Chapter Five

The Story and Reading the Story: Reading as Dialogue

To speak of the meaning of the work is to tell a story of reading (J. Culler).[[1]](#footnote-1)

Each reading of a book, each, re-reading, each memory of the re-reading, reinvents the text (J.L. Borges).[[2]](#footnote-2)

From the very first chapter I have emphasized that the homiletic story is a reading of the biblical narrative by means of a combination of storytelling and commentary, and I have attempted to illustrate the diverse meanings of this duality on different levels of the genre. Up until this point, however, I have made no mention of one very important axis that connects the storytelling with the commentary – that is, the reader. In the previous chapter, when I tried to describe the character of the storyteller of the homiletic story, it became apparent that it is impossible to consider the teller without returning over-and-over-again to his mirror image – the intended recipient, the individual to whom the story is aimed – who usually is one-and-the-same as the engaged reader. One of the surprising discoveries that we made was the predominant role played by this intended recipient on the different levels of fulfillment of the meanings of the text, and the creation of an alliance between storyteller and reader when facing the characters who are active in the story. When we argued that the storyteller works to develop a hermeneutic partnership, it is the engaged reader with whom that partnership is established. The positions taken by the storyteller – both declared and hidden – serve as an invitation to the reader to accept those positions and to join the storyteller in experiencing the world that is presented. Neither the reader nor the storyteller has fared well in the realm of midrash scholarship, and if literary approaches to aggadic literature largely ignored the storyteller as a significant literary figure, the role of the reader in the development of textual meaning is almost entirely neglected.[[3]](#footnote-3) In this chapter I will attempt to address this lacuna.

“To speak of the meaning of the work is to tell a story of reading.”[[4]](#footnote-4) This assertion made by Culler is particularly important regarding the homiletic story, inasmuch as the story itself stands as an interpretive reading of the biblical narrative. It is difficult to describe the event that takes place between the text and the reader. First and foremost, who is the reader that we are discussing? In the literary theories of the “reader-response” school, there are many readers and many intended recipients. I am not referring here to some empirical reader,[[5]](#footnote-5) rather to the engaged reader. Every author imagines a certain type of reader, a “capable reader,” able to satisfy the semantic patterns of the text. He is concealed in the text by the very rhetoric through which he is asked to recreate the world of the author who imagined it.[[6]](#footnote-6) As one who responds to rhetorical structures that beg for reconstruction, the engaged reader is called upon to develop frameworks in which the text takes on a new level of reason, coherence and meaning. The advantage of this approach, as Ramon-Keinan argues, is that “it suggests that the text can be viewed as a system made up of components that must be reconstructed, rather than an autonomous object.”[[7]](#footnote-7) But the engaged reader does not merely reconstruct the examples that appear in the text. Every element discussed offers not only a framework of personalities and events, but also a framework of attitudes, norms and values. The reader is invited to adopt a particular position regarding these ideas.

1. Culler, On Deconstruction, p. 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. J.L. Borges, *Seven Nights*, trans. E. Weinberger, New York 1980, p. 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Given the historical development of the literary school, it is not difficult to understand why the reader has been ignored. Early scholars worked within the theoretical framework of the New Criticism, a school of thought that buried the reader under the tombstone of “affective failure.” For an initial, but important, study, see Stern, *The Parable* (Hebrew) pp. 88-93; See also D. Kraemer, “The Intended Reader as a Key to Interpreting the Bavli,” *Prooftexts* 13 (1993), pp. 125-140. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Culler, On Deconstruction, p. 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The attempt to characterize different groups of readers belongs to another branch of this school, and there is no doubt that it could lead to important conclusions regarding the study of midrash, the challenges involved notwithstanding. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Iser, *Reading* (Hebrew) p. 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ramon-Keinan, *Poetica* (Hebrew), pp. 113-114. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)