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'The Kisses of His Mouth': Intimacy and Intermediacy as Performative Aspects of a Midrash Commentary

STEVEN D. FRAADE

Michael Fishbane passionately and convincingly identifies a fundamental dialectic of rabbinic midrash. On the one hand, its verse-centred exegesis produces free-standing hermeneutical units of lemma and comment thereto ('microform'); while on the other, its anthological assembly of a multiplicity of such units of commentary, both to a single lemma and to the scriptural sequence of lemmata, invites enquiry into the meanings generated by the editorial combination of such units ('macroform'). Does the midrashic anthology reflect mere collection for preservation's sake, or an artfully constructed composition, whose whole is greater (in rhetoric and meaning) than the sum of its parts? Fishbane, correctly to my mind, is not satisfied with the first alternative; however, even were it the case, the anthology's preservation of a variety of interpretations of Songs 1.2 would constitute an important cultural statement in itself. Rather, he argues forcefully that the 'macroform' is the primary medium of midrashic *paideia* ('literary-cultural instruction').

However, notwithstanding Fishbane's elegant exposition of the overall arrangement of the exegetical units, there remains a dialectical tension between the anthological whole and its exegetical parts. Notwithstanding some degree of linear movement between them, they cannot be neatly subsumed under a metanarrative of the whole. Notwithstanding thematic (and literary¹) links between the exegetical units, the total arrangement resists totalizing explanation. As much as there is discernible meaning in the arrangement of the exegetical units, each one retains its autonomy of micro-form and -meaning. The composition is in a sense unfinished, its text open; its meaning is created through the process of engaged study that it demands of its students, each of whom, in the process of such study, reconfigures the relation of the parts to each other, and hence to the whole, anew.

The place to begin anew each time is with the lemma itself, whose very ambiguities occasion, if not generate, the variety of interpretations that the anthology assembles and arranges so as to facilitate their interplay. Virtually every word of the lemma, 'let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, [for your love is better than wine]', is in some way indeterminate (especially in the Hebrew):

1. Since this is the opening verse of the song itself, it is not at all clear who desires to be kissed by whom. Even assuming that the song, as rabbinically understood, is a love poem between God and Israel, which one is speaking here?

2. Furthermore, are there only two parties present? How are we to understand the relation of the third person 'him' and 'his' of the kissing and kisses to the second person 'your' of the 'love' in the continuation of the verse (and the successive verses)?

3. The imperfect form 'let him kiss me', here rendered as a subjunctive, denoting desire (as soon as possible), could also be rendered as a future, 'he will kiss me' (some indeterminate time from now). Thus, the temporality of the scene is ambiguous.

4. What is the significance of the plural 'kisses', especially when preceded by the prefix *mem*, which could be taken to denote the partitive: 'let him kiss me from [among] the kisses of his mouth'?

5. Finally, the word 'his mouth' is both redundant (with what else would one kiss?) and again ambiguous (whose mouth?).

It is no wonder, therefore, that the lemma occasions such a variety of interpretations, which, when juxtaposed against one another, create a broad playing-field of intersecting meanings.

Fishbane is particularly attentive to the meaning generated by the sequence in which the interpretive units are arranged, and detects therein an overall linear progression: eros desired, briefly experienced, deferred, and finally restored. At Sinai Israel receives the dual written/oral Torah, 'sealed by a kiss', thereby experiencing a moment of supreme intimacy with God; but this direct intimacy is immediately disrupted by Israel's 'loss of religious consciousness', resulting in the 'onset of forgetting and evil desire'; which is partly compensated for by the ongoing 'eros of Torah study', marked by human 'kisses' between students; and ultimately concluding with the 'hoped-for renewal of God's Word and kiss' in the eschatological future.

However, notwithstanding the linearity of this sequence, I would emphasize equally another trope that runs throughout the anthology, less prone to linear plotting: the unresolved dialectic of intimacy and intermediacy in Israel's revelatory relationship to God. Israel desires, and is privileged with, the 'mouth to mouth' intimacy of God's revelatory kiss, yet also, in fear of the potency of such unmediated divine contact, prefers to receive revelation via an intermediary agent. At the level of the lemma, this ambivalence is occasioned by the aforementioned textual ambiguities; the desire for kisses is addressed not in the second person (as is the continuation of the verse and the succeeding verses), but in the third person, while the partitive *mem* could suggest something less than the fullness of kisses. Once the Song of Songs is situated at Sinai, these ambiguities would resonate with Israel's fear of direct revelation, already at Sinai, as enunciated in the scriptural account itself: 'You [Moses] speak with us, and we will hear, but let not God speak with us, lest we die' (Exod. 20.16; as well as Deut. 5.22-4), cited several times in our midrash. Our text shuttles repeatedly between midrashic moments of desire for and fear of unmediated intimacy with God and his words (commandments), which moments cannot simply be located as successive points on a linear temporal continuum.

