Highway 61 Revisited Again

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“It’s strange the way circles hook up with themselves.”

—Bob Dylan, *Chronicles,* p. 288

I

When he begins to play we are transported to pre-war Europe, a world all but destroyed by the Nazis—outside, unsuspecting pedestrians are startled by each clear note as they stroll down West 4th Street. The dilapidated room, holding an American flag and a threadbare *parokhet*, is filled with Village hipsters, pruriently dressed clubbers, a rag-tag group of local musicians and artists, Doc

Marten-wearing bridge and tunnel folks, an NYU professor or two, three yeshiva students from Melbourne on holiday, and a group of curious onlookers who have stumbled in to see just what the sign bearing a blue imprint of a Lubavitcher Hassid beneath the large block letters “BLUEGRASS,” really foretells. Weaving in and out of all these questers, an impish-looking *shamash*, Herman Lowenharr, sporting a *Yechah*-style straw hat, carries a frighteningly large bottle of Jim Beam Rye tucked expertly under his right arm. I stand in the Charles Street Synagogue with a large group of West Texans—my students from the University of Texas at El Paso—adding yet another layer to this absurdly cosmopolitan mix of faces crammed into the tiny, well-worn synagogue. The place seems to be on the verge of collapse—until the first note escapes Andy Statman’s clarinet, and then the rickety contraption of a *shul* comes alive, shedding not just decades, but centuries, from its grimy façade. In that moment, Statman’s clarinet points our motley crew in the direction of the old country and into the future of Jewish imagination. [See **Figure 1**at http://academics.utep.edu/Default.aspx?tabid=69307]

II

For the past decade Andy Statman and the other inspiring musicians in his trio—Larry Eagle on drums and Jim Whitney on bass—have been playing a mixture of traditional Hassidic *niggunim*, Klezmer, Bluegrass, Jazz, and Country music to ecstatic audiences at the Charles Street Synagogue in the West Village of Manhattan. To hear Statman is to be immersed in the vitality of an imaginative culture that has borrowed and invented from every civilization Jews have called home before their eventual expulsion or murder. Statman’s clarinet is aural cosmopolitanism. Statman is a Lubavitch Hassid, which means he plays with a large black velvet yarmulke perched on his head, his *tzitzith* elegantly twisted and modestly tucked into his black pants pockets; he sports a trim Lubavitch-style beard above a tightly buttoned white shirt. In contrast, his two band-mates are not Hassidim—they, in fact, are not Jewish, and yet, they too, have imbibed the spirit of the Hassidishe music that they all transcendently play together.

As a great-grandson of the Modzitzer Rebbe, I always wait for the moment when Statman will segue into a Modzitzer *niggun* as part of his repertoire. This particular evening, on a painfully hot, early summer day in 2010, Statman begins

the concert with the plaintive notes of the Modzitzer Rebbe's *niggun* for *Mizmor L'David*—a mournful tune that the Rebbe, my grandfather's grandfather, titled "The Song of the Homeless" after watching the thousands of refugees streaming through the streets of Radom, Poland[i] during World War I. Looking around the room, it seems as fitting a melodic place as any to begin. To my right is one of my students, who earlier that day uncovered his Jewish grandfather's difficult immigration history at the Ellis Island museum and confided in me as we waited for the *shamash* to open the doors to the synagogue, that he couldn't remember ever having stepped foot in an actual synagogue. Through Statman's music my students and I, as well as the others in our eclectic group, experience not just a working, living synagogue and tradition, but each of us in attendance becomes a part of the musical tapestry of contemporary Jewish imagination. It is as if Statman himself is a sort of timeless, musical *genizah*—a repository of thousands of years of history and texts. His musical compositions are the *shemos*, the many pieces and fragments of a collective Jewish culture throughout the world in different eras bound into a meaningful whole.

