Reading Esther in Dialogue with the Rabbis\*

One of the commonest ways in which the rabbis read the Bible was through the lens of analogy (Fishbane 1986; Bruns 1987). Sometimes the interpreter [I sometimes translate הדרשן this way, sometimes as “the midrash.” Other possibilities the author might want to consider: “the midrashist” (which I rejected) or simply “the *darshan*” transliterated] states the analogy explicitly, and sometimes he presents its results and the reader must uncover the analogy on which the midrash is based (Grossman and Sasson 2007; 2010). Such midrashic readings developed in a particular way due to the univocal approach to the Bible, leading to the possibility of conversation between different books and different authors (Heinemann 1954: 56-7; Frenkel 1991: 163-80; 1996: 161-96). The book of Esther has a special place of honor in this connection: Various midrashim suggested various readings of the book against the background of other biblical stories, of prophecy, and especially of wisdom literature (not merely in the introductions, as is usual in the midrash, but also in that the story of Esther reflects the principles of wisdom literature). From this perspective, it is possible that the rabbis already felt that there was something in common between the basic idea of the book of Esther, according to which the wicked fall by the same means with which they sought to bring down others (Haman’s being hanged on the same gallows that he prepared for Mordecai), and wisdom literature, a dilemma [התלבטות; but either I misunderstand it or there is something wrong here] that modern scholars share (Talmon 1963; Gordis 1981; Bachmann 2014).

The intertextual reading of Esther by the rabbis can be divided into four basic models. I will discuss them briefly and then focus on a single midrash which indicates a number of the challenges that accompany an investigation into literary analogy in rabbinic literature.

1. **An Analogical Reading within the Book Itself**

Before we examine rabbinic intertextual reading between Esther and other biblical books, it should be noted that analogies between scenes even within Esther itself are widespread in rabbinic literature. In this respect, the midrash matches the design of the book itself: The parallels between various scenes within the book of Esther are well known. The motif of reversal is one of the most basic motifs of the story, and so the story makes fun of Haman’s fate, which flipped over onto his own head. Various midrashim point to this reversal, but other midrashim point to an implicit dialogue between scenes that do not express reversal but reward resulting naturally from a deed and reward nexus. So for example:

R. Jacob b. Aha said: God said to him: “You have inquired of the welfare of one person, TO KNOW HOW ESTHER DID (Esth 2:11); I swear that in the end you will seek the welfare of a whole nation”; and so it says, “Seeking the good of his people and speaking peace all his seed” (Esth 10:3). [Esther Rabbah 6:8; Tabory-Atzmon 117 f.][[1]](#footnote-1)

The word שלום (“welfare”), which forms the basis of the connection between these two scenes, occurs in Esther in one additional place (9:30), and it therefore appears that it is not only the shared word that led the interpreter to create a connection between them, but also the course of the plot and the nature of the character. In both episodes, Mordecai is concerned about the welfare of others — at first, Esther’s welfare; eventually, the welfare of all his nation. The interpreter sees in this a development, and interprets the second mention of “inquiring about the welfare” as a reward that Mordecai had earned for his original concern about Esther’s welfare. Since in the prevailing biblical conception עם refers to an ethnic group and is to be considered an extended family (Block 1997; Speiser 1960; Grossman 2016: 50-59), the basis of the midrash gets an additional anchor: at first Mordecai was concerned about his cousin alone; eventually he was concerned about all his nation and his “seed.”

1. **Linguistic Allusions**

Connecting distant texts by means of shared language is widespread in the midrash. With great interpretive courage, the rabbis saw in this literary method a tool that could escape the bounds of narrative and be employed as well with practical legal implications. The *gezerah shavah* or analogy based on linguistic similarity is in fact a model of allusion, by which means it was possible to transfer laws from one legal realm to another. In the halakhic midrashim, such dialogues have legal implications, and in the aggadic midrashim such dialogues bring the entire Bible into conversation. One word shared between two stories is enough for the interpreter to imply a dialogue between stories that are quite different.