Variations on this dialectical trope of intimacy and intermediacy are replayed over and over again within the midrashic anthology, beginning

(Fishbane's units II–III) with the juxtaposition of the view of R. Yohanan and the rabbis: the former saying that the divine commands were imparted to each Israelite through the kiss of an angelic agent (*shaliach*) (with Deut. 4.35 cited to stress the indirectness of the revelation), while the latter stresses that it was the divine word itself that kissed each Israelite directly (with Deut. 4.9 cited to stress Israel's direct perception of the divine word). A medial position is taken by yet other rabbis: the first two (or three) of the ten commandments were received directly from God, while all the others were received indirectly by way of Moses.

As Fishbane notes, the pivotal point in the anthology comes in unit VII, when the Israelites upon hearing directly the first commandment, 'I am the Lord your God' (Exod. 20.2), become immune to forgetfulness in their Torah studies. Similarly, upon directly hearing the second commandment, 'You shall have no other gods besides me' (Exod. 20.3), the impulse to do evil is uprooted from their hearts. But in both cases, despite these desirable consequences, the Israelites are unable to bear the intensity of direct divine revelation and beg instead for Moses to serve as intermediary, whereupon they revert to their former conditions marked by forgetfulness in study and the impulse to do evil. Regretting these reversals, they desire a second chance for the intimacy of direct revelation ('Would that he kiss me [again] with the kisses of his mouth') and its desirable consequences, only to be told that they would now have to wait for the 'future to come' to recuperate from their loss.

Fishbane expresses uncertainty as to why the Israelites would have forfeited direct revelation and its benefits ('for unexplained reasons, religious fear severed their ideal concentration'; 'unaccountably interrupted by religious fear'; 'how this state of mind is broken is never stated'). However, the midrash is quite clear: the people retreat from the intimacy of direct revelation out of fear that sustained direct contact with the divine word would cause them to die (repeatedly citing Deut. 5.22). Other rabbinic texts similarly stress that the 'fires' of Torah study, sources of 'light' and 'warmth', can fatally burn those who get too close to them.²

Returning to our midrash, just as Sinai represents for the Israelites the occasion for unmediated intimacy with God and his word, and the consequent removal of such mortal weaknesses as forgetfulness and the impulse to do evil, it also threatens in its very potency to kill them. The scene at Sinai is one of dialectical tension between Israel's desire for complete unmediated divine intimacy and their fear of death through direct divine contact.³ In the end, the fear of death deflects the desire for intimacy, or at least defers it, from Sinai to the eschatological future-yet-to-come (when presumably the dialectic would be resolved as the fear of death would cease). But this dialectic of love intertwined with death is a recurring motif in the Song of Songs itself.⁴ Here as elsewhere, the midrash *Song of Songs Rabba* transposes the Song of Songs' tropes of carnal desire and its deferral, of erotic intimacy and its loss, to the registers of divine revelation and its human reenactment in the Torah study (*talmud torah*) of the rabbinic sages.⁵

Fishbane imagines the synagogues as the 'natural setting' for the 'pedagogical content' of the individual microforms later subsumed within the anthological

macroform of our text. However, given the pivotal emphasis on the fear of forgetfulness, we might just as easily imagine an intramural rabbinic context, especially for the anthology as a whole. Such a pedagogical context is most particularly suggested by what, to my mind, is the midrash's boldest hermeneutical move (Fishbane's unit IX): the re-siting of Songs 1.2 from the divine revelation of Torah to Israel at Sinai to the dialogical discourse of Torah study among rabbinical colleagues. As they face each other in study and debate, the words of Torah that issue from their pursed lips are understood to derive ultimately from God (or are directed to God). 'Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth' (in the third person) is understood now, in the *longue durée* between Sinai and the future-yet-to-come, as referring not to God but to one's fellow sage or disciple. When a righteous sage dies after a life occupied with studying (and uttering) words of Torah, his soul is taken, as it were, by the kisses of his colleagues, as they, with their mouths, acclaim his teaching. The desire for intimacy and its deferral by the necessity of intermediacy is now relocated from the revelation at Sinai to the discourse among the sages and between them and the public,⁶ from the history and redemption of Israel as a whole to the life and death of the sage in particular.

