



direction of our lives.

Yet, the power and relevance of the Bible is demonstrated by its enduring presence throughout all parts of western culture. By confronting the biblical text, whether we see it as divinely given or the product of divinely inspired human beings, and immersing ourselves in these sacred stories, we can gain a better sense of the meaning of our own baffling dramas. This, in turn, can affect the nature of our lives and our priorities.<sup>3</sup>

To appreciate the importance of the Bible and gain insight about ourselves from it, both Jews and Christians can use the process of midrash: The attempt to find contemporary meaning in the biblical text. The term midrash comes from the Hebrew root *darash* which means to seek, search or demand (meaning from the biblical text). The starting point of our search for personal meaning is the Bible itself. This is the first level of our midrashic interpretation. By using all the possible knowledge of the Bible at our disposal—philological, literary, historical, archeological, sociological, theological—we can approximate what the biblical writers meant in any given narrative. Our task at the outset is to imbibe the power and flavor of the biblical text itself, attending closely to every word, every detail. Each generation, each reader, can approach the text anew and draw meaning from it. By filtering our sacred stories through the prism of nearly two millennia of rabbinic interpreters, Jews and non-Jews alike can learn from their sense of the text's meaning. It is vital to remember that the great rabbinic sages were human beings too. And as they responded to the text, they responded to the pressures of their own life situations. They had no choice but to read the text through the lens of the political, religious, and socio-cultural conditions under which they lived. Their interpretations embody their polemical replies to the challenges to Jewish survival which they faced living under the Greeks, Romans, Persians,

Babylonians, Christians and Moslems. Yet, at the very same time, they also responded to universal questions of meaning raised by every generation and by all people: What does it mean to be a human being created in God's image? How can we make our personal lives better? Can we perfect our world? Their questions are our questions and their interpretations reach across time and space to touch and teach us. This then is the second level of our midrashic study: To open ourselves to the myriad rabbinic interpretations of the biblical narratives.

However, it is not enough for us to read the interpretations found in the classic midrashim and in the Talmud. Reading a sacred text forces self-involvement and self-reflection, and it is through our own entry into the text that meaning surfaces. Thus with every story we study, we learn not only about what we are reading, but also about ourselves. In deciphering a text, we bring to the fore elements of our own being of which we may not always be conscious. We respond to our own questions and dilemmas.

This then is the final stage of the midrashic process.<sup>4</sup> To gain insight from the biblical text, it is incumbent upon each of us to read the text slowly. Our task is to pay attention to every word, phrase, metaphor, and symbol. And since the biblical narratives are so terse and the sketches of biblical characters so fragmentary, the inclusion or even the exclusion of any particular word or phrase may be of great significance. Choices of syntax, narrative structures, the repetition of motifs, as well as selective silences can all be seen as crucial threads in weaving a fabric of meaning. Generally the biblical writers present only that which the reader absolutely needs in order to understand the flow and the thrust of story. This challenges the reader to fill in the gaps, supplying what is meant but is at times not stated. The obliqueness of the biblical material is that which beckons readers from every generation and every faith to enter the text, to

delight in discovering the depth of its meaning, and to enrich their own lives.<sup>5</sup>

It is the sketchiness of detail that invariably draws us especially to the personalities of the Book of Genesis. We are confronted by vaguely drawn descriptions of characters who, generation after generation, struggle with themselves and especially with their siblings. Genesis presents the reader with stories of family rivalry which embody the basic tension between contrasting personalities with whom we can identify almost immediately.

Such conflicts between different personalities are probably adapted from common patterns found in folklore, such as the dispute between the shepherd and the farmer, or the conflict between brothers.<sup>6</sup> Yet, the very forces in conflict always seem to be parts of a whole, of one and the same being, with a constant shift between moments of contrast and moments of similarity.<sup>7</sup> However, the people of the Ancient Near East perceived the struggle to be only among the external forces of nature, never suspecting that they were really seeing the paradoxical nature of their own personalities.

Modern psychology has taught us that each human being has a complex personality made up of a variety of positive and negative traits. We tend to repress the negative tendencies which constantly function as part of our unconscious.<sup>8</sup> For some of us, these parts of our personalities have gained a stronghold and dominate our lives, though we may be unaware of them. For all of us, channeling these tendencies toward constructive ends is not possible until we can recognize them, admitting to ourselves that these forces are real and present within us. This is the first step in the process of individual growth; in our integrating the disparate elements—the good and evil, the divine and human—into a better functioning whole.

The Genesis narratives in particular can serve as vehicles

of insight into our own personalities as well as the dynamic tensions within our own families. They can help us see ourselves as brothers and sisters, and as parents and children. This is because the biblical writers' attempt to express through their stories what we are as human beings, with all our conflicting qualities—greed, generosity, lust, love, fear, courage, selfishness, compassion and much more.<sup>9</sup> Since it is through a wrestling with the sacred stories of Torah and with the complex personages delineated in them that we can begin to take an honest look at ourselves, it is precisely upon our own reading of the biblical text that our search for wholeness and holiness is contingent.

Our recreating the text, the creation of our own modern midrash, must be moored in the traditions of the past. I have cited in the sidebars all the sources which I have used, both the core biblical passages as well as the midrashic texts, so that the reader can better understand the basis upon which the interpretation is built. Yet, the creation of midrash is an open task for each new reader. It is never considered complete. For whenever a passionate reader grants any text an appropriate reading, an interpretation or expansion which helps him or her as a human being, and fosters growth, the Torah will come alive. At that instant it will be working in the life of that very reader.<sup>10</sup>

The starting point in the process of creating our own modern midrash, as already intimated, is paying close attention to the Torah text itself. Our task is to open the stories of sibling rivalry and family conflict in the Book of Genesis in such a way that they speak directly to us. Therefore, we must begin "in the beginning."

By imbibing the power of the words of *Bereshit* (Genesis), from the creation of humankind as male and female in the Garden of Eden through their struggles with themselves, their siblings and with God, culminating with Jacob's blessings of his twelve sons, we may come to a better

understanding of our own true natures. As we confront these sacred stories, we not only learn about them, but they can teach us about who we are and what we can become. We who have been driven from the Garden can find a path back to our original wholeness. The text is a mirror that reflects a picture of each reader who has the courage to peer into it with an open mind and a willing heart that reaches toward heaven.