The very texture of these almost lost cultures can be felt in each of Statman's compositions. His version of the Modzitzer *niggun* for *Adon Olam*, known the world-over as a welcome song to the weekly *Shabbos*, day of rest, also, in Statman's recasting, becomes an invitation to explore other realms of being—uncovering perhaps, just what *Shabbos*, ideally, should be about: experiencing another way of living.

Although Statman is a unique, almost legendary figure in the New York music scene, he is also, in many ways, a representative of the contemporary Jewish imagination. It seems the further Statman digs into his own Jewish past and the roots of Jewish liturgical texts and rhythms, the farther ahead he surges within contemporary American culture. And, in this regard, Statman is not alone. In this essay I seek to answer biblical scholar David Stern's challenge to literary scholars, issued in his pithy volume, *Midrash and Literature* (almost two decades old), to begin the real scholarly work of linking midrash to literature and contemporary literary theory. As Stern writes:

> Now that the buzz and flurry of the initial excitement has passed, the time has arrived to reap the fruits of the original linkage and to begin the real work of reading midrash theoretically, as literary discourse—that is, to use the theoretical sophistication appropriated from literary studies to describe midrash's literary forms in their specificity and full complexity; to use the

> language of midrash as the base from which to discuss its hermeneutics in the light of the history of interpretation, and perhaps, most importantly, to employ our growing knowledge of the social, religiopolitical, and gender constructions of literature in order to analyze the singular forms of Rabbinic writing. (9)

Indeed, this is precisely the issue I examine in my soon-to-be-completed book, *Midrash and Modernism: The Making of the Jewish Imagination*. What I seek to do here is to take up Stern's analytical challenge by discussing several examples of midrashic storytelling in a variety of contemporary art forms. My aim is not only to connect midrashic modes of storytelling to literary criticism alone, but also to look at the myriad ways that midrashic modes of composition have infiltrated and empowered the contemporary Jewish imagination. From the music of Bob Dylan and Andy Statman, the stories of Isaac Babel and Gary Shteyngart, and, lastly, to the graphic art of Ahron Weiner and Tobi Kahn, midrash and midrashic modes of composition link all of this Jewish imaginative work of modernism through the beginning of the twenty-first century.

III

"The midrash says…"—how many memorable stories and lessons from my childhood days in yeshiva began with this deceptively simple declaration? From stories of Hassidic masters' perfect faith and holy men performing miracles in the old country, to story-like interpretations of talmudic discussions, midrashic storytelling for generations of readers, has often filled in the many gaps and fissures encased within original biblical passages. In contemplating the current state of Jewish culture, I have found that the ancient biblical exegetical method of midrash surprisingly offers key insights in understanding the contemporary Jewish imagination.

So just what exactly is midrash? Midrash is an exegetical tool of biblical scholarship that assumes that every word and letter of the Torah has meaning.[ii] In his study, *Midrash and Literature*, Stern says that the popularity of midrash has much to do with the "wayward antic features of midrashic interpretation that had often been considered scandalous in the past" (3). Rather than seeming disreputable in the postwar American academy—it was precisely this outlaw and

subversive quality that drew proponents to midrash and midrashic interpretation. In his study, Stern defines just what this type of interpretative storytelling entails:

> The typical midrashic predilection for multiple interpretations rather than for a single truth behind the text; its irresistible desire to tease out the nuances of Scripture rather than use interpretation to close them off; and most of all, the way midrashic discourse mixes text and commentary, violating the boundaries between them and intentionally blurring their differences, flourishing precisely in the grayish no-man's-land between exegesis and literature—all these features that once had seemed (since the time of Maimonides at least) to be the most problematic and irrational aspects of midrash now became its most intriguing and fascinating qualities. (3–4)

This subversive quality that blurs boundaries and genres is, in my mind, a hallmark of much of contemporary Jewish American literature and culture.

