

Midrash or As'machta? How to Use and Not Use the Bible in Politics

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One afternoon a young *yeshiva bocher*, a student immersed in the study of the tomes of the Sages, was on his break. He was wandering around the *Bes Medrash*, the library, going from aisle to aisle. Among all the tall and thick rabbinic treatises and commentaries, he came upon a book that was noticeably smaller than all the rest. He took it from the shelf and began paging through, and suddenly his face burst into a smile. The book was a *Tanakh* -- a Bible. The young *yeshiva bocher* took the book and sprinted to the study of the *Rosh Yeshiva*, the head of the yeshiva, and he screamed in excitement:

“Rebbe! You’ll never guess what I found! It’s a book full of quotations from the Talmud!”

This is often how the Bible is used -- it’s subordinate to something else. I’m poking fun at the world of traditional Jewish learning, but we see this too in politics, in political argument. I want to teach you two terms from the Talmud that I bet you’re going to want to start using -- and one is in Aramaic, so you will really sound like you’re in the know to boot. The terms are: מִדְרָשׁ *midrash* and אֲסַמְכְתָא *as'mach'ta*.

Midrash is a word you may know -- it means *inquiring* into the meaning of words from Torah, digging into them, trying to figure out what the original words are saying as they apply to a situation today. *As'mach'ta* means, a prop. It’s the same root as a word you may know from the prayers, סוּמַךְ נוֹפְלִים *somaych noflim*, the

one who holds up the fallen. *As'mach'ta* is when you don't have a good argument, so you prop up your view with a verse from the Bible. Slapping a verse next to something for decoration. Or *as'mach'ta* is when you don't really care whether people pay attention to your real argument -- but there's a verse that's related so you tack it on and figure people will pay attention to that.

In the Talmud, the rabbis often bring up biblical verses in the course of discussion, and they ask each other -- is that *midrash* or *as'mach'ta*? Is that your argument, are you really asking the verse what it says, or are you just trying to buy the power of a biblical verse without paying for it? The rabbis in the Talmud even have a way of rolling their eyes in writing when sniff out a weak *as'mach'ta*. You call that an argument? It's just אֲשֶׁמַח'תָּא בְּאַלְמָא *as'mach'ta b'alma*. That's the *yeshiva bocher*, who finds a Bible in the house of study and thinks it's just a book of things rabbis say to decorate an argument they are making.

As I say, I'm really talking about the Bible and politics. When you hear the Bible quoted, when is it *midrash*, when is it really digging in for wisdom, for challenging the world, and when is it just *as'mach'ta*, a cheap trick to borrow some gravity and power and substance when it's not really there?

This week we had a battle of the Bible verses, on the subject of immigration and in particular the policy of the United States at the borders of our country, to take children far away from their parents if they arrive illegally. On one side, the Attorney General of the United States, Jeff Sessions -- and on the other one side, well..... the Southern Baptist Convention and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, and a whole bunch of others of us.

This week, at their national convention, the Southern Baptists passed, as they have before, a resolution on immigration reform including the principle of family unity, protesting at about the border. They gave a strong affirmation of the value and dignity of immigrants, making a whether Christian or not, and they issued a call to political leaders and clergy to speak and take action.¹

They quoted Genesis, Leviticus, and the prophets Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah, and also the Christian Bible of course.

Attorney General Sessions gave a speech this week in direct response to the Southern Baptists. We should always read the whole speech before reacting, check what's in the press, make sure they aren't quoting out of context. His whole speech is in fact on the Department of Justice website already. This is some of what he said, and while it's not the whole thing I'm not omitting any words in the middle.

“Let me take an aside to discuss concerns raised by our church friends about separating families. Many of the criticisms raised in recent days are not fair or logical and some are contrary to law.

“First- illegal entry into the United States is a crime—as it should be. Persons who violate the law of our nation are subject to prosecution. I would cite you to the Apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13, to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained them for the purpose of order.

“Orderly and lawful processes are good in themselves and protect the weak and

1. <http://www.sbcannualmeeting.net/sbc18/resolutions#2288>

lawful.

“Our policies that can result in short term separation of families is not unusual or unjustified. American citizens that are jailed do not take their children to jail with them....”²

The attorney general quoted from an epistle of Paul in the Christian Scriptures, but he could have just as easily cited from chapter 29 of Jeremiah, the same Jeremiah the Baptists quoted.

Bible and Bible. I know, I hope, that we’re agreed about the cruelty of this policy; I hope there is one vision here you find more compelling, for a whole lot of reasons. But this is a biblical standoff, and what do we do with that? If one side has their verses and one side has theirs, what do we mean when we say that one side is right, other than -- it’s what I already think, so that’s what right? Is the Bible really adding anything here? It’s very important to me that your response to this isn’t: anyone can just find a verse for anything.

I want to give you a way to think about this, and it includes a challenge even if you know this week who you agree with. It’s not about who has the best interpretation of a specific biblical verse. I think the most important way to think about this battle of the Bible verses is: *midrash vs. as’mach’ta*. Who is really searching the meaning of the verse, and who is just propping up their view with a shiny ornament.