In the book of Esther many linguistic links were exploited to construct midrashim and surprising analogical readings of other books of the Bible. A striking example of this is the following midrash:

BUT IT SEEMED CONTEMPTIBLE IN HIS EYES TO LAY HANDS ON MORDECAI ALONE (Esth 3:6). He was a contemptuous man like his ancestor before him. Elsewhere it is written, So Esau despised his birthright (Gen 25:34), and here it is written, IT WAS CONTEMPTIBLE IN HIS EYES. [Esther Rabbah 7:10; Tabory-Atzmon 129]

According to this midrash, Haman is a descendant of Amalek, the grandson of Esau (Gen 36:12). The comparison between these words about Haman and the words about Esau are therefore also a comparison between an ancestor and a descendant (“a contemptuous man like his ancestor before him”). It is noteworthy that the form ויבז occurs in the Bible nowhere but in these two verses, so it is possible that this allusion leaves the realm of midrash and can be seen as intentional, in which case it should be considered part of the straightforward sense, intended by the author of the story (“deliberate authorial intertextuality”).[[2]](#footnote-2) In some of the parallel midrashim the midrash is also connected to Ob 1:2, “See, I will make you small among the nations; you will be utterly contemptible [בזוי].”[[3]](#footnote-3) Thus is created a conversation between three texts, all of which describe Esau and his descendants as “contemptible.” Note that both Esau and Haman are described as actively *expressing* contempt; this does not prevent the interpreter from applying the adjective *contemptible* to them.

The interpreter himself does not develop the meaning of the analogy between Haman and Esau, and we may wonder whether he indeed saw a real meaning to this analogy or whether he simply wished to point to a similarity between the two characters and thereby to describe a kind of “family behavior.” The family connection between Haman and Esau comes up in additional midrashim (e.g. Esther Rabbah 7:4), and it provides fertile soil for the linguistic allusion of ויבז, which equates the two characters, to flourish. Note that we are not speaking here about an analogy that relies on the plot; the linguistic link is enough to set the two characters side by side.

Such midrashim are quite common in rabbinic readings of the book of Esther,[[4]](#footnote-4) but it is especially worth mentioning the surprising midrash of R. Akiva in Esther Rabbah 1:8. That passage explains that when R. Akiva saw his students drowsing, he suggested to them that Esther had been found worthy of ruling over 127 provinces through her being a descendant of Sarah, who lived for 127 years. It is hard to know whether the midrash intends to suggest a serious analogy between Esther and Sarah (Heinemann 1954:66), or whether the setting of the midrash — a way to wake up the students — hints that it is merely meant as a joke (Tabory and Atzmon 2014: 85). If we follow the first theory, we find that the midrash is ready to make an analogy between two stories even on the basis of the existence of an identical number in both. Perhaps it was this unusual number, not recorded in any other biblical text, that led R. Akiva to create his midrash. It is also noteworthy that other traditions about the Persian Empire tell of 120 provinces (e.g., Dan 6:2) — a more elegant and appropriate number — by which it would appear that the number 127 mentioned at the beginning of our story was deliberately chosen. In any case, it was not the plot that led R. Akiva to suggest this midrash (despite the fact that it is possible to find similarities in what happened to Sarai in Pharaoh’s palace and what happened to Esther in the palace of the king).[[5]](#footnote-5) The shared number was enough for him to point to a dialogue between the two stories.

1. **Developed Plot Analogy**

Sometimes the interpreter presents an analogy that goes beyond a single picture and develops along with the plot through several scenes. The most noticeable example in Esther — which was not missed by the rabbis — is the link between the story of Esther and Mordecai and that of Joseph:

AND IT CAME TO PASS, AS SHE SPOKE TO JOSEPH DAY BY DAY, etc. (Gen 39:10). R. Judan said in the name of R. Benjamin b. Levi: The sons of Rachel underwent trials of equal severity and attained to equal greatness.

They underwent equal trials:

• AND IT CAME TO PASS, AS SHE SPOKE TO JOSEPH DAY BY DAY = Now it came to pass, when they spoke unto him day by day (Esth 3:4);

• THAT HE HEARKENED NOT UNTO HER = And he hearkened not unto them (ibid.).