In *Reading the Book*, Burton Visotzky says that once a canon is closed, the problem facing a person and a community is one of "searching out the meaning of a text before our eyes" (5). Put another way: how does one find a "useful reading strategy" (5) and method of analysis for making the biblical text personal and relevant? As Harold Bloom suggests in *Kabbalah and Criticism,* through the ages, what all Jewish writing attempts to interpret is the Bible, or more specifically all Jewish literature worthy of the moniker implicitly asks the difficult question, "How to open the Bible to one's own suffering?" (xxiii). Ideally, this is precisely what Torah study should accomplish: through the stories and lessons of the Hebrew Bible, the full range of human experience is illuminated.

Contemporary Jewish American writers and artists—using midrashic interpretive and storytelling techniques—then, often make the ancient, foundational texts of Judaism relevant to our postmodern, contemporary American lives. According to Visotzky, midrash is a method of reading the Bible as an "eternal text," and is the result of applying a set of hermeneutical principles evolved by the community to guide one in reading the canon, in order to focus one's reading. The ultimate goal of midrash is to "search out" the fullness of the biblical language. Visotzky explains that the word "midrash" refers to a "homiletical exegesis of Scripture—the 'reading out' of moral lessons," (9) and that midrash means a "searching out" (10) of this biblical interpretation.

In analyzing biblical language there are two schools of thought: the first suggests that biblical language is no different from the language of regular human discourse, and is subject to the same redundancies that we all encounter in everyday communication; the second view, on the other hand, holds that since scripture is the word of God, not one word is superfluous. Every apparent mistake, or seeming grammatical error, has some encoded meaning. This is where midrash comes in to play. Midrash ultimately minimizes the authority of the wording of the text as normal language; instead it places the focus on the reader's moral application of the text, allowing for an endless variety of interpretations.

In his blending of poetry and criticism, modernist poet Wallace Stevens writes in "Of Modern Poetry": "The poem of the mind in the act of / finding / What will suffice" (1–3). Although, he surely does not have Jewish American literary texts in mind when he writes these lines, Stevens's ideas about the conflation of theory, criticism, and poetic diction woven together, bears much light on Jewish writers and artists steeped in the traditions needed to find a language that will suffice—a vessel capable of containing the thousands of years of textual history while being modern and contemporary in its outlook. For the writers and artists I will be discussing in this essay, midrashic storytelling is that sufficient language. Using midrash enables these Jewish writers and artists to uncover and illuminate their own culture, while deeply connecting to and extending the thousands of years of Jewish textual history as well.

I would add to these definitions on midrash, my own ideas on the ways that modern or contemporary midrash functions. I believe a key component of midrash is that it extends and completes[iii] an earlier (often biblical or medieval) text. A midrash fills in gaps and creates new meanings and understandings of difficult biblical stories. In so doing, midrashic storytelling not only makes these ancient stories relevant, but it also brings them immediately into our realm—recasting these stories on the contemporary stage of Jewish American culture.

IV

A wealth of literature and artwork has been created in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries by people aspiring to create "Contemporary or Modern Midrash," including music, poetry, prose, and painting. I begin here with an excerpt of the biblical story of the *Akedah*, or *The Binding of Isaac*, before

analyzing a midrashic re-interpretation and extension of this story:

1And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am.

2And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.

3And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him.

4Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off.

5And Abraham said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you.

6And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together.

7And Isaac spake unto Abraham his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?

8And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together.

9And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood.

10And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.

11And the angel of the LORD called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I.

12And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me.

> **13**And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son. (Genesis 22:1–13)

This is, obviously, one of the most troubling and disturbing stories in the entire Hebrew Bible. It has consequently lent itself to literally thousands of midrashic reinterpretations, completions, and extensions. Recall the blurring of boundaries and the preference for multiple interpretations rather than a single truth that Stern spoke of in relation to midrashic texts. These same qualities are certainly true for the zeitgeist of the 1960s, the supposed "youth movement" or "counter-culture"—a movement that quickly anointed a baby-faced Jewish boy from Hibbing, Minnesota as its high priest. In 1965 Bob Dylan was looking for a way to capture the absurdity of the American political moment—he turned toward a midrashic interpretation of *The Akedah*, or *The Binding of Issac* to make his statement in "Highway 61 Revisited" [See **Figure 2**at http://academics.utep.edu/Default.aspx?tabid=69307]:

> Oh God said to Abraham, "Kill me a son"
> Abe says, "Man, you must be puttin' me on"
> God say, "No." Abe say, "What?"
> God say, "You can do what you want Abe, but
> The next time you see me comin' you better run."
> Well Abe says, "Where do you want this killin' done?"
> God says, "Out on Highway 61."
>
> Well Georgia Sam he had a bloody nose
> Welfare Department they wouldn't give him no clothes
> He asked poor Howard where can I go
> Howard said there's only one place I know
> Sam said tell me quick man I got to run
> Ol' Howard just pointed with his gun
> And said that way down on Highway 61
>
> Well Mack the Finger said to Louie the King
> I got forty red, white and blue shoestrings

And a thousand telephones that don’t ring
Do you know where I can get rid of these things
And Louie the King said let me think for a minute son
And he said yes I think it can be easily done
Just take everything down to Highway 61

Now the fifth daughter on the twelfth night
Told the first father that things weren’t right
My complexion she said is much too white
He said come here and step into the light, he says hmm you’re right
Let me tell the second mother this has been done
But the second mother was with the seventh son
And they were both out on Highway 61

Now the rovin’ gambler he was very bored
He was tryin’ to create a next world war
He found a promoter who nearly fell off the floor
He said I never engaged in this kind of thing before
But yes I think it can be very easily done
We’ll just put some bleachers out in the sun
And have it on Highway 61

(Copyright © 1965 by Warner Bros. Inc.; renewed 1993 by Special Rider Music)

There are numerous ironies and levels of meaning in Dylan’s midrashic reinterpretation of the ancient biblical story of *The Akedah*. Dylan’s deeply American, vernacular “translation” of this archetypal biblical story of faith and sacrifice is, in many ways, indicative of the contemporary Jewish imagination. As Robert Hass reminds us in his poem, “Meditation at Lagunitas”: “All the new thinking is about loss. / In this it resembles all the old thinking (1–2).

We should first notice the intense conflation of time in Dylan’s lyrics and song: in seven short lines, Dylan midrashically links several key biblical stories: 1) Genesis 17, the story of God’s changing Abram’s name to Abraham, 2) Genesis 18, the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, 3) Genesis 22, story of the *Akedah*, or *The Binding of Isaac*.

In “Highway 61 Revisited,” the voice of God is still the voice of Yahweh from the Hebrew Bible, a fierce God of retribution, yet the voice of Abraham assumes the guise of a contemporary of Dylan—mid-1960s Greenwich Village hippie: “Man you

must be putting me on," Dylan's Abe says. Yes, much like the story told in the Hebrew Bible, Genesis: 17, Dylan changes the Patriarch's name. Even this aspect of the song is a rather humorous and ironic reversal (an extension through subtraction) of the original biblical story in Genesis: "Neither shall your name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee" (Genesis 17:5). In the Hebrew Bible story, God does not shorten Avram's name, but rather lengthens it (by including the name of God, represented by the letter "heh," to Avraham). Dylan's shortening both Avram and Abraham to just an American-style "Abe" suggests an ironic reversal of the closeness to God and his watchful gaze here on Earth, and his promise that Abraham "will be the father of many nations," that the patriarchal name Abraham represents. It is the reversal of the name Abraham, which contains God's name within it, that Dylan alludes to throughout the apocalyptic lyrics and carnivalesque rhythms of "Highway 61 Revisited." The song moves toward the indifference of authority figures to outright cruelty, sadism, and destruction by those in power (promoting a "next world war") and not the birth of great nations as the God of the Hebrew Bible promises Abraham. Consequently, Dylan's song might represent a terrifying state of *hester panim*, or a time when God has "turned away his face."

Of course, in the context of warfare, it is also hard to hear the name Abe, either with the Vietnam war raging in the background, or the imagined "next world war" discussed in the powerful concluding stanza of Dylan's song, without immediately imaging Abraham Lincoln and the American Civil War—thus, "Abe" functions midrashically as yet another ironic reference embedded within Dylan's song. Whereas Abraham Lincoln as "the Great Emancipator" represents freedom and justice—all is ironically reversed in "Highway 61 Revisited." The name "Abe," in the context of the 1960s underscores the lack of justice and the absence of freedom that the youth movement felt toward an increasingly militaristic American government.[iv]

Another biblical story midrashically alluded to in Dylan's song is the episode of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the twin cities that have come to be synonymous with evil. Through his midrashic storytelling in "Highway 61 Revisited," Dylan seems to equate the consumer obsessed capitalism of America—("I got forty red, white and blue shoestrings / And a thousand telephones that don't ring" (16–17)—which hides behind patriotism with ultimate evil.

Soon after God changes Abram's name to Abraham in Genesis, God reveals his plan to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah:

22 Then the men turned away from there and went toward Sodom, but
Abraham still stood before the LORD. 23 And Abraham came near and said,
“Would You also destroy the righteous with the wicked? 24 Suppose there
were fifty righteous within the city; would You also destroy the place and
not spare *it* for the fifty righteous that were in it? 25 Far be it from You to do
such a thing as this, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the
righteous should be as the wicked; far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of
all the earth do right?”
26 So the LORD said, “If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I
will spare all the place for their sakes.”
27 Then Abraham answered and said, “Indeed now, I who *am but* dust and
ashes have taken it upon myself to speak to the Lord:

28 Suppose there were five less than the fifty righteous; would You destroy
all of the city for *lack of* five?”
So He said, “If I find there forty-five, I will not destroy *it.*”
29 And he spoke to Him yet again and said, “Suppose there should be forty
found there?”
So He said, “I will not do *it* for the sake of forty.”
30 Then he said, “Let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak: Suppose thirty
should be found there?”
So He said, “I will not do *it* if I find thirty there.”
31 And he said, “Indeed now, I have taken it upon myself to speak to the
Lord: Suppose twenty should be found there?”
So He said, “I will not destroy *it* for the sake of twenty.”
32 Then he said, “Let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak but once more:
Suppose ten should be found there?”
And He said, “I will not destroy *it* for the sake of ten.” 33 So the LORD went
His way as soon as He had finished speaking with Abraham; and Abraham
returned to his place.(Genesis 18:22–33)

The knowledge of this impending destruction and loss of life, leads Abraham to desperately bargain with God on behalf of the righteous among these cities. This tense back and forth bargaining between God and Abraham in Genesis Chapter 18 is midrashically alluded to in the opening lines of Dylan’s song, particularly lines 3–6, where Abe and God seem to bargain back and forth until Abe accepts God’s demand to “do the killing out on Highway 61.”

Like an aged prophet from the Hebrew Bible, Dylan sings his song from the depths of the counter-culture revolution sweeping America—in its numerous hidden allusions and allegorical meanings, it is a midrashic commentary on the state of America at war in Vietnam, the civil unrest at home, and the rising tide of violence, and indifference overtaking the United States.

V

In the first installment of his memoirs,*Chronicles, Volume I*, Dylan talks about his early method of song composition: “I could slip in verses or lines from old spirituals or blues… What I usually did was start out with something, some kind of line written in stone and then turn it into another line—make it add up to something else than it originally did” (228). One would be hard pressed to find a more exact definition of the act of midrashic storytelling—including its subversive element and its addition and completion of an original biblical story—the line, which was originally “written in stone,” that Dylan alludes to.

The Highway 61 that Dylan takes as the name of his album and this song from the collection has its own highly mythologized history. After the failure of Reconstruction and the development of the Jim Crow south, Highway 61, which follows the contours of the great Mississippi River, became a major migration route for African Americans heading north for opportunities they were barred from in the deep South. As they traveled the nearly seventeen hundred miles of Highway 61—stretching from New Orleans all the way to Duluth, Minnesota—right next door to where Dylan grew up in a Jewish home in Hibbing, Minnesota, these African American migrants brought with them their musical traditions. One such traveler was the bluesman Robert Johnson, who, as legend has it, sold his soul to the devil on Highway 61 at a crossroads near Clarksdale, Mississippi in exchange for his musical talents. Those who were privileged to hear Johnson play surmised that this story was the only way to explain such supernatural talent.

Many music critics interpret Dylan’s use of Highway 61 as a return to his roots—the musical roots of the Blues—and, suggest that Dylan’s songs showcased how Rock and Roll (and electric guitars) could actually incorporate the best of the Blues as well as the Folk music Dylan began his career singing and creating. While I would largely agree with this assessment, I would also suggest that “Highway 61 Revisited” conveys an even deeper significance and return for Dylan, a concomitant return to his Jewish roots along with his musical ancestry.

The fact that Dylan uses the biblical story of the *Akedah* as a starting point—the "lines written in stone" that he will midrashically re-imagine and reinterpret in a contemporary American setting suggests a much larger, philosophical and thematic return. Dylan's, "Highway 61 Revisited," is both a commentary on a culture of violence that sacrifices the "best minds of his generation" (1) to warfare and slaughter, to quote another midrashic poem, Allen Ginsberg's "Howl," as well as a re-interpretation of the biblical story of the *Akedah*.

Highway 61 mostly parallels the great Mississippi River, its watery path forever linked to the heart of America through Mark Twain's canonical novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*:

> It was a monstrous big river down there—sometimes a mile and a half wide; we run nights, and laid up and hid day-times; soon as night was most gone, we stopped navigating and tied up—nearly always in the dead water under a tow-head; and then cut young cottonwoods and willows and hid the raft with them. Then we set out the lines. Next we slid into the river and had a swim, so as to freshen up and cool off; then we set down on the sandy bottom where the water was about knee deep, and watched the daylight come. Not a sound, anywheres—perfectly still—just like the whole world was asleep… (135)

Through the many musical legends who migrated up north along the land route of Highway 61 (such as Bessie Smith and Robert Johnson), and the musicians who, years later, in search of those musical traditions traveled back down south along Highway 61 (including Bob Dylan), the highway itself, much like the Mississippi River, has just as impressive a mythical life—legends that Bob Dylan midrashically tapped into while writing "Highway 61 Revisited." As Dylan suggests in *Chronicles, Volume One*:

> Highway 61, the main thoroughfare of the country blues, begins about where I came from… Duluth to be exact. I always felt like I'd started on it, always had been on it and could go anywhere from it, even down into the deep Delta country. It was the same road, full of the same contradictions, the same one-horse towns, the same spiritual ancestors. The Mississippi River, the bloodstream of the blues, also starts up from my neck of the

> woods. I was never too far away from any of it. It was my place in the universe, always felt like it was in my blood. (240–241)

Dylan's musical exploration of Highway 61 along with his turn back toward the language and stories of the Hebrew Bible in 1965 signaled a seismic shift in Jewish American literature and culture. Many critics thought that with the passing of the immigrant generation Jewish art had lost its main theme. With Dylan pointing the way toward the future through re-invigorating the past, Jewish American culture was about to explore exciting new developments in art, culture, and representation.

VI

Lenny Abramov, a Jewish Russian immigrant to New York City, is the unlikely hero of Gary Shteyngart's novel *Super Sad True Love Story*, chosen as one of the *New York Times*' ten best books of 2010. The novel is set sometime in the-not-too-distant-future, when New York City, as well as the rest of the "American empire," is coming to a close. The entire rickety structure of the U.S. government, including its long-neglected infrastructure, is about to fall apart. In one memorable scene in the novel, part of the Williamsburg Bridge collapses into the East River—all of this rotting-away, in Shteyngart's biting satire, is, of course, symptomatic of America's many moral failings. In this frighteningly all-too-real look into the future, there is no longer a two-party system of Republicans and Democrats—now there is only a need for one party which calls itself—in deference to the supposed two-party politics of years ago—the Bi-Partisans. In Shteyngart's vision of the coming American century, all citizens wear around their necks an electronic device called an äppärät, which resembles a sort of high-tech cross between the *choshen mishpat* and an advanced iPhone that constantly streams data and, most-importantly, ratings for every person one encounters (does this remind anyone of Twitter, or Facebook?).

Lenny works for a company called Post-Human Services, owned by a man named Joshie Goldman. Post-Human Services offers its rich clients eternal life, but this "product" is only available to those extremely wealthy individuals who can afford the exorbitant fees that Post-Human Services charges—or as Shteyngart puts it—High Net Worth Individuals or HNWI's. This concept of eternal life is

accomplished through painstaking blood work, healthy eating habits, and an extremely high-tech drug regimen. This painful routine of constant monitoring of clients' blood levels for fat and triglycerides, and so forth—is, of course, Shetyngart's satire of our current culture's complete obsession with youth and beauty, a preoccupation that many elevate to the level of a new religion.

When the novel opens, Lenny, our hero has been living abroad in Italy for a few years selling eternal life to HNWI's, and in the scene I examine below, he has just returned to New York to his office at Post-Human Services, which is situated at an old, and now-defunct, midtown New York synagogue, built in the Moorish architecture style. Shteyngart is probably modeling this fictional midtown synagogue on the famous Central Synagogue in New York. Shteyngart writes:

> The Post-Human Services division of Staatling-Wapachung Corporation is housed in a former Moorish-style synagogue near Fifth Avenue, a tired-looking building dripping with arabesques, kooky buttresses, and other crap that brings to mind a lesser Gaudi. Joshie bought it at auction for a mere eighty thousand dollars when the congregation folded after being bamboozled by some kind of Jewish pyramid scheme years ago. (56–57)

Shteyngart's satirical joke of the venerable midtown synagogue being sold at auction hits painfully close to home. The effect is enhanced by the fact that this travesty was caused by "a Jewish pyramid scheme"—an obvious reference to the Bernard Madoff scandal, which deeply affected numerous Jewish charitable organizations that had invested with Madoff (*The Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity*, among others). Shteyngart's midrashic reversal continues throughout this scene:

> The ark where the Torahs are customarily stashed had been taken out, and in its place hung five gigantic Solari schedule boards Joshie had rescued from various Italian train stations. Instead of the *arrivi* and *partenze* times of trains pulling in and out of Florence or Milan, the flip board displayed the names of Post-Human Services employees with the results of our latest physicals, our methylation and homocysteine levels, our testosterone and estrogen, our fasting insulin and triglycerides, and, most important, our

> “mood + stress indicators,” which were always supposed to read, “positive/playful/ready to contribute,” but which, with enough input from competitive co-workers, could be changed to “one competitive betch today” or “not a team playa this month.” On this particular day, the black-and-white flaps were turning madly, the letters and numbers mutating—a droning ticka-ticka-tika-ticka—to form new words and figures, as one unfortunate Aiden M. was lowered from “overcoming loss of loved one” to “letting personal life interfere with job” to “doesn’t play well with others.” Disturbingly enough, several of my former colleagues, including my fellow Russian, the brilliantly manic-depressive Vasily Greenbaum, were marked by the dreaded legend TRAIN CANCELLED. (56–58)

Shteyngart has midrashically replaced the ark of the Torah, which holds the scroll of the law, with a Solari flip information board that does nothing but contain data. The difference of the endless interpretations spilling out from the Torah’s thousands of stories, which have been interpreted and re-imagined by Jewish writers and thinkers for thousands of years, versus the notion of all of this being replaced by a simple Solari flip-data board, representative of our future, as well as a wry commentary on our current culture—life within the information age—is hard to miss. This satirical scene might also be a sad addendum to recent Jewish history: in a post-Holocaust world, it is difficult to see a European train schedule board in a synagogue and not have it convey numerous associations to the Holocaust-era cattle-cars and trains, which carried Jews from the farthest reaches of occupied Europe to the Nazi killing centers. [See **Figure 3** and**Figure 4**at http://academics.utep.edu/Default.aspx?tabid=69307]

Additionally, Shteyngart obviously does not choose the number five at random; rather, each of the Solari boards can be understood to replace one of the “Five Books of Moses,” the Hebrew Bible. This displacement of prayer services and the numerous activities of a synagogue, which promises eternal life in *olam haBa*, the world to come, with the headquarters of a corporation premised on delivering eternal life in *olam haZeh*, the present world, showcases Shteyngart’s familiarity with midrashic ironic reversal. In fact, these many ironies, of using midrashic exegesis to decry American culture’s displacing of literacy with raw data, becomes the major theme of Shteyngart’s novel. Despite these many midrashic interpretations, Shteyngart’s main focus remains on the present, information and ratings-obsessed cultural moment; in decrying our current culture’s reliance on data over the endless multiplicity and imagination of books, Torah exegesis, and midrashic reinterpretations, he ironically employs an extended midrashic story to

make this observation.

We can see this theme further developed during a key moment in the novel when Eunice, Lenny Abramov's love-interest in the novel, does something radical in this futuristic post-literate New York City: she attempts to read a book, or rather, she asks Lenny to read a book to her. In Shteyngart's dystopic vision of the American future, a time and place where the Ark of the Covenant has easily been replaced by a Solari information board, people do not read books anymore. Books are considered extremely "uncool" and they will lower your rating on your äppärät—clearly something to be avoided in a data-obsessed culture where a person's success is entirely dependent on one's rating. Despite the many perils of literacy in this futuristic New York, in a brave moment in the novel, Eunice attempts to understand Lenny's old, yellowed, dog-eared copy of Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*—a book about love and mortality. She asks him to read to her from the novel. However, after a few moments, Eunice appears to give up: "Eunice's gaze had weakened, and the light had gone out from her eyes, those twin black orbs usually charged with an irrepressible mandate of anger and desire" (277). Eunice's wandering attention leads to the following conversation:

> "Are you following all this?" I said. "Maybe we should stop."
>
> "I'm listening," she half-whispered.
>
> "But are you *understanding*?" I said.
>
> "I've never really learned how to read texts," she said. "Just to scan them for info."
>
> I let out a small, stupid laugh.
>
> She started to cry…
>
> "Even I'm having trouble following this. It's not just you. Reading is difficult. People just aren't meant to read anymore. We're in a post-literate age. You know, a *visual* age. How many years after the fall of Rome did it take for Dante to appear? Many, many years." (277)

The knowledge and wisdom contained in the Torah (synonymous with Judaism's textual history), has been entirely displaced in Gary Shteyngart's futuristic view of

a “post-literate” America bereft of values and all the knowledge that our print culture contained. Instead of midrashic interpretations of the Five Books of Moses, much like a retro Twitter account, the five Solari flip boards endlessly stream data concerning the health and mood of the Post-Human Services employees. Through the Solari information boards, streaming endless statistics and blood-work data, Shteyngart creates a modern midrash that also works allegorically, as the Solari boards imported from Italian train stations cannot help but bring to mind the roll-call of the European death trains. Even as the Solari boards broadcast the health and vitality of the workers at Post-Human Services, in an ironic midrashic reversal, Shteyngart has them memorializing the “post-human” quality of all that endless life. Shteyngart’s ironic displacement suggests to his readers that without the Torah and the stories and ethics and the “understanding” that goes with it—the hermeneutics and interpretation of the Torah—all is reduced to a mindless scanning of texts for data, for useless information. Indeed, it is a sterile vision of our age and the future it foretells. Through his ironic reversal of the Torah ark, Shteyngart midrashically underscores the perils of ignoring our spiritual and cultural heritage contained in the Torah and our thousands of years of textