



Curriculum (Discussion)

Midrash

Matt Britt & Kat Bair

Summary

1. Format: Discussion & Activities Lesson
2. Audience: High school and up
3. Objective: To introduce teenagers to an ancient Jewish spiritual practice, both to give them context for how Paul and contemporaries would have learned scripture and to empower their own study of scripture.
4. Supplies needed: bibles
5. Two-sentence description: Midrash is an ancient Jewish spiritual practice of engagement and imagination, and a way in which Paul, the Gospel writers, and even Jesus engaged with scripture. Teenagers will find it imaginative, liberating, and maybe even fun.


Time Allotment: 1 hour

For Leaders

Introduction to Ideas

Midrash is an ancient Jewish practice and genre of rabbinical writings that seeks the unwritten answers to religious questions, both practical and theological, by using sacred imagination to explore the meaning of the words of the Torah.

The practice and writing of Midrash can seek to respond to current social and cultural problems, make connections between new Jewish realities and lived history, try to clarify ambiguities in an ancient original text, or help make the text applicable to current times. Historically, rabbis wrote midrash to explain parts of a biblical text that aren't clear: if there seemed to be a missing piece



to a story or an inconsistency between two different passages, a rabbi would explain the problem by writing a new midrash, filling in the missing dialogue, reconciling the seeming contradiction.

There are two types of midrash: midrash halacha, which deals with subjects of Hebrew law and religious practice, and midrash aggadah, which interprets biblical narratives, exploring questions of ethics or theology or retelling the story in a modern context. Today, we will be focusing on midrash aggadah.

Theological Basis

It may be confusing to some of our teenagers that we're using Jewish spiritual disciplines in this course, because they may see them as not relevant to our Christian faith. The fact is that the divide between Christianity and Judaism is not that simple. The practice we're learning today, Midrash, can be not only spiritually enriching but provide insight into how our faith came into being and make all of Scripture feel more accessible. Paul's construction of original sin is a Midrash, Matthews quoting of Isaiah is an example of PaRDeS, and Jesus's exchanging of questions with legal experts is classic Havruta! If it was good enough for them, it stands to reason we have much we can learn from these practices.

Midrash aggadah – the practice of storytelling in order to better understand the scripture and faith – is a practice of sacred imagination. Works of midrash aggadah fill the space between reverence and love for the written scriptural word and modern understanding, often reading between the lines or creating new, larger, more complex narratives in order to better understand the characters and authors of the text. Midrash may feel, to some teenagers, like 'making something up,' because it requires imagination and is about creatively reading new meaning into text. It's important to remember that our way of seeing scripture, as an old, fixed document to be understood only a certain way, is unique to modern Western Christianity, and that Jewish Rabbis who developed the practice didn't see it that way. Using this practice in our faith can help us to find empathetic understanding with the characters or author – what they might have seen, heard, felt, thought – and help us better place ourselves within the scripture we are reading.

Outline of Lesson

Part I: Opening

Part II: Introduction to Midrash

Part III: Practice Midrash (Group)

Part IV: Practice Midrash (Small Group)

Part V: Conclusion

Additional Notes

Christianity has a complex history of anti-semitic attitudes embedded in how we teach and talk about Judaism. While this practice is ancient, it is still in practice today by Jewish people in our communities. If you have the opportunity to learn this and other practices from practicing Jews in your area please do so! You can also check out accompanying lessons on Havruta and PaRDeS.

Part 1: Opening Activities

Take this time to give teenagers an opportunity to briefly talk about their week by doing Highs and Lows or some other opening ritual.

Ask: After teenagers are done sharing, transition into opening the class with the following questions:

- When was the last time you used your imagination?
 - Was it a daydream? While reading a book?
 - Doing a creative writing exercise?
- What did you imagine?
- Was it easy or hard to do?
- Did you have any emotional response to it?
- How often do you use your imagination?
 - Is it something that you're encouraged to do by people around you?
 - Is it something that you feel free to do?
 - Why or why not?

Part II: Introduction to Practice

Say: Today we're going to be continuing learning about ancient Jewish practices and today's is called midrash. Midrash is a practice of sacred imagination – trying to imagine what the author or characters might have seen and heard and felt and thought or who they were and what their life

was like that isn't actually in the text itself. In a lot of ways, it's a practice of reading between the lines.