They attained to equal greatness:

• And Pharaoh took off his signet ring from his hand, and put it upon Joseph's hand (Gen 41:42) = And the king took off his ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it unto Mordecai (Esth 8:2);

• And arrayed him in vestures of fine linen, and put a gold chain about his neck (ibid.) = And Mordecai went forth from the presence of the king in royal apparel of blue and white, and with a great crown of gold, and with a robe of fine linen and purple (Esth 8:15);

• And he made him [Joseph] to ride in the second chariot which he had (Gen. 41:43) = And cause him [Mordecai] to ride on horseback through the street of the city (Esth 6:9);

• And they cried before him [Joseph]: Abrech (ibid.) = And proclaimed before him [Mordecai]: Thus shall it be done unto the man, etc. (Esth 6:11). (Genesis Rabbah 87:6)

The midrash focuses on the story of Mordecai and parallels it to the story of Joseph. The analogy is based first and foremost on both of them being “sons of Rachel” — again the comparison is based on a family connection. Haman (like Esau) [I suggest adding] is a contemptible man who is the son of a contemptible man; equally, the descendants of Rachel both achieve greatness. One might add to the comparison the rise of Esther herself (the Hebrew girl) to royalty, so reminiscent of the rise of Joseph (the Hebrew boy) to the position of viceroy. But the midrash ignores Esther and focuses on Mordecai alone. Perhaps this stems from the assumption that a stable analogy is one that follows a particular character and does not jump between characters (as Noble 2007 thinks); perhaps also the interpreter bases the analogy specifically on linguistic allusions and not on plot materials unsupported by linguistic similarity. But the most reasonable possibility for ignoring Esther is that the interpreter wants to focus on the experience of Mordecai and his reward; widening the analogy would create a second focus for the midrash.[[6]](#footnote-6)

This last possibility can clarify an omission even more surprising than the other components of the comparison between the characters. Esther Rabbah contains an additional analogy to the story of Joseph (already mentioned in B. Meg. 13b), according to which there is a similarity between the Bigthan and Teresh scene and the story of the two officers of the king who are confined to the prison in Genesis 40:

R. Berekiah said in the name of R. Levi: It is written, Come, behold the works of the Lord, who hath made desolations in the earth (Ps 46:9). He made servants wroth against their master in order to confer greatness on the righteous, as it says, BIGTHAN AND TERESH WERE WROTH, etc. — to bestow greatness on Mordecai. He also makes masters wroth with their servants [as, for instance], to confer greatness on Joseph, as it says, Pharaoh was wroth with his servants, etc. (Gen. 41:10). (Esther Rabbah 6:13; Tabory-Atzmon 120-121)

The midrash sets the two officers in Genesis in antithetic parallelism to the two eunuchs of the king in Esther. Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, “was angry” at two of his officers, just as the two eunuchs “became angry” at their king. In both these episodes there is “anger,” whose role in the plot is to further the goals of the hero of the story, or, in the words of the midrash, “to confer greatness on the righteous.” Though the interpreter is aware of this link, it is not integrated into the structure of comparison between Mordecai and Joseph. In light of our hypothesis that the midrashic interpreter is focusing only on comparative materials that are relevant to his purpose, this omission can be understood. If his purpose was indeed to highlight the reward received by the characters who stood up to the test (they “underwent trials of equal severity and attained to equal greatness”), he prefers to focus on what happened to these particular characters and not any others. In this respect, midrashic intertextuality differs from that accepted in modern scholarship. The interpreter does not assemble all the connections and then judge their meaning; instead, he chooses from the wider analogy the elements that focus on his midrashic purpose.

1. **Formal Structural Analogy**

Building an analogy on the basis of a shared formal structure demands real sophistication and literary sensitivity. The rabbis do pay attention to these aspects — even if one may doubt whether we are talking about analogy or just an indication of a repetitive writing style. One example of “forced exposition” will suffice.[[7]](#footnote-7) The expository data that presents Mordecai to us (2:5-7) is inserted in the story *after* we have already been told that the king has decided to seek a new wife for himself (2:1-4). On this structure, the midrash comments:

AND LET THE MAIDEN THAT PLEASETH THE KING. etc. (2:4). Who was the right man for this occasion? Mordecai; and the text continues, THERE WAS A CERTAIN JEW IN SHUSHAN THE CASTLE, WHOSE NAME WAS MORDECAI.

Similarly we read, And God saw the children of Israel, and God took cognizance of them (Exod 2:25). Who was the right man for this occasion? Moses; [and so it goes on], Now Moses was keeping, etc. (3:1).

Similarly, And Samuel said unto the men of Israel: Go ye every man unto his city (I Sam 8:22). Who was the right man for this occasion? Saul; and it goes on, Now there was a man of Benjamin, whose name was Kish, etc. (1 Sam 9:1).

Similarly, And when Saul and all Israel heard those words of the Philistine, they were dismayed, and greatly afraid (1 Sam 17:11). Who was the right man for this occasion? David; and it goes on, Now David was the son of that Ephrathite, etc. (1 Sam 17:12)…

He mightily oppressed the children of Israel (Jud 4:3)… Who was the right person for this occasion? Deborah; and so the text goes on, Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, etc. (Jud 4:4). (Esther Rabbah 5:4; Tabory-Atzmon 108)

All these are cases of delayed exposition, which creates a special awareness — the reader already knows when the character is presented what that character is destined for and what will happen to the character as the plot moves along. As noted, the midrash does not indicate a dialogue between the stories that is formulated by their identical structure; it only points to the use of delayed presentation in all these stories (and in two others omitted here). I have discussed the possible connections between the characters mentioned in this midrash elsewhere (Grossman 2011: 61-71; Grossman 2015: 328-30), but even without developing the analogy between the stories, the indication of the recurrent literary structure itself demonstrates literary sensitivity.

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**Mordecai as Moses**

Two basic questions accompany the discussion in research into the rabbis’ awareness of literary analogies, and I intend to present them via a study of a single midrash taken from Esther Rabbah, 6:2. The midrash presented there suggests that we view Mordecai against the background of Moses:[[8]](#footnote-8)

THERE WAS A MAN, A JEW IN SHUSHAN THE CASTLE.

The word MAN here tells us that Mordecai in his generation was equal to Moses in his; for of Moses too it is written, Now the man Moses was very meek (Num 12:3).

Just as Moses stood in the breach, as it is written, Therefore He said that He would destroy them, had not Moses His chosen stood before Him in the breach (Ps 106:23), so did Mordecai, as it is written, Seeking the good of his people and speaking peace to all his seed (Esth 10:3).

Just as Moses taught Israel Torah, as it is written, Behold, I have taught you statutes and ordinances (Deut 4:5), so did Mordecai, as it is written, And he sent letters... with words of peace and truth (Esth 9:30), [and truth means Torah], as it is written, Buy the truth, and sell it not (Prov 23:23). (Tabory-Atzmon 111)

The midrash depicts Mordecai’s leadership as resembling that of Moses and focuses on two things — both characters defended their people from disaster, and both taught Torah to the people.[[9]](#footnote-9) Another text that presents this midrash (*Panim Aherim*, version B) adds that both of them understood 70 languages.

The sole linguistic link in the midrash is found at the very beginning — both characters are called “man.” The rest of the comparisons are not based on linguistic similarity but on plot materials that the midrash connects.

This midrash brings up two basic questions that accompany the discussion of the use the rabbis make of analogies in the Bible. The two questions are related to what is not explicitly written and to the demand placed on the reader of the midrash to broaden the scope of the analogy beyond what is explicitly mentioned, and this from two different perspectives.

First (as I noted above with regard to Bigthan and Teresh), there is a real link between the characters being discussed, which for some reason the midrashist does not mention, though it is hard to believe he did not notice it:[[10]](#footnote-10)

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| The Greatness of Moses (Exod 11:3) | The Greatness of Mordecai (Esth 9:3-4) |
| The LORD gave the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians … | And all the nobles of the provinces, the satraps, the governors and the king’s administrators helped the Jews, because fear of Mordecai had seized them. |
| … and Moses himself was a man highly regarded in the land of Egypt, in the sight of Pharaoh’s officials and in the sight of the people. | Mordecai was prominent in the palace; his reputation spread throughout the provinces, and the man Mordecai became more and more powerful. |

Since the midrash connects Mordecai and Moses by the designation “man” that they share, one might expect this to be based on the description of Moses’ greatness in the sight of the Egypt, where he is also called “a man.” The allusion appears to be a genuine one, and it seems that the description of Mordecai as “prominent in the palace” is dependent on the parallel description of Moses. In addition to the clear linguistic link, in both stories the description of the characters’ greatness is presented doubly: with regard to the palace and with regard to the public.[[11]](#footnote-11) Moreover, beside the “greatness” of these two “men,” both descriptions also mention the Gentiles’ favorability toward the entire Jewish people; there may be a connection between the greatness of these characters and this supportive relationship. In Exodus too it is possible to understand that the people found greater favor in the sight of the Egyptians on account of the fact that Moses “was a man of great [גדול] importance in the land of Egypt,”[[12]](#footnote-12) just as Esther describes all the officials of the provinces as supporting the Jews because “Mordecai was prominent [גדול] in the palace.”

