

Turning back to the three midrashim, we can locate the problem and the message in each case:

1) Cain and Abel

The question: The biblical text seems to "miss" part of the story: What did Cain say to Abel, what did they fight about?

The message: Jealousies over material possessions are often at the root of strife.

2) Veavehu

The question: How do we glorify God? The text is not totally clear.

The message: The way to glorify God is to imitate the Divine attributes - to be compassionate and gracious.

3) Tower of Babel

The question: Why was God angry that the people built a city and a tower?

The message: There is a danger in attempting to achieve more and more, to possess more and more. Sometimes basic human values get lost along the way.

We have seen that where the Torah is very concise (as it almost always is in its narrative sections), the midrash serves to fill in the gaps, explaining and interpreting when needed. It is the midrash that tells us **how** we can love our neighbor as ourselves, and **why** we observe Shabbat. Midrash also plays a role in overcoming discrepancies between the Biblical text and the lives of people in later generations. When the Rabbis came across a Biblical law or idea that conflicted with their value system they often reinterpreted the Biblical phrase with midrash to comply with their perspective. Thus, for example, the idea that one must demand "an eye for an eye" was interpreted as meaning monetary retribution. Finally, new historical realities were read into Biblical texts, deepening the layers of meaning within the original text. Throughout history, Jews saw similarities between events they were living through and Biblical stories which they reinterpreted in new ways to match their own experiences. Midrash served as a vehicle for people of later generations to take the Biblical text, interpret it and expand its meaning to make it meaningful for their own lives.

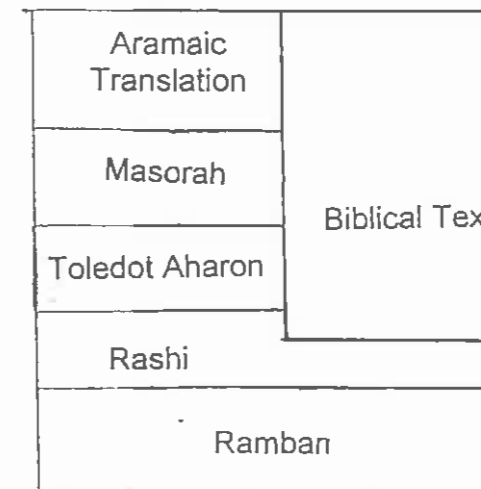
As Reform Zionists, striving always to approach the tradition with fresh eyes, and on the other hand viewing contemporary issues through the glasses of tradition, midrash is a particularly meaningful process.

We said that midrash flowered between the years 400 - 1200. However midrash did not end there. The Midrashic process continues whenever anyone grapples with the Biblical text, interprets it, fills the gaps, and adds new levels of meaning⁴

⁴ Many compilations of modern midrash exist. Two interesting works are "Gates to the New City" by Howard Schwartz, and "Taking the Fruit - Modern Women's Tales of the Bible" edited by Jane Sprague.

MIKRAOT GEDOLOT (MEDIEVAL BIBLICAL COMMENTARIES)

Although Midrash, as we have seen, is a way to interpret the Torah, a more methodical and comprehensive method of interpreting and commenting on the Bible became popular in the Middle Ages. It was at this time that many different commentators examined each verse and tried to analyse it. This method of study resulted in books and books of Biblical commentary. At one point, a new version of the Torah came out in which the Biblical text was surrounded by various commentators. This text was called Mikraot Gedolot. Although different versions of the Mikraot Gedolot exist, and each includes a different number of commentaries, the overall structure is common to all, and looks something like this:



The page includes:

- The Biblical text
- An Aramaic translation (which is also a commentary, as any translation by its very nature is a commentary on how one understands the text)
- Toledot Aharon - a reference to where the biblical passages are found in the Babylonian Talmud (edited by Aaron of Pesar, 16th century)
- Commentaries - each Mikraot Gedolot will include a different number of commentaries. Among the most famous are :
 - Rashi - Rabbi Solomon Yitzchaki (France, 1040 - 1105)
 - Rashbam - Rabbi Samuel Ben Meir (France, 1085 - 1174)
 - Ibn Ezra - Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra (Spain, 1089 - 1164)
 - Ramban - Rabbi Moses Ben Nachman, Nachmanides (Spain, 1194 - 1270)
 - Sforno - Obadiah Ben Jacob Sforno (Italy, 1475 - 1550)