The point of using midrash as a spiritual discipline is not to find the "right answers," it's using our imaginations to better understand the story and be able to find ourselves in the story so we can learn what it might mean for our own lives. Some parts of midrash might feel like "making stuff up" – and that's ok! The idea is that we use the imagination God gave us to breathe new and unexpected meaning into the text.

Part III: The Practice (Group)

Say: We're going to practice midrash together, first as a full group, then as smaller groups that will share their stories at the end of our time together. The first story we are going to look at is John 9 – the story of Jesus healing a blind man. I'm going to read this out loud for us, so we're going to have you close your eyes and try to imagine what the story was actually like.

Have the students close their eyes, then read out loud John 9:1-7

Ask:

- Who are the characters?
 - Who else might have been around?
 - What do you think the blind man's name was? (Use this name for him for the rest of the discussion)
 - What does he look like?
 - What kind of clothes is he wearing?
- Picture the setting:
 - What do you see?
 - What does the road look like?
 - What does the town look like?
 - What do you hear?
 - What do you smell?
 - What do you feel?
- What happens in this story?
- What parts of the story do you think might be missing?
 - What do you think the conversation was like between Jesus and the disciples?
 - What do you think the conversation was between Jesus and (name)?
- What do you think (name)'s life is like before this happens?
 - What had he done that day before Jesus came down the road?

- What do you think happens next?

Have the students close their eyes, then read out loud John 9:8-17

Ask:

- How does (name)'s life change immediately?
 - How do you think he feels?
- How do his neighbor's and the religious leaders respond to him?
 - What conversations are his neighbors having at home and in the neighborhood?
 - How do you think that makes him feel?
- How do you think (name) feels while he's getting berated with questions?
 - How would you feel?
- How do you think the crowd is responding to (name)?
 - How do you think they are responding to the religious leaders?
 - What do you think is going through the religious leader's heads?
 - What conversations are they having with their families when they get home?
- What do you think the atmosphere is like while he's being questioned?

Have the students close their eyes, then read out loud John 9:18-34

Ask:

- How do you think (name) feels when they bring his parents in to be questioned?
 - How do you think his parents feel?
- How do you think the conversation went between (name) and his parents?
 - What did they say to him?
 - What did he say to them?
- How do you think (name) feels when they bring him back in the second time?
 - What emotions do you think he would be feeling?
 - What tone of voice do you think he would use?
- So at the end of this story, they kick (name) out – out of the synagogue, out of the community.
 - How do you think he feels?
 - How do you think his parents feel?
- What do you think happens next to the man?
 - What do you think the rest of his life is like?

Ask:

- If you were going to rewrite this story so that it was easier to understand or easier to remember, what would you change?
- What new details would you include?
 - Why do you think they are important?

- Is there anything you might take out?
 - Do you think that changes the story?
- Does anyone want to try actually telling our version of the story?

If anyone in your group wants to re-tell the story with the new details, let them! Character voices and hand motions are encouraged. If they will let you record them, please do!

Say: That process – the process of filling in the blanks and imagining what the story looked like and sounded like and felt like – is midrash!

Ask:

- Do you feel like you better understand the story?
- What did you learn from it?
- What part of our version of the story could you apply to your life?
-

Part IV: The Practice (Small Group)

Split the room into three groups, giving each group a scripture and a copy of the list of midrash questions. Give them as much time as they need, allowing for 10 minutes at the end of your time for each group to tell their story and to wrap up.

Scriptures:

1 Samuel 17 – David vs Goliath

Mark 6:1-6 – Jesus Goes Home

Acts 16:16-40 – Paul and Silas in Jail

When each group is ready (or when you have about 10 minutes left in class), regather the room and have each group tell their midrash story. Again, if they'll let you, record it!

Ask:

- Do you feel like you better understand your story?
- What did you learn from it?
 - What did you learn from another group's story?
- What part of your version of the story could you apply to your life?
 - What part of another group's version of their story could you apply to your life?



Part V: Conclusion

Ask:

- How was Midrash different from other ways that you have interacted with scripture?
- How is it similar?
- Which part of this practice was easiest for you?
- Which was the hardest?
- What was your biggest takeaway from today?

Close in Prayer: *God, thank You for being with us in this time. Thank You for the ways You have been present with us and revealed Yourself to us, using your Word. May we continue to seek and rest in Your presence as we end this time, and may what we have learned carry with us back into our days, weeks, and lives. Amen.*

Additional Materials and Activities