As noted, the midrashist based the link between the two characters on the fact that both are called “man”; but to prove that Moses is also called “man” he had to go all the way to Num 12:3 [the Hebrew (page 7) says “Numbers 11” but I believe 12:3 is the correct citation] where Moses is called “a very humble man.” A much simpler link would have been the comparison between “Moses himself was a man of great importance” and “the man Mordecai grew more and more powerful,” two verses which both describe the special status of the two “men” — which would be more appropriate to the subject of the midrash.

What explains the interpreter’s omitting such basic components in the structure of the comparison? On the face of it, [I’m guessing this is what is meant by *a priori* here] there are three possibilities:

1. A failure of recognition: The interpreter did not recognize the link that he did not mention.
2. Deliberate omission: The midrashist deliberately omitted the link that he did not mention. Perhaps he found it not persuasive enough, or perhaps — as we saw above in the discussion about Bigthan and Teresh — it did not mesh with the purpose of the midrash. Perhaps also the omission had a polemic basis, of one kind or another.
3. Partial mention: The interpreter put only some of the components of the comparison into his midrash, letting them point the way to a broader comparison.

In the case before us, it is difficult to decide among the three possibilities: Theoretically, it is possible that the interpreter did not notice the link with Exodus 11 (possibility 1), and it is also possible that he meant to feature Moses’ good qualities and thereby to preach to his listeners about the quality of humility that befits a leader. And perhaps the midrashist did not want to his listeners to pay attention to the success of the characters among the non-Jews as much as the way they led Israel (possibility 2). But we cannot rule out the third possibility, and this has important implications for the way in which we must read the intertextual remarks in the midrash. It seems that sometimes the analogy in the midrash opens a window to a broader comparison between the stories, which the midrash makes no pretense of presenting fully.

Beside this question, the midrash raises an additional basic methodological question, also connected to what is not mentioned explicitly in the midrash, one much more difficult to settle. Every literary analogy or allusion, by forging an opening to a story, makes it possible to look through the opening to the parallel story. These two openings face each other, but each story has a complete literary structure of its own that is perfectly good. Working through the analogy creates a dilemma: How far should we push the view through the opening into the structure that is hiding behind it? In our case, the midrash is comparing the Moses who “stood in the breach” to Mordecai, who similarly “stood in the breach.” In general, these two characters defended their people against the troubles that beset them, but a further look at the connection the interpreter has forged makes the comparison somewhat uneasy. The argument that Mordecai was concerned for the welfare of his people rests on the verse that ends the book of Esther: “Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Xerxes, preeminent among the Jews, and held in high esteem by his many fellow Jews, because he worked for the good of his people and spoke up for the welfare of all the Jews” (10:3). True, Mordecai and Esther succeeded in fending off Haman’s decrees, and at the end of the story Mordecai continues to defend his people. But the argument that Moses was concerned for the welfare of his people and stood firm in the face of disaster depends on a midrash on Psalm 106, which describes Israelite history:

“At Horeb they made a calf and worshipped an idol cast from metal. They exchanged their Glory for an image of a bull, which eats grass. They forgot the God who saved them, who had done great things in Egypt, miracles in the land of Ham and awesome deeds by the Red Sea. So he said he would destroy them--had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him to keep his wrath from destroying them” (Psalms 106:19-23; NIV).

The verse that was chosen to teach about Moses repelling the disaster threatening Israel describes God’s anger at the people as a result of the sin of the Golden Calf. The “breach” in Ps 106:23 was a danger not from an enemy of flesh and blood but from God’s anger. This is a quite surprising choice on the part of the midrash. Mordecai having stood up to Haman and defeated him, we might expect that the midrash would describe Moses defeating the Egyptians who were threatening Israel, and seeking their welfare in this way.

However, such distinctions do not always say “Expound me.” The interpreter may take a verse from here and another verse from there and fashion a midrash that depends on a partial analogy, but in this case the comparison of Mordecai to Moses — that both of them stood up to an enemy of Israel — is what was wanted. The most basic component in the comparison of Moses’ and Mordecai’s leadership was their success in thwarting the desire of the enemies of the Jews to destroy them. What led the interpreter to set up God as someone Moses had to stand up to?