Thus, the midrashic anthology has gradually transposed our understanding of the kisses of Songs 1.2 from the fiery words that issued from God's mouth at Sinai to the words of debate that issue from the mouths of the sages in the *bet midrash* (house of study). As R. Judah states: 'The Torah which was [initially] uttered with one [divine] mouth is [now] uttered by many [rabbinic] mouths' (Fishbane's unit X). Through a series of word plays on Songs 1.2, human desire for God's kisses is transposed to human study of words of Torah. They are the weapons which protect and empower Israel, so long as Israel is occupied with their study and observance. Through study of the rules of ritual purity, Israel creates the means for their purification. Through Torah study, Israel cleaves to (the words of) God.⁷ The desire to hear once again, unmediated, the 'voice' of God's kisses remains alive. But in the time-between, the taste of those kisses is sustained through Israel's (sages') collective study of the written and oral words of Torah.⁸

Finally we might ask, does (and if so, how does) our text practise what it preaches? In rabbinic fashion I shall conclude by answering this question with further questions: Does the commentary's shuttle between scriptural lemma and rabbinically attributed interpretations enact the shuttle between Sinai and the perpetual present? Does the elusiveness of midrashic meaning echo the elusiveness of divine intimacy? Are the desired kisses of the lemma experienced, to the extent possible in the time between revelation and redemption, in the socially constructed oral study of our text by and between sages and their disciples? Do they too seek, momentarily experience, but ultimately defer direct spiritual intimacy? In their active yet anxious engagement with the midrashic text, do they too uncover meaning even as it escapes them, gain knowledge even as they forget it, foretaste transcendence and holiness in the very midst of their mortality and evil? Does the ambiguity of scriptural lemma and the polysemy of midrashic commentary, alternately disclosing and concealing meaning, enact a hermeneutical version of 'playing hard to get'? Does

the medium of commentary enable or deflect, or both, textual intimacy through its intermediacy? To borrow a psychoanalytic term, does (and if so, how does) the midrashic process fashion for its students a 'talking cure' for the anxieties of these anomalies?

Personal postscript. Driving home on 17 June 1997, at the conclusion of the Textual Reasoning conference, I decided suddenly to make a detour to visit my father, Bert Fraade, as his health had been declining. We spent a while together, mainly in silence as a stroke years earlier had robbed him of speech. Upon departing, I kissed him and he me, unusual gestures of physical intimacy between us. Upon arriving home that evening I received a phone call informing me of my father's death. 'May he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth . . . For love is strong as death.' May his memory be for a blessing.

Notes

1. See n. 8.
2. For Torah and God as consuming fires, compare *Sifre Deut.* 49, 343 (ed. Finkelstein, 114–115, 399–400). For discussion, with reference to other rabbinic texts, see Steve D. Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifre to Deuteronomy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), pp. 46–9, 92–4 (with notes).
3. Other rabbinic texts, in interpretation of Ps. 82.6 ('I said, "You are god-like beings"'), depict Sinai as the scene in which Israel achieves momentary immortality, a restoration of the human state in the Garden of Eden, only to be forfeited through their worship of the Golden Calf. See *Mekilta Bahodesh* 9 (ed. Lauterbach, 2.272); *Pesiqta Rabbati* 1.2, 14.10 (ed. Friedmann, 1b, 62b); *Bavli 'Abod. Zar.* 5a.
4. This interconnection is exhaustively explored by Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1977). Word of Marvin Pope's death, on 15 June 1997, arrived during the Textual Reasoning conference.
5. This is as much true of the larger *Song of Songs Rabba* as of this passage.
6. Note the function of the *meturgeman* to the sage (or *amora*), who communicated a sage's homily to the public, so as to avert direct communication between the two.
7. Compare *Sifre Deut.* 49 (ed. Finkelstein, 114–115): "'Cleaving to Him" (Deut. 11.22): But is it possible for a person to ascend to heaven and to cleave to fire? . . . Rather, cleave to the sages and their disciples, and I will account it to you as though you had ascended to heaven to receive it [Torah] . . .' For complete citation and discussion, see Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary*, pp. 92–4.
8. It should be stressed that these final four interpretations (Fishbane's unit XA–D), while perhaps originally autonomous each of the other, and potentially separable again, are enchaind by language (more apparent in the Hebrew than in translation) one to the next in such a way that each anticipates the next, suggesting that we have here not a random assortment but an ordered progression: The first (A) ends with the word 'purity', which is the theme of the second (B); while the second contains the word 'cleave', which is the theme of the third (C); while the third contains the word 'voice' (or 'sound'), which is the theme of the fourth (D).