JEWISH

History, Theory, Practice
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 [772b] 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 sea 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. 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 interpre-
tation. 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 persua-
sion 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 visualization in rabbinic texts some years ago. 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
Picke d'R. Eliezer, commenting on the book of Jonah. As a biblical text, the
story of Jonah itself contains comic and satiric elements, fantastical carac-
tures, 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 circum-
cised penis as his weapon. As a reward, the fish agrees to Jonah's request
to take him on an underwater voyage and shows him everything in the seas. It's
a kind of Jewish Moby Dick. The following is the translation of chapters 9
and 10 of Picke de-Rabbi Eliezer and the Pseudepigrapha by Rachel Adelman
from her superb The Return of the Repressed. Chapter 9, just before the one
in which our text appears, provides the larger context for our story. It inter-
prets Genesis 1:20-23 and the emergence of various swarm of creatures
above the earth and in the seas, including the sea monsters (ha-tasrim
he-godolim) 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 asso-
ciations in Jewish tradition with both primordial creation and end-of-time
messianic eras that our midrash will further engage.

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 [מייסות ה־ים] of the universe. All the great sea monsters

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
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 it
up all that was in the sea and in the Underworld, and of this it says, "Light is shown for
the Righteous" (Ps. 97:1). 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 [b'rit—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 na'il), which had walled upon, as it says: "... the
weeds [na'il] 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 breaker 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 Sheli I cried out" (v. 3). And it showed him the netherworld
underworld of Shoul, 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 sink 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." (Hab.) 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, 264-55)

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 essais, 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 to 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 trauma of Jewish history and engages in ethical debate. One also often senses in so many midrashim that the authors are shyly winking at us. Or, as one of my favorite contemporary Jewish thinkers, Rabbi Yehouda Léon Assouline, once put it: "A Rabbi who does not laugh, is not a serious Rabbi" (quoted in Arimer, 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 the other visual, register temporality spatially. Comics moves forward in time through the space of the page, through its progressive or sequential narrative, and through its spatial layout of panels and frames. 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 monosynchronously: a reader of comics not only fills in the gaps between panels but also works with the often disjointive back-and-forth of meaning 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. What we read and we see 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 of 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 or 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 both a 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 arisen 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 buy or break. An image is what appears in a picture, and
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 Askênazi (whose work I have discussed at length elsewhere, in trying to define what Jewish rhetoric) 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, domat, mahat, tselem, re lynn posel, turit, temanah, turah, histulan, 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, Askênazi 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 20:5:

"[And] all the people saw the voices and the lightning and the sound of the horn." It is indeed true, Askênazi 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 Askênazi 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 Askênazi observes, the Mishnah (Jewish oral law that is part of the Talmud but was put in writing around the second century C.E.) after the destruction

of the second Temple and end of the prophecy) uses a conventional phrase to mean "come and study": Ta Sh. tro—literally, come and hear. In contrast, the Zohar (one of the foundational documents of Jewish mysticism, whose contents were collected, edited, and written down in the fourteenth century), uses the phrase Ta Hazoh—literally, come and see. Why these two different formulas? asks Askênazi. 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 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 2:11–13 that our midrash interprets:

And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow 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
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 Messianah, 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 teshuvah, for it transforms intentional sins into merits” (Bava Batra, 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 visuals. 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.” 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 sermon 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, defamiliarize the text (to use the term of Russian Formalist critic Viktor Shlovsky), 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” (Parrhesia 26, 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 Maas, 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 desired 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 restored 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 duel; 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 a 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 hababal etefen la yoter [םירבּיתָה יְפֵיהּ וַיְנַעְרוּ], look to the brit and don’t incline to your desire!” 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, 26) 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” (27), which becomes the foundation stone of the Temple. This reimagining 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 Maas, 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 *Breakdowns*, ... 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", 1994, 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, *afniçoth* (עיניוות) is somewhat obscure. Based on her philological research, Adelman notes differences in manuscript versions of our midrashic text. The word *afniçoth* 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 periph­oles of doors also give us a wide-angle spherical view. The point here, of course, is not biology or the science of op-tics, 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 derided as a kind of deceptive fish story, unconcerned with pure truth. Similarly, comics has had a long history of being derided as a cress, 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 that?" (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—lands Jonah his eyes/perspective (as a fish) and through them Jonah is 'enlightened'—as the midrash says, וישים עיניים לעז, enlivened Jonah." If we look back at the cartoon figure McCloud draws of himself, his face has large, round, eye-glass frames but no eyes. Elper has made a stunning connection between those transparent, round, clear, and empty lenses of McCloud's and the ḥiqqōn, those window eyes of Jonah's fish through which we see 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 2:21). 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 sea 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" (2:3) — 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” (Pesiukah Zutah, Lechah Tan, 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 treatates of the Babylonian Talmud, it is written:

Abba Iui 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.”

(Sotah 12a, 6)

NOTES

1. Academic definitions of “comics” 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 such 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 1990s. Daniel Boyarin’s “The Eye in the Torah” first discussed the question of visuality, Elliot Wolfson’s Through a Spandrel That Shines: A Study of Visualization in Early Jewish Mysticism appeared in 1995. See also Marc Bregman, “Midrash as Visualitation.” 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 Pique de S. Eliasen in another midrashic collection, see Tarkhan, on Lec. 5.

5. The Levraim is mentioned six times in the Holy Bible: Job 41:17–18 describe 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

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Days (Yoma 94b-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 Schroeder quoted this sentence to me in a conversation. When I asked him for the source, he wrote in an e-mail message of 26 December 2008: "Written on the wall of the Men's room in the Peac Street café. Austin Texas."

9. This phrase is part of the well-known piyyut (liturgical song) "El Hineni," 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 left, the sign of circumcision, and don't turn to your desires," or addressed to God to "look to the sign of the left, the circumcision that sealed God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants for all time.

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

SHAI GINSBURG

September 2, 1948. 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 *Al ha-Mishmar and Davar* announces the publication of S. Yizhar's new novella *Sipur irabet his'a* (The story of Hirbet His'a, translated into English as *Khirbet Khizeh*). 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. 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.

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