Actually, the very fact that the midrash turned to Psalm 106 is surprising. This is a historical psalm, dedicated entirely to Israel’s ingratitude toward God. The psalm opens with a warning — “We have sinned, even as our ancestors did; we have done wrong and acted wickedly” (Ps 106:6, NIV) — which accompanies the psalm throughout. Israelite history is presented in the psalm as a series of junctions that mark the people’s sins, starting with the exodus from Egypt and going all the way to their taking possession of the land, and the corresponding response of God — now with compassion, now with punishment.[[13]](#footnote-13) As part of this difficult historical description, Moses and Phinehas are introduced, whose deeds and prayers defended Israel from God’s wrath.

The surprising inclusion of Psalm 106 in the midrash comparing Mordecai to Moses is so strange that for this very reason it would appear not to be coincidental. Mordecai, who defends Israel against the decrees of Haman, is compared to Moses, who defends Israel against God’s wrath.

It seems that precisely through this imbalance the interpreter is hinting at a subversive reading that is hiding beneath the surface. The analogy between the two leaders hints between the lines at a criticism of their people without having to say so explicitly. By comparing Mordecai to Moses, who prays to God not to destroy the people, the midrash paints the Jews in the story of Esther in the same colors as Israel in Psalm 106, thus indicating their bleak situation. The book of Esther does not describe the story of a miraculous, glorious rescue, but the situation of Diaspora Jewry, which did not return to the land of Israel after the proclamation of Cyrus, but remained in exile until Haman arose against them and sought to destroy them. According to the midrash, Haman was none other than the anger of the Lord that was sent forth against the Jews, and Mordecai, by managing to overcome Haman, in fact managed to propitiate God and assuage God’s anger.

Note that when the midrash cites the verse describing Moses “standing in the breach,” it ends with the Hebrew word וגומר, “and it finishes” — that is, it is up to the reader to finish the verse, which has not been cited in its entirety. This is quite different from “etc.,” which implies that the continuation is unimportant to the argument. In rabbinic literature, the argument quite frequently depends precisely on the part of the verse that is not cited explicitly.[[14]](#footnote-14) In our case, the verse continues this way: “had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him to keep his wrath from destroying them,” and the subsequent verse describes what happened to Israel later, after the sin of the spies: “Then they despised the pleasant land; they did not believe his promise” (Ps 106:24). That is, it is not merely the general description in the psalm of the sins of the people by which the midrash hints at criticism of the Jews of Persia, but specifically the sin of the spies, which comes directly after the verse cited in the midrash. Can it be possible that the midrash was hinting that the Jews living in Persia and invited to the king’s feast could be understood to have “despised the pleasant land” as their ancestors did?[[15]](#footnote-15) Was the midrash hinting that Jewish history as reflected in the book of Esther was a continuation of the bleak history reflected in Psalm 106, and that what is said at the end of the psalm could be said as well of the Jews in the story of Esther?

Therefore the LORD was angry with his people and abhorred his inheritance. He gave them into the hands of the nations, and their foes ruled over them. Their enemies oppressed them and subjected them to their power. Many times he delivered them, but they were bent on rebellion and they wasted away in their sin. Yet he took note of their distress when he heard their cry; for their sake he remembered his covenant and out of his great love he relented. (Ps 106:40-44; NIV).

In light of this possibility I would like to pose a question that is inescapable in the study of rabbinic intertextual readings: Does the interpreter who lays bare a link between two passages intend for the reader to study both passages in their entirety, in that way alone giving the analogy its full meaning? If so, sometimes the point is precisely that which remains unsaid explicitly in the midrash. This question is equally inescapable in the study of intertextual reading that occurs in a halakhic context. When the rabbis compare (for example) the festival of Sukkot to the installation of Aaron and his sons as priests — because both passages use the word תשבו (“you shall dwell,” B. Suk. 43b) — are they assuming that there is an essential similarity between the week in which the Tabernacle was inaugurated (with its extra eighth day) and the seven days of the festival of Sukkot (with its own extra eighth day, Shemini Atzeret)? Or is the comparison about a precise linguistic similarity and nothing more? This is a matter of scholarly disagreement; some prefer to see such allusions as linguistic links, unburdened with any rational basis (Liberman 1994:60), while others argue that it is possible to see a development in rabbinic literature: Originally, the *gezerah shavah* was perceived as a basic method of logical analysis that should be considered a genuine literary analogy, but eventually some midrashim came along in which the *gezerah shavah* reflects no more than a localized linguistic equivalent (Gilat 1992: 373).

I am inclined to see at least in some of these linguistic links, at least in some of the cases, an opening for a broader analogy, and in our midrash, as noted, such a conclusion leads to dramatic results. Beside the explicit statement glorifying Mordecai as the equivalent of Moses is hidden an implicit intertextual reading through which the midrash hints also at criticism of the Jews of Shushan. [Seems the better choice here than Susa, which I would use in a work about history.]

It is difficult to pin down this suggestion, let alone to prove it, but the question of opening up the original story on which the interpreter makes the later story depend is a dramatic question of interpreting the analogy in the midrash and of unpacking the potential hidden in literary analogies of this kind. In every analogy there is a kind of winking at the reader, and it is precisely through this literary technique that an author can conceal criticism of a character that he does not want to express openly, or to hint at other polemical messages. In our case, we are not dealing with the author himself but with an interpreter who uncovers an analogy but nonetheless works in similar fashion: He points to an opening through which one can enter the passage as a whole, and when all of it is visible, the reader can interpret in full the meaning of the analogy, even what has not been stated explicitly in the midrash.

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   Citations from Esther Rabbah are taken from the Soncino translation; additional page references are to the 2014 Hebrew edition of Tabory and Atzmon. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. On these two fundamental positions about this literary technique, see Tull 2000; Miller 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See the notes in Tabory-Atzmon, ibid. Bible translations outside Esther Rabbah are taken from the New International Version, with slight alterations when necessary to make the linguistic point clear. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. E.g., the connection between Memucan’s suggestion to give Vashti’s royal position “to someone else who is better than she” (Esth 1:19) and Samuel’s telling Saul that his kingship has been given “to someone else, who is better than you” (1 Sam 15:28) (Esther Rabbah 4:9). So too “the wise men who understood the times” mentioned in Esth 1:13 are, in the midrashic view, the sons of Issachar, of whom we are told in 1 Chr 12:33 that they were “men who understood the times” (Esther Rabbah 4:1); there are many such examples. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Such an analogy has been suggested in modern scholarship. See (e.g.) Zakovitch 1995; Grossman 2011:38-9, 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. On the widespread use among the rabbis of analogy to indicate reward presented via literary technique, [not perfectly certain I have understood this correctly] see Heinemann 1954: 64-68. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The coinage is that of Meir Sternberg (1978: 8-14). [I could not find “forced exposition” or any similar coinage in Sternberg, but I could only check it via Google Books, where p. 9 was unavailable. The author should check to make the correct English phrase is used here.] [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Modern scholars too have suggested reading Esther against the background of the exodus story and putting Moses and Aaron parallel to Mordecai and Esther. See especially Gerleman 1973: 11. He notes principally the following connections: a Jewish man is introduced into the palace of the non-Jewish king; the existential danger to the nation of Israel; Israel's victory over their enemies; a festival for all generations that is established in the wake of the victory. Still, we may wonder whether these connections indicate an intentional parallel. See also: Loader 1980: 148-151. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Isaac Gottlieb has shown that the goal of the midrash is to present the level of holiness of the book of Esther as comparable to that of the Pentateuch, and as part of that goal the writing of the scroll is equated to the giving of the Torah and Mordecai is equated to Moses (Gottlieb 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In modern research several scholars have noted this connection, e.g. Levenson 1997: 121; Berlin 2001: 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. On the absence of Pharaoh himself from the list of those in whose sight Moses was great, see the suggestion of Carol Meyers: “the unnamed Egyptian ruler has become a parody of a powerful sovereign, isolated in his adherence to a misguided and doomed policy” (2005: 92). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Cassuto (1967:132) preferred to phrase it the opposite way: Since the people found favor in the sight of the Egyptians, Moses felt comfortable speaking more forcefully to Pharaoh. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In this respect Psalm 106 differs from the preceding Psalm 105. In Psalm 105’s description of history, God’s kindness is prominent, and there is no mention of the sins of the people. This contrasts, as already noted, with the primary aim of Psalm 106. The interpreter could easily have relied on the optimistic Psalm 105, but he chose to use Psalm 106, which is highly critical of Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. “With biblical verses, the writer relies on the reader’s expertise, and therefore finds it sufficient to cite just the beginning of the verse” (Sharvit 2008:38). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. On the possibility that the book of Esther itself implicitly criticizes the Jews who did not return to Israel, see Stern 2010; Grossman 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)