I think of the Bible like the equalizer on a stereo or amp, in your living room or on

2. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/speech/attorney-general-sessions-addresses-recent-criticisms-zero-tolerance-church-leaders>

the stage of an arena. On a good stereo, a good amp there is a series of dials -- from deep bass to high treble -- and each one corresponds to a different part of the sound, and you can adjust each one of them separately. You can silence one completely, or crank it up pretty high.

And the Bible is like that. Every verse in the Bible is like one of the dials on the amplifier of the Divine Voice. The question is: how much are you cranking up the level on each dial? When you are presented with a question of today, a question of policy, what does your whole equalizer look like?

There is one dial that should always be cranked up; it's the fundamental bass all the time. It's in Genesis 1, the verse that reads: 'God created the human being in God's image.' וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ *Vayiv'ra Elohim et ha-adam b'tzalmo*. When it comes to that dial, to paraphrase Spinal Tap -- ours goes to 11, all the time. If someone is quoting the Bible about a public policy issue and they don't have that dial cranked up to the maximum -- you should stop listening. You know there is no *midrash* there, only *as'mach'ta*.

But after that, every verse has a range of settings that could be appropriate. Even the ones like what the Attorney General quoted. As long as you are thinking about how to set the dials, you are doing *midrash* -- you are inquiring into the sound of each verse, the setting of each dial. How that verse or that combination of verses, mixed in different ways, vibrates, penetrates your thoughts and grabs your emotions, stimulates your nerves and flexes your muscles into action. It should make you tremble, or move you to a joyful noise.

These past three years in particular, I have been thinking about all kinds of verses relevant to issues of immigration.³ About *ahavat ha-ger*, loving the stranger, and its relationship to *v'ahavta l'rayacha kamocho*, loving the neighbor. The relationship between loving the stranger and not oppressing the stranger, which in different verses are about economics, power, or the words we use. These verse don't all say the same thing. How high should each one be set? And what about the kinds of verses like the one the Attorney General quoted?

If you never mess with the dials, if you set them once upon a time and never change them, then I don't care what your view is, you are doing *as'mach'ta* -- the Torah is just a prop. The verse isn't really for meaning or argument, it's not revelation, it's just plastic decoration.

There are verses that should have a maximum setting, and some that should have a minimum. To me, when it comes to the Bible and public affairs, we always have to remember that every word of the Torah was revealed in opposition to the powers of the world, to people emerging from slavery or to prophets calling kings and leaders to account. So Attorney General Sessions has his settings wrong, in the sense that his verse about orderly government can be more than zero, but it is set too high, and his image of God setting is far too low. And you can tell that for him it's just *as'mach'ta*, and not *midrash*. He doesn't hear the other verses at all. And even the verses he cites aren't really where he learned his views about government and law. They are just for effect; the verses aren't making him tremble.

3. I gave a sermon a few weeks ago, which I have not yet edited to publish, exploring a fascinating teaching by Rav Hutner on the relationship between the Torah's commands of loving one's neighbor and loving the stranger. I owe Rabbi Josh Feigelson for teaching this particular text.

At the same time, you can't set your levels just once, to vibrate with one political party or movement. There is "love the stranger", and there is a minimum that that verse should never be set below. But there are other dials too -- and any party or movement or leader who doesn't allow you to fiddle with the levels, becomes a power that also has to be criticized and corrected. If you zero out every dial but one, if you hear only one verse or just a few verses, and that's all you want or all you get coming out of your stereo -- even if it's *Tzelem Elohim*, the image of God -- then you'll stop trembling, you won't be moved to a joyful shout. Your sound will be tinny, not rich and lush, and that is not *midrash*. Our political friends too can make our verses no longer resonate, if they turn off all the other dials. Just because we like it doesn't mean this isn't also using the Bible as *as'mach'ta*, a prop, a talisman.

There is right or wrong about the separation of families at the border -- and it's wrong. But when it comes to how the Bible speaks to that, what I'm listening for is right or wrong and also more -- it's *midrash* or *asmachta*. I believe the religious folks this week are more right than the Attorney General, and partly it's because they have a richer sound. They bothered to set a bunch of dials, and the Attorney General sounds like he set only one, and he did it once and has never gone back. They did *midrash*, and he just did *as'mach'ta*.

Let's not any of us settle for biblical verses as *as'mach'ta*, even when we are surely right. We must never get in a position where the citation of a verse from the Bible is ho-hum. The Bible might be the smallest book on the shelf when it comes to public policy -- but it should pulse in a way no other resource does. It should not just inform our policies, but stretch our humanity. When you think you have the

truth, that's when you should check the levels every time, to make sure they are right each time you listen, each time you perform the sounds. That's what will make the verses of Bible matter. Especially when we're right about an issue that affects lives, life and death -- especially then, we as Jews, as religious people, should be the ones teaching verses from the Bible as *midrash* -- making the sound of justice better, sweeter, edgier, richer, so that the voice of the living God vibrates like a revelation, penetrating thoughts and grabbing emotions, stimulating nerves and flexing muscles into action.

Shabbat Shalom.