Chapter Five

**The Narrative and its Reading: A Dialogical Reading**

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 that re-reading, reinvents the text (J. L. Borges).[[2]](#footnote-2)

From the very first chapter of this book, I have stressed that the homiletical narrative is a reading of the biblical story, blending narrative and interpretation. I have attempted to uncover the diverse implications of this dichotomy in the various strata of this genre. I have not yet touched on the critical link between narrative and interpretation – namely the reader. In the preceding chapter, while attempting to characterize the narrator of homiletical narratives, we saw that it was impossible to deal with the narrator without repeatedly referring to his mirror image – his fictional addressee who tends to coincide with the implied reader. One of our surprising discoveries was the dominant role of this addressee within the various strata of actualizing the implications of the text, and in creating an alliance between the narrator and the reader with respect to the characters. When we say that the narrator seeks to create a hermeneutic partnership, we mean that this partnership is formed with the implied reader. The narrator’s positions, both stated and concealed, invite the reader to adopt these positions and to view the presented world together with him. The reader fared no better than the narrator in midrashic scholarship. While the literary approaches to Aggadic literature generally neglected the narrator as a significant authority, they almost completely ignored the reader and his roles in forming the connotation of the texts.[[3]](#footnote-3) In this chapter, I will endeavor to begin to fill in this lacuna.

“To speak of the meaning of the work is to tell a story of reading.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Culler’s statement is especially true with respect to the homiletical narrative, as it is itself an interpretive reading of the biblical narrative. It is hard to describe the interaction between the reader and the text. To begin with, which reader are we talking about? According to the literary theories of the ‘reader-response’ school, there is a plethora of readers and addressees. I am not referring to a specific concrete reader,[[5]](#footnote-5) but rather to the implied reader. Every author imagines a particular reader, ‘a model reader,’ capable of realizing the semantic schemata of the text. He is encoded within the text by means of the very rhetoric which he is called upon to utilize in constructing its fictional world.[[6]](#footnote-6) As the one responding to the rhetorical structures which invite reconstruction, the implied reader builds frameworks within which the text acquires elucidation, coherence and meaning. As Rimon-Kinan points out, the advantage of this perspective is that “it implies viewing the text as a system made up of structures inviting reconstruction, rather than as an autonomous object.”[[7]](#footnote-7) However, the implied reader does not merely reconstruct the models of reality in the text. Each discourse presents not only a network of characters and events; but, also, a network of positions, norms and values. The reader is invited to adopt a specific position with respect to these networks.

While most scholars dealing with the dynamics of reading stressed the reader’s creation of the text’s meaning – with whatever degree of autonomy, they failed to emphasize the text’s creation of the one who reads it. Every author fashions his narrative to suit a particular implied reader. On the most basic level, he cannot begin writing without making numerous assumptions about the reader, his positions, viewpoints and expectations; along the lines of “each and every person understood according to his capabilities” (Tanhuma, ed. Buber, Exodus 22).[[8]](#footnote-8) The encounter between the text and its reader is always conditional and intertextual. According to Bennett’s approach, mentioned above in chapter one, different reading formations fashion the texts, the readers and the modes of encounter between them.[[9]](#footnote-9) Until now, the textual aspect of reading formations has been emphasized,

1. Culler, *Decostrutzia*, 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. J. L. Borges, *Seven Nights*, trans. E. Weinberger (New York, 1980), 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This oversight is understandable in light of the historical development of the literary school. Its earliest members operated from within the theoretical framework of the new criticism. As is well known, this school buried the reader under the tombstone of "Affective Fallacy,” nothing further need be said about this. For a preliminary, but significant work, see Stern, *Hamashal*, 88-93. See further

   D. Kraemer, “The Intended Reader as a Key to Interpreting the Bavli,” *Prooftexts* 13 (1993), 125-140. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Culler, *Decostrutzia*, 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The attempt to characterize different communities of readers belongs to a different branch of the school. There is no question that despite all of the difficulties that this approach entails; it, too, can yield important conclusions which concern midrashic scholarship. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Eiser, *Kriyah*, 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ramon-Keinan, *Poetica*, 113-114. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Rabinovitch, *Lifnei Kriyah*, 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Bennett, *Textim*, 70-75; T. Bennett, “Text, Readers, Reading Formations,” Literature and History 9 (1983), 218. It is only recently that scholars have begun to pay attention to this. See J. L. Machor, Readers in History, (Baltimore, 1993). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)