Ibn Ezra's) influence on the Jewish community and the wave of rationalism. Rationalists attempted to demystify and remove a supernatural layer of Torah study and Jewish practice. In response, those opposed to this movement, antirationalists, elevated Rashi and his use of midrashic interpretation (which is a nonrational method) as a tool to challenge the movement toward reason and logic. As we know today, Rashi's work survived the rational movement and sits alongside Rambam's logical and philosophical works in virtually every *beit midrash* in the world. Lawee details the long and challenging road taken to reach today's synthesis.

Finally, we learn about the long tradition of supercommentary. As Rashi's work becomes canonized, those who wish to support or challenge him begin to comment on his work, just as he once did on Torah. Supercommentators will often read Rashi's words in a way we assume Rashi did not intend; in essence, the new supercommentaries helped modernize Rashi's words for a new age. In many ways, these comments on Rashi are the final codification of this classic rabbinic work, making Rashi himself the object of exam-

ination, as he had done for Torah and Talmud, the essential works of Judaism.

Rashi's Commentary on the Torah is a well-researched and thorough book. While at times I found this study to be too rich in examples and evidence, this book is a great tool for the curious reader of Torah commentaries who would like to understand the evolution of Rashi and even of Torah commentary in general. One reads this research and can imagine the generations of students learning Rashi, from Andalusia to Byzantium, and how they reacted to the classic work. More importantly, it allows the reader to remove the lens of the current reception and acceptance of Rashi in the observant community and be more introspective and intellectually curious while reading Rashi's commentary on the Torah.

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Time and Difference in Rabbinic Judaism, by Sarit Kattan Gribetz. Princeton University Press, 2020.

Reviewed by Joshua Cahan

I have always been fascinated by the nature of time. It is the one true universal in human experience. A day is the only thing that has the same length anywhere on the globe. While land may be divided up or fought over and serves to separate us, time is shared, everyone passing through it together. And because it is shared, it is the focus of perpetual battles over how to divide and mark it. When groups live in close proximity, there must inevitably be struggles over whose system of marking time will dominate. And, conversely, distinct systems of marking time become primary ways to accentuate cultural difference.

Sarit Kattan Gribetz takes as her premise the idea that, while time may be uniform, everything about how we mark its passage—the division of a year into weeks and months or of a day into hours—is entirely contingent. These are acts of cultural creation, both expressing and constructing a particular vision of how to experience time, that have a profound impact on us precisely because we take them for granted. Gribetz explores several prominent rabbinic discussions of how different people mark units of time to argue that the rabbis use such differences to highlight essential distinctions between those groups. Many of the texts she cites will be familiar to experienced readers of rabbinic texts. But this act of putting them in dialogue with non-Jewish and even other rabbinic sources opens up whole

new possibilities for understanding the subtle power of the rabbinic calendar.

The book presents four case studies, each using a different time frame to explore distinctions between different groups: Jews versus Romans, Jews versus Christians, (Jewish) men versus women, and people versus God.

The first section looks at the texts in tractate Avodah Zarah that set parameters for pagan festivals that Jews must avoid. Gribetz does impressive work gathering data from a wide range of contemporary sources to clarify, to the extent possible, the identities of the festivals listed in the Mishnah and that shaped this list. She then does a deep dive into the etiologies the two Talmuds offer for several of them and shows how both Talmuds read Jews into Roman history but in starkly different ways. But the profound insights come only in the conclusion. She notes that the festivals on the Mishnah's list are not just pagan but specifically Roman, and their rejection is thus a statement of pointed resistance to Rome's cultural dominance. Yet the very act of setting such rules presumes and in fact necessitates intimate knowledge of and close attention to the Roman calendar. And these rules not only restrict cultural contact between Jew and gentile on certain days but also permit it the rest of the time, a seeming attempt at accommodation to the reality of Roman dominance. The etiologies of the festivals strike a similar balance. Reading Jewish history into these origin stories functions as an attempt to co-opt Roman history. But the explanations, particularly in the Palestinian Talmud, also reflect a strikingly detailed familiarity among the rabbis with Greek and Latin and with Roman lore about its own past. They emphasize that "we" are different from "them" while recognizing that Roman time is dominant, and that we have unavoidably become a part of their story.

The other sections of the book present texts that are not overtly dialogical, so the arguments feel suggestive rather than definitive. Gribetz reads the extensive and sometimes hyperbolic statements exalting the Sabbath and ascribing to it an inherent holiness as intended to reject both Christian critiques of Jewish Sabbath observance and their move to shift their Sabbath to Sunday. This reading highlights the unusual frequency of stories in which gentiles, in several cases emperors, question the Jewish Sabbath but then offer external testimony to its clear, albeit intangible, specialness. In this case, it is the Christians who see the need to differentiate themselves from Jewish practice, to move through time

in a way that is overtly not Jewish. As the new faith moved from being a minority religion to the majority in the Roman Empire, the rabbis sought to bolster their community's commitment to the rhythms of Jewish time.

The sections on men and women and on God's time seem at first glance only tangentially related. However, they strip the book's case down to its most elemental and, I found, its truest form. While structures of time are often used in polemical contexts, time itself and its singularity are the heroes of this story. Gribetz suggests that the twice-daily regimen for women of checking for menstrual blood, a practice that goes well beyond legal necessity, evolved as a counterpoint to men's reciting of the Shema morning and evening. The practices serve parallel functions as rituals to frame each day but, more than that, they are exclusionary. We all traverse the same morning and evening, during which men and women are assigned different tasks that feel mutually exclusive. And these tasks project very different social roles. While men's energy is directed toward spiritual matters and Torah study, women's focus is constantly brought back to monitoring their physicality. On an even more subconscious level, we see that even when imagining God's activities, the rabbis presume a single, uniform passage of time. By asking what God does each day and each hour of the day, they assume that God travels through the same cycles of day and night as people, and the distinction comes in how God uses that time.

In some ways it seems that this book only scratches the surface of a very rich topic. Some of the most interesting and provocative claims, hidden at the ends of chapters, really deserve fuller consideration in their own right. But Gribetz's work, part of a growing corpus of scholarship on conceptions of time in antiquity, poses a compelling question and makes a strong case that the rabbis were actively exploring how we choose to mark time and how those choices mark us in turn.

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