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History, Theory, Practice

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Is Midrash Comics?

A Fish Story about Graphic Narrative, Visual Rhetoric, and Rabbinic Hermeneutics

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Jonah entered the mouth of the whale like a man entering a great synagogue, and stood. The eyes of the fish were like shuttered windows [אפמיות] *which shone, and he could see all that was in the sea and the underworld. R. Meir said: there was a pearl which hung from within the belly of the fish that lit up all that was in the seas and in the Underworld, and of this it says, "Light is sown for the Righteous."*

Midrash, *Pirke d' R. Eliezer,* chap. 10

Several years ago, while attending a Rhetoric Society of America conference in Minneapolis, I wandered into a local Barnes and Noble looking for examples of graphic novels to use in a new seminar I was preparing on graphic narrative. As I stood looking at the many works from Batman to Will Eisner to Daniel Clowes to Japanese manga, I became aware that standing next to me were two boys about seventeen years old, with mohawk haircuts, tattoos, and pierced noses, looking as intently at those shelves as I was. Nothing like that had ever happened when I was looking at books on literary and cultural theory! As Art Spiegelman, the author of the Pulitzer Prize–winning graphic Holocaust narrative *Maus*, told the *Comics Journal* in 1995, "It seems to me that comics have already shifted from being an icon of illiteracy to becoming one of the last bastions of literacy. If comics have any problem now, it's that people don't even have the patience to decode comics at this point. . . . I don't know if we're the vanguard of another culture or if we're the last blacksmiths" (61).

It was Spiegelman's *Maus*, completed in 1991, that made comics and graphic narratives acceptable in the eyes of the adult reading public and academic critics. Theorists and practitioners of the medium often insist on using

the word "comics" as a singular noun that requires a singular verb.[1] So the title of this essay, "Is Midrash Comics?," is neither ungrammatical nor meant to be simply provocative. It is a way of asking central questions about the rhetorical relationship between text and image in this form of rabbinic interpretation. Although much has been written on the textuality of midrash, there has been little relating it to contemporary theories of visual rhetoric or graphic narrative. Visualization, of course, was one of the venerable techniques of persuasion in the art of public speaking in Greek and Roman rhetorical theory. Rabbinics scholars such as Marc Bregman, Elliot Wolfson, and Daniel Boyarin began to look at questions of visuality in rabbinic texts some years ago.[2] I would like to carry the discussion further by using contemporary theories of comics and graphic narrative to examine an exemplary midrashic text, and then consider the implications for a renewed sense of Jewish rhetoric.

I have chosen a particularly extravagant midrash from the collection *Pirke d' R. Eliezer*, commenting on the book of Jonah. As a biblical text, the story of Jonah itself contains comic and satiric elements, fantastical caricatures, and imaginative breadth. But I think my chosen example will serve us well as we ask larger questions about midrash and visual rhetoric. This midrash imagines and visualizes what occurs when Jonah enters the huge fish's mouth, converses with it, and saves the fish from being eaten by no less a creature than the Leviathan. Jonah then acts as a type of superhero, rescuing both the fish and himself through the visual display of his circumcised penis as his weapon. As a reward, the fish agrees to Jonah's request to take him on an undersea voyage and shows him everything in the seas. It's a kind of Jewish *Moby Dick*.[3] The following is the translation of chapters 9 and 10 of *Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer and the Pseudepigrapha* by Rachel Adelman from her superb *The Return of the Repressed*.[4] Chapter 9, just before the one in which our text appears, provides the larger context for our story. It interprets Genesis 1:20–23 and the emergence of various swarms of creatures above the earth and in the seas, including the sea monsters (*ha-taninim ha-gedolim*) on the fifth day of creation. This is the link our chapter 10 will use to connect Jonah's fish to the Leviathan, a creature that has many associations in Jewish tradition with both primordial creation and end-of-time messianic eras that our midrash will further engage.[5]

> On the fifth day, [God] caused the Leviathan, the Elusive Serpent, to crawl from the waters. Its dwelling is in the lowest waters and, between its two fins, rests the foundation hinge [הבריח התיכון] of the universe. All the great sea monsters [התנינים הגדולים] in the oceans are food for the Leviathan. The Holy One, blessed be He, plays with him daily. He opens his mouth and the sea monster, whose designated day has come to be eaten, (tries to) escape and flee, but enters the Leviathan's mouth. The Holy One, blessed be He, plays with it, as it says: "(this is) the Leviathan that You formed to sport with" (Ps. 104:26). (Adelman, 244; bracketed interpolations and parentheses by Adelman)

Chapter 10 says:

> The fifth day . . . R. Tarfon said: the fish had been appointed to swallow Jonah since the Six Days of Creation, as it says: "And God appointed a huge fish to swallow Jonah" (Jonah 2:1). Jonah entered the mouth of the whale like a man entering a great synagogue, and stood. The eyes of the fish were like shuttered windows [אפמיות] which shone, and he could see all that was in the sea and the underworld. R. Meir said: there was a pearl which hung from within the belly of the fish that lit up all that was in the seas and in Underworld, and of this it says, "Light is sown for the Righteous" (Ps. 97:11). The fish said to Jonah, "Don't you know that my day has come to be swallowed by the jaws [lit. mouth] of the Leviathan?" Jonah said, "Take me to him and I shall save you, as well as myself, from his jaws." He [the fish] took him [Jonah] to him [the Leviathan]. He [Jonah] said to the Leviathan, "It was for you that I descended to see your abode [in the sea], and I will descend again, in the future, to place a rope through your tongue, and haul you up to sacrifice you for the great feast of the Righteous in the Days to Come." As it says: "Can you draw out the tongue by a rope?" (Job 40:25;). And, not only that, but look at this seal of our forefather Abraham. Look to the covenant [*brit*—mark of circumcision]' and flee!" And the Leviathan saw the seal of Abraham our forefather and fled from the presence of Jonah a distance of two days. (Adelman, 240–41; bracketed interpolations by Adelman)

> Jonah then said to the fish, "Well, I saved you from the jaws of the Leviathan, so now show me everything in the seas and the depths." It showed him the paths along the bottom of the Sea of Reeds [*yam suf*], Israelites had walked upon, as it says: ". . . the weeds [*suf*] entwined around my head" (Jonah 2:6). It showed him the Great River [*nahar*] of Oceanus, as it says: ". . . the floods [*nahar*] engulfed me" (v. 4). It showed him the place where the breakers of the sea and its waves emerge from, as it says: ". . . all Your breakers and billows swept over me" (v. 4). It showed him Gehenna, as it says: "From the belly of Sheol I cried out" (v. 3). And it showed him the nethermost underworld of Sheol, as it says: "You brought my life up from the pit, O Lord my God" (v. 7). It showed him the foundation pillars of the earth, as it says: "I sank to the base of the mountains" (v. 7). From this verse, one learns that Jerusalem stands upon seven mountains. There, it showed him the Foundation Stone, set in the depths, and he saw, there, the sons of Korah standing and praying, and he knew he was below the Temple of God. (Adelman, 249–50; bracketed interpolations by Adelman)

> The fish then said to Jonah, "Behold, you are now standing below the Temple of God. Pray and you will be answered." Jonah said to the fish, "Stand on your tail, for I would like to pray." He began to pray: "Master of all the Worlds, Whom we call 'He-who-casts-down and He-who-raises-up,' I have gone down, now raise me up! You Who are called 'He-who-causes death, and He-who-grants-life,' I have reached death, now raise me up, bring me back to life!" But he was not answered until he uttered the following words: "Whatever I vowed I shall fulfill" (Jonah 2:10)—to slaughter the Leviathan before You on the day of Israel's salvation. "And I, with a voice of gratitude, will sacrifice to You" (ibid.). As soon as he said this, the Holy One, blessed be He, indicated to the fish to vomit Jonah up onto dry ground as it says: "And God told the fish to vomit Jonah up onto dry ground" (v. 12). (Adelman, 254–55)

The text is endlessly rich and complex, and I can touch on only a few aspects of it here. I recommend Adelman's book for an excellent summary of the background, textual history, and literary and psychological readings of this passage. A further caveat: I am not trying to make grand claims about the entire genre of Midrash, an ancient rabbinic exegetical activity spanning over a thousand years; nor do I want to engage in any of the complex historical and philological questions about the editing and background of midrashic texts, or the intentionality of the authors. I'm writing this as an "essay" in the word's original sense (from the French *j'essaie,* I try)—as a tentative, personal, exploratory attempt to look at things from a new angle and see what insights that might yield. To use a visual metaphor, the scholarly methods we use are like various pairs of glasses we put on that reveal different views, none of which is panoramic or all-encompassing (what the rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke might call a terministic screen).

The Hebrew root of the word midrash—*drsh*—means to search out, seek, inquire, or demand. Midrash visualizes, scripts, plays with, and caricatures the biblical text whose meaning it probes. It dissolves the linearity of the text, making us read back and forth simultaneously, on multiple levels; it disrupts regular chronology and topography; and it thus grapples imaginatively with the traumas of Jewish history and engages in ethical debate. One also often senses in so many midrashim that the authors are slyly winking at us. Or, as one of my favorite contemporary Jewish thinkers, Rabbi Yéhouda Léon Askénazi, once put it: "A Rabbi who does not laugh, is not a serious Rabbi" (quoted in Aviner, 15). In sophisticated comics—graphic novels and narratives—there is a similar uneasy and challenging relationship between text and image: one has to read back and forth, filling in the gaps between panels, and there are complex nonlinear juxtapositions of time and space.

As Hillary Chute—one of the best contemporary literary theorists of comics—writes, it is a genre dealing with fiction, narrative, and historicity:

> Comics might be defined as a hybrid word-and-image form in which two narrative tracks, one verbal and one visual, register temporality spatially. Comics moves forward in time through the space of the page, through its progressive counterpoint of presence and absence: packed panels (also called frames) alternating with gutters (empty space). Highly textured in its narrative scaffolding, comics doesn't blend the visual and the verbal—or use one simply to illustrate the other—but is rather prone to present the two nonsynchronously; a reader of comics not only fills in the gaps between panels but also works with the often disjunctive back-and-forth of *reading* and *looking* for meaning. (452)

Graphic narratives at their best, Chute continues, also involve an "affective, urgent visualizing of historical circumstance" and ethical engagement (457). As researchers in visual studies and graphic narrative always stress, we read images and we imagine texts; reading and seeing are complex activities, engaged in a profound interrelationship. I do not have room here to examine the complexity of this relationship, but it's useful to stop for a moment to enumerate what W. J. T. Mitchell—to my mind, one the best scholars writing in the field of visual studies today—calls the "four fundamental concepts of image science": the pictorial turn, the image-picture distinction, the meta-picture, and the biopicture (14). The pictorial turn does not signify just the rise of purely visual media like video, cinema and television. Mitchell explains:

> Media are always mixtures of sensory and semiotic elements, and all the so-called visual media are *mixed* or hybrid formations, combining sound and sight, text and image. Even vision in itself is not purely optical, requiring for its operations of coordination of optical and tactile impressions. Second, the idea of a "turn" toward the pictorial is not confined to modernity, or to contemporary visual culture. It is a *trope* or figure of thought that reappears numerous times in the history of culture, usually at moments when some new technology of reproduction, or some set of images associated with new social, political, or aesthetic movements has arrived on the scene. (15)

Mitchell's image-picture distinction is fundamental for the analysis I want to present of the midrash on Jonah. Image and picture are not the same, as Mitchell notes:

> "You can hang a picture, but you can't hang an image." The picture is a material object, a thing you can burn or break. An image is what appears in a picture, and

> what survives its destruction—in memory, in narrative, and in copies and traces in other media. The golden calf may be smashed and melted down, but it lives on as an image in stories and innumerable depictions. . . . The picture, then, is the image as it appears in a material support or specific place. This includes the mental picture, which (as Hans Belting has noted) appears in the body, in memory or imagination. . . . [An image] is thus the perception of a relationship of likeness or resemblance or analogous form—what C. S. Pierce defined as the "iconic sign," a sign whose intrinsic sensuous qualities remind us of some other object. (16–18)

Mitchell has influenced the way I think about visual rhetoric, but he lacks scholarly familiarity with Jewish tradition, Hebrew, and rabbinic hermeneutics. One of the principles I have absorbed from Askénazi (whose work I have discussed at length elsewhere, in trying to define what Jewish rhetoric)[6] is the need to return to Hebrew to understand the meaning of Jewish ideas and texts. In other words, the language one uses is inseparable from the conceptuality that the language and its grammar entail. That is an important (and rhetorical) caveat for discussing Jewish rhetoric. Using English words such as "image," "picture," "vision," "representation," and "imagination" involves a conceptuality that differs from that entailed in the many Hebrew words used for images and seeing, such as *hazon, demut, mabat, tzelem, re'iyah pesel, tavnit, temunah, tzurah, histaklut,* and *dimayon* in biblical, rabbinic, and kabbalistic literature. To understand the profound and pervasive notions of seeing and visual rhetoric in Jewish texts, one would need to first thoroughly survey the numerous Hebrew words denoting seeing or images, then note where they appear and try to decipher meanings from those contexts.

In an essay on hearing and seeing, Askénazi discusses the dialectic between these two faculties in Jewish tradition. The biblical revelation at Sinai, he notes, is described as "witnessed"—both seen and heard—by the Jewish people. There is an especially interesting and cryptic line in Exodus 20:15: "[And] all the *people saw the voices* and the lightning and the sound of the horn." It is indeed true, Askénazi notes, that Jewish tradition is careful about vision because using it can risk idolatry, so one needs to first listen or hear in the sense of being taught to comprehend. As Askénazi puts it, "hearing is first and only those who have heard in truth will be able to see" ("Écoute et vision," 2:549; my translation).

But there is a deeper, subtler dialectic between the two faculties. As Askénazi observes, the Mishna (Jewish oral law that is part of the Talmud but was put in writing around the second century CE, after the destruction

of the second Temple and end of the prophecy) uses a conventional phrase to mean "come and study": *Ta Sh'ma*—literally, come and hear. In contrast, the Zohar (one the foundational documents of Jewish mysticism, whose contents were collected, edited, and written down in the fourteenth century), uses the phrase *Ta Hazeh*—literally, come and see. Why these two different formulas? asks Askénazi. He answers that there was an initial time of revelation, during which the witnesses had seen and heard. Revelation later was hidden, so in the Talmudic period the imperative becomes: Come and understand by study what you have seen. Afterward, the kabbalistic teaching is: Come and see what you have understood by studying. In other words, if one is not initiated into hearing, into the rabbinic tradition of understanding what was first revealed and now hidden, then there is a risk of idolatry. So the Talmud says: "Come and understand, Israel, what you saw." And if you have understood, then the tradition of the Zohar intervenes: What you understood, come to see ("Écoute et vision," 2:550).

The Fish Story

With these preliminary theoretical reflections in mind, let's now look further at our midrash on Jonah. In the Bible, Jonah is the prophet who flees the mission to which God has called him: to go east to the city of Nineveh and proclaim its impending destruction due to its wickedness. (Nineveh was one of the oldest and largest cities of ancient Mesopotamia.) Instead, Jonah escapes in the opposite direction, to the coastal city of Jaffa, in the Land of Israel. There he finds a ship going even further west, to Tarshish. He pays his fare, gets settled on board, and falls asleep. No grand rhetoric here, in the classic tradition of Israel's ancient prophets Amos, Isaiah, and Hosea. Instead, silence and unconsciousness. God then sends a great storm, placing the ship in mortal danger; the pious non-Jewish sailors investigate and discover the storm is due to Jonah's presence and flight. Jonah responds by asking them to throw him overboard. The sea stops raging, and God sends the fish to swallow Jonah. Here is the biblical passage from Jonah 2:1–11 that our midrash interprets:

> And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish. And said, I cried to the Lord out of my distress, and he heard me; from the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. For you cast me into the

> deep, in the heart of the seas; and the floods surrounded me; all your billows and your waves passed over me. Then I said, I am cast out from your sight; yet I will gaze again on your holy temple. The waters surrounded me, even to the soul; the depth closed around me, the weeds were wrapped around my head. I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars closed on me for ever; yet have you brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God. When my soul fainted inside me I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came to you, to your holy temple. Those who pay regard to lying vanities forsake their loyalty. But I will sacrifice to you with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay that which I have vowed. Salvation belongs to the Lord. And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land. (Adelman's translation)

Jonah's prayer is an eloquent piece of rhetoric, a poetic psalm interpolated into the prose narrative, whose nuances and tropes our midrash will play on, literalize, and concretize, as we will soon see. It is a commonplace of literary commentary on this biblical text to also note an ironic and satiric core.[7] The prophet is a clumsy antihero, doing the opposite of what he's supposed to; then he gets swallowed by a fish and is forced finally to pray from its belly. In the Jewish cycle of holidays, Jonah is the biblical book read on Yom Kippur, the holiest and most solemn day of the Jewish calendar, in which Jews are called to return to God and are cleansed of their sins. Yet in the book of Jonah, it's the non-Jewish sailors and residents of Nineveh who become the paradigms of pious repentance, not the reluctant Jewish prophet or any other Jewish figure. Even when Jonah accepts his mission, he does so with little enthusiasm. When Nineveh's inhabitants do repent and the city is saved, Jonah is angry and wishes for death at the end of the book.

The image of the large fish that swallows Jonah and Jonah's ardent, stylized prayers from the fish's belly seem especially exaggerated and grotesque—very much like a "comic." Indeed, the image of Jonah and the fish has been cloned endless times: it is particularly beloved by cartoonists, graphic artists, and advertisers. Perhaps there is a kind of meta-picture here as well, to use Mitchell's term. A meta-picture, he writes, is one in which the "image of another picture appears, a kind of 'nesting' of one image inside another, as when Velázquez paints himself in the act of painting Las Meninas" (18). As Mitchell also indicates, any picture can be a meta-picture if it becomes a device to reflect on its nature as a picture. I suggest that our biblical text here is using an outlandish image of a man praying inside a huge fish as a way to comment on its own narrative and themes, and to signal to the reader the impossibility of any literal meaning. The midrash on Jonah then carries that

gesture further, with an ironic rhetorical self-consciousness: it images the nature of its imaging and brings another huge fish to swallow Jonah's fish. Then, on a third level, we have the final triumph in the days of the Messiah, with the picture of the righteous eating the Leviathan itself.

Let me try to explain further. One of the main themes of the book of Jonah is *teshuvah* (literally, return, but often awkwardly translated as repentance), which involves a reflexive and rigorous looking back on one's life and deeds, a rewriting and reimagining of one's life story, as it were. In other words, this cartoonish man-in-the-fish image embedded in the biblical narrative is a kind of meta-pictorial device used to embody that double consciousness of *teshuvah*—of the need to look at ourselves looking at ourselves. We are inevitably reluctant to truly see ourselves. We naturally evade our less attractive sides, trying to escape that difficult work; we find endless reasons to rationalize our behavior and see ourselves as more righteous than others. So to see rightly, we have to see differently; we have to have our vision distorted. We need to be shocked out of our normal ways of doing and being.

But in the Jewish notion of *teshuvah*, there is also much hope and flexibility: time is reversible. As the Talmud famously says, "great is teshuva, for it transforms intentional sins into merits" (*Yoma*, 86b). In other words, the past is not irrevocably over; the past itself can be changed; time is not linear. There is no Greek sense of fate and tragic destiny, or Christian sense of original sin, or Marxist dogma of irreversible deterministic history. As Askénazi puts it, Jewish history is "a drama but not a tragedy" ("Le couple," 209). Indeed, the Leviathan—representing the seemingly overwhelming forces of chaos, death, and destruction—is also portrayed as God's plaything in our text.

Now let me try to relate this back to midrash and visuality. In visuality, there is a certain kind of simultaneity; one sees all at once, as it were. Humans process images 60,000 times faster than they do texts. "Time," someone once said, "is God's way of not having everything happening at once."[8] Physicists indeed speak about the way in which the universe is both in time and outside of time. Outside of time, everything happens at once. That is very hard for humans to understand, since we are temporal creatures. But the midrash pushes the limits of our understanding. It not only reads the text in nonlinear ways, but it also transforms Jonah into a superhero battling the primordial sea monster of Creation and Apocalypse. That is, it rhetorically makes us see all at once: past, present, and future simultaneously, with a

kind of God's-eye vision of creation, covenant, struggle, and redemption. It does this not through sermonic preaching or philosophical argument, but through its pedagogical and rhetorical combination of text and image. And like comics, it does so in an accessible and popular way.

All these techniques challenge us to see anew, defamilarize the text (to use the term of Russian Formalist critic Viktor Shlovksky), upset our conventional ways of reading and understanding. And, as Askénazi once put it in another context, they keep the discussion from being "too serious to be serious" (*Parachat Béréchit*, 28). To cite another brilliant humorist, Mark Twain, "humor must not professedly teach and it must not professedly preach, but it must do both if it would live forever" (202). I would suggest that a specifically Jewish religious rhetoric must somehow ultimately situate its audience in relation to this larger redemptive vision, as part of the divine comedy. (Even in secularized Jewish rhetoric, one often finds these theological elements transformed, and also often in an ironic or satiric way. In *Maus*, for instance, the horrific experience of the Holocaust is intertwined with ironic and comic scenes of the narrator Artie's interactions with his father.) This seeing brings what is outside or at the end of time into time; that is, it both gives us a glimpse of that redeemed world and performatively moves the world further toward the messianic goal. So it is also the source of the laughter of Rabbi Akiva, in the famous Talmudic story (*Makkot*, 24b), as he views the ruins of the Temple destroyed by the Romans in his generation. Asked by his colleagues why he laughs instead of weeping at this sight as they are, he answers that now he has witnessed how the prophecies of destruction have come true, so surely the prophecies of the rebuilding and redemption will also eventually come true.

This entire sensibility, I think, is also at the heart of the spiritual seeing in the midrash on Jonah, with its disruption of linear chronology and geography, its mixture of past, present, and future, and its intense graphic images. In sum, Jonah in the fish is not a naïve image or simply part of folklore. Of course, I am using "image" here in the sense of Mitchell's definition: "a highly abstract and rather minimal entity that can be invoked with a single word. It is enough to name an image to bring it to mind" (18). In fact, the text of Jonah does not specifically use any Hebrew word for whale but rather refers to a huge fish (*dag gadol*). We tend to envision a whale, due to the conventional translations and associations: whales are probably the largest fish that could swallow a person whole, though of course whales are actually mammals and not fish.

Moreover, this has not been a strictly verbal dual; Jonah also intimidates the Leviathan by showing him the mark of his circumcision in another strong display of visual rhetoric, as it were. In biblical and rabbinic literature, the mark of circumcision is often called the *brit milah* (circumcision of the covenant), or *ot brit* (sign of the covenant) since the act of circumcising signifies the entry of the male Jewish baby into covenant of Abraham and the Jewish people. So part of Jonah's secret weapon is a word-thing, a graphic sign of God's unbreakable embodied relationship with the Jewish people and God's saving power. There may even be a parodic reference here to a famous line in the Yom Kippur liturgy, when the book of Jonah is read in the afternoon service: "*La brit habet ve al tefen la yetzer* [לַבְּרִית הַבֵּט וְאַל תִּפֶן לְיֵצֶר, look to the *brit* and don't incline to your desire]."[9] I cannot help but also sense a seriocomic tone here, a double consciousness in the juxtaposition of these solemn words from the liturgy with Jonah's use of them to scare off the huge monster.

It's the ironic or satiric literal sense of Jonah in the fish's belly as a comic, a kind of intentionally distorted cartoon image, that our midrash in chapter 10 from *Pirke d' Rabbi Eliezer* builds on so well. In both the biblical and the midrashic texts, Jonah has been taken into an alternative reality, an upside-down world. And along with him, we are swallowed into the depths of the text, the psyche, history, and the world of images that lies under the surface of words. At these levels of reality, there is a different kind of vision. The reader has to follow the back-and-forth interpretation of the verses from Jonah's biblical prayer, where the metaphors are now literalized, pictorialized, and made into a topography and map of his voyage. The "weeds [*suf*] entwined around my head" (*Pirke d' Rabbi Eliezer*, 2:6) metamorphose, as in a surrealist painting, into the paths along the bottom of the Sea of Reeds [*yam suf*], on which the Israelites had walked as they left Egypt. "I sank to the base of the mountains" (2:7), which becomes the foundation stone of the Temple. This reimaging of the metaphors parallels Chute's description of how "comics spatially juxtapose (and overlay) past and present and future moments on the page" (453): the midrashic interpreter has taken the verses of Jonah's biblical prayer and pictorialized and divided them into visual sequential frames of his journey with the fish, where past, present and future are overlaid.

In an essay on *Maus*, Chute analyzes Spiegelman's masterwork and notes how he uses his comics panels as "windows" to open up and order the traumatic nonlinear account of his father's Holocaust testimony, the memories

of which his father wants to forget, and critical personal papers which he has destroyed. Chute notes:

> In the introduction to his 1977 collection *Breakdown*, . . . Spiegelman attaches the concept of narrative to the spatializing, "materializing" work of comics:
>
> MY dictionary defines COMIC STRIP as 'a narrative series of cartoons . . . .' A NARRATIVE is defined as 'a story.' Most definitions of STORY leave me cold. . . . Except for the one that says 'a complete horizontal division of the building . . . [From Medieval Latin HISTORIA . . . a row of windows with pictures on them].'" (quoted in Chute, "The Shadow of a Past Time," 209; bracketed interpolations by Spiegelman)

Something similar, I suggest, is happening in our midrashic narrative, which presents us with a "row of windows," a visual sequencing of Jonah's underwater journey, and also deals with trauma and survival—serious and comic at once, so consonant with Jewish life and history.

Fish Eyes

What else can we understand about those eyes or windows of the fish that enable Jonah to see an alternate world? The text does not use the regular Hebrew word for eye, *ayin*; the word used instead, *afmioth* (אפמיות) is somewhat obscure. Based on her philological research, Adelman notes differences in manuscript versions of our midrashic text. The word *afmioth* has been translated as "skylight," "windows of glass," "flaps," and "shutters." Regardless of the precise spelling or translation, this is a special visual apparatus that allows Jonah to see anew—to see into the dark depths of himself and the world and have a visionary glimpse of history and redemption. The midrash specifically focuses us on the eyes of the fish, although they are not even mentioned in the biblical text, which directs us more to the fish's belly.

What would it be like to see as a fish? This is also both a serious and comic question. There is something actually quite extraordinary about fish vision. Fish navigate in the depths with little light; their eyes never close and are much larger in proportion to their bodies than human eyes are. Fish eyes have fixed irises and round lenses, and most have no eyelids. Placed on both sides of the head, a fish's eyes give it 180-degree vision. We have some everyday sense of this from the ultrawide camera lens called a fisheye lens, which uses strong visual distortion to create a hemispherical panoramic image. The small fisheye lenses in the peepholes of doors also give us a wide-angle spherical view. The point here, of course, is not biology or the science of optics, but the rhetorical effects and associations of the image of the fish eye in our midrashic narrative. The fish eyes are the windows through which a Jonah, closed in on himself, can open up, see anew, see truly. Not a biological seeing but a psychological, spiritual, and historical reenvisioning of himself and the world; a *teshuvah*, or return, repentance, renewal. These fish eyes also make the reader see with a different kind of vision.

In sum, I am proposing that the fish eye itself is the image in the text that marks this alternative seeing, vision through distortion, and is also an embodiment or an icon of what it designates. Perhaps one might say that the genre of Midrash itself is a kind of fish eye, a way of looking with and through the text, without which the text is an empty shell. Could I push that simile further and apply it to rhetoric itself? To ways in which rhetoric is also an attempt to make an audience see differently, or to rhetoric's use of tropes and turns and various techniques of persuasion? If so, it is no wonder that many times in its history of conflict with philosophy, from Plato onward, rhetoric has been denigrated as a kind of deceptive fish story, unconcerned with pure truth. Similarly, comics has had a long history of being denigrated as a crass, superficial form of art. And comics especially works through fish-eye vision, a kind of wide-angle distortion.

To help explain that technique, I turn to Scott McCloud's classic *Understanding Comics*, one of the earliest and best attempts to theorize the formalist aesthetics of comics. McCloud is also a cartoonist, and the book is written as a graphic narrative in comics form. By "de-emphasizing the appearance of the physical world in favor of the idea of form," McCloud argues, "the cartoon places itself in the world of concepts" (41). He is referring to the ways in which comics caricatures, abstracts, and engages in "amplification through simplification." In cartooning, he continues, when an image is abstracted, "we are not so much eliminating details, as we are focusing on specific details. By stripping down an image to its 'essential meaning,' an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't" (30). So there is a special intensity to the image, and, as he notes, "simplifying characters and images towards the purpose can be an effective tool for storytelling in any medium. Cartooning is not just a way of drawing, it's a way of seeing" (31).

Why do the simple abstracted lines in cartoons or Midrash so attract and engage us? To take the common example of emoticons, why do we so easily read the sign :-), which are just a few set of dots and a lines, as a face? (The examples are mine, not his). McCloud observes that when we "look at a photo

or realistic drawing of a face," we see it "as the face of *another*. But when you enter the world of the *cartoon*—you see *yourself*. . . . The cartoon is a *vacuum* into which our *identity* and *awareness* are *pulled*—an *empty shell* that we inhabit which *enables* us to travel in another *realm*. We don't just *observe* the cartoon, we *become* it! That's why I decided to *draw* myself in such a simple *style*. Would you have *listened* to me if I looked like *this??*" (36). In this quote, I've taken just the words from the balloons over the images in the panels his book. Here's the way it's actually appears:

In analyzing McCloud's two drawings of his face in the above panel, the one in "cartoon" style, and the other in "representational" style, Ora Elper commented to me that "those windows/eyes through which Jonah was enabled to see everything he saw—they are the round, blank glasses of your comics author. The fish—like that self-effacing teacher image—lends Jonah his eyes/perspective (as a fish) and through them Jonah is 'enlightened'—as the

midrash says, מאירות ליונה [gave light to], enlightened Jonah."[10] If we look back at the cartoon figure McCloud draws of himself, his face has large, round, eyeglass frames but no eyes. Elper has made a stunning connection between those transparent, round, clear, and empty lenses of McCloud's and the *afmioth*, those window eyes of Jonah's fish through which he sees in our Midrash.

The leap from reading the words I cited from McCloud's book to looking at the actual reproduction of those same words as they are drawn and integrated with images, panels, and gutters (the empty spaces between the panels) in the graphic narrative also feels somewhat like the leap from reading the biblical text of Jonah to the midrashic version of *Pirke d' R. Eliezer*. When McCloud writes that "the cartoon is a *vacuum* into which our *identity* and *awareness* are *pulled*—an *empty shell* that we inhabit which *enables* us to travel in another *realm*. We don't just *observe* the cartoon, we *become* it," I think he is also giving us a tool to explain what happens when we read or look at that fish image in the biblical text. It, too, is a kind of "vacuum" that pulls us in and enables us, like Jonah, to travel to another realm. This is precisely what the midrash picks up and then exaggerates or amplifies—lending new eyes to both the reader and Jonah. In other words, the cartoon image is analogous to the physical belly of the fish—"an *empty shell*" for Jonah to inhabit that enables him to travel into other psychic and historic realms, where his vision merges with the fish's and he can see into the depths. Our midrash even likens it to a synagogue: "'And God appointed a huge fish to swallow Jonah' (Jonah 2:1)]. He entered its mouth like a man entering a great synagogue, and stood."

Fish belly as synagogue? I sense the simile too is both serious and tongue-in-cheek. Both are open spaces that close around what or who enters them and then become platforms for transformation. In both places, prayer from the straits opens up the supplicant. The fish story genre of Midrash similarly opens up the biblical text. In other words, for the Jew, the Torah narrative is a kind of large, dark belly into which one is swallowed, which one lives with and through as one is tossed about in the stormy waters of Jewish history and life. How does one survive and maneuver in those narrow straits and turbulent depths? What does one seek? What is the goal of Midrash or Jewish religious rhetoric itself, if not also a spiritual transformation, a way of seeing or living the text and journeying with it through the long, agonizing process of history, enduring and building despite chaos and death—with one's eyes not failing, but still looking, still longing for that ultimate messianic com-

pletion of Creation? And so also being able, like Rabbi Akiva, to still laugh in spite of it all? Or, as Jonah puts in his prayer in the biblical text: "For you cast me into the deep, in the heart of the seas; and the floods surrounded me; all your billows and your waves passed over me. Then I said, I am cast out from your sight; yet I will gaze again on your holy temple" (2:5)—the holy temple in Jerusalem, that center toward which Jews have prayed through all their exiles and suffering, believing in a future of rebuilding and redemption.

The rabbis famously say that "God's salvation comes in the blink of an eye" (*Pesikta Zutra, Lekah Tov*, Esther, chap. 4). That eye movement takes only a fraction of a second. Of this, our midrash as comics has given us a smiling wink. In one of the most exceptional uses of the metaphor of the eye, from one of the minor tractates of the Babylonian Talmud, it is written:

> Abba Issi ben Yochanan said in the name of Samuel ha Katan: "This world is like a person's eyeball. The white of the eye is the ocean surrounding the world; the iris is the inhabited world; the pupil of the eye is Jerusalem; and the face [the reflection of the observer] in the pupil is the Holy Temple. May it be rebuilt speedily in our days." (*Derekh Eretz Zuta*, 9)

NOTES

1. Academic definitions of "comics" are as much debated as the term "visual rhetoric." I use these terms rather loosely and interchangeably in this essay. There are many definitions and arguments about what constitutes each field. The literature is vast, and many academic areas intersect in visual rhetoric, including rhetoric, art history, linguistics, semiotics, cultural studies, and technical communication. The broadest definition of "visual rhetoric" would be the study of how images affect audiences and societies. For a good introduction to and overview of various debates in the field of comics, see Hillary Chute, "Comics As Literature?," whose publication in *PMLA*, the most prestigious journal of literary studies, was a sign that the field had very much arrived.

2. My *Slayers of Moses* dealt with midrashic hermeneutics and literary theory before the rise of the field visual rhetoric in the 1990's. Daniel Boyarin's "'The Eye in the Torah'" first discussed the question of visuality. Elliot Wolfson's *Through a Speculum That Shines* is a study of visulization particularly in medieval Jewish mysticism. *Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism*, appeared in 1994. See also Marc Bregman, "Aqedah: Midrash as Visualization." For recent work from a different angle, see, for example, Maya Katz, *The Visual Culture of Chabad*.

3. I thank Marc Bregman for bringing this wonderful text to my attention many years ago in our discussions of the creative hermeneutics of Midrash. He playfully called it the "Yellow Submarine."

4. For a close parallel version of the text from *Pirque de-R. Eliezer* in another midrashic collection, see *Tanhuma*, on Lev. 5.

5. The Leviathan is mentioned six times in the Hebrew Bible. Job 41:1–34 describes it in detail, and some of those verses are used in our midrash on Jonah. The Babylonian Talmud also emphasizes the creature's eyes and associates it with primeval creation and the End of Days (*Bava Batra 74b-75a*). There are many parallels between Jonah and Job, for which there is no room for discussion here.

6. See Handelman, "The Philosopher, the Rabbi, and the Rhetorician."

7. For a comprehensive and excellent critical scholarly overview of this passage and the book of Jonah, see Uri Simon, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Jonah*.

8. The physicist Gerald Shroeder quoted this sentence to me in a conversation. When I asked him for the source, he wrote in an e-mail message of 20 December 2012: "Written on the wall of the Men's room in the Pecan Street café, Austin Texas."

9. This phrase is part of the well-know *piyut* (liturgical song) "Ki Hinneh K'homer," sung by the assembled congregation several times on Yom Kippur in the various requests for forgiveness. An alternative reading would be to see the words addressed to a human person, to "look to the *brit*, the sign of circumcision, and don't turn to your desires," or addressed to God to look to the sign of the *brit*, the circumcision that sealed God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants for all time.

10. Ora Wiskind Elper, e-mail message to the author, 24 July 2012.

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10

S. Yizhar's *Khirbet Khizeh* and the Rhetoric of Conflict

SHAI GINSBURG

September 2, 1949. The last military operation of the 1948 War—the First Arab-Israeli War, the Israeli War of Liberation and Independence, the Palestinian *Nakba* or Catastrophe—was concluded merely six months earlier. The ceasefire agreement between Israel and Syria, the final of four such agreements between the newly established Jewish state and its neighboring states that officially brought the war to a close, was signed less than two months earlier. A notice in the daily newspapers *ʿAl ha-Mishmar* and *Davar* announces the publication of S. Yizhar's new novella *Sipur ḥirbet ḥizʿa* (The story of Ḥirbet Ḥizʿa, translated into English as *Khirbet Khizeh*).[1] The laconic language of the ad is suggestive: "The cry of conscience of a Hebrew warrior as he clashes with the cruel face of our war."

Yizhar's novella relates a harrowing tale indeed. Spanning a day from sunrise to sunset, it chronicles a military operation to expel the Palestinian villagers of Khirbet Khizeh and transport them across the cease-fire lines. The Israeli troops who carry out the operation appear, by and large, to have no qualms about it; even the narrator—the only one of the perpetrators to articulate his compunctions—offers only a feeble protest. The expelled offer no resistance, so the operation proceeds unhindered to its prescribed end. Though the novella is fictitious—there was no Palestinian village by that name—Yizhar has insisted on the veracity of the events that it recounts, and his readers likewise conceived of it as a true account.[2] The novella was—and still is—considered a moral deliberation on Israelis' conduct during the 1948 War in general and on Israel's treatment of the Palestinian civilian population during that war in particular.[3]

Khirbet Khizeh was immediately recognized as a literary achievement, and it also enjoyed commercial success. In less than two years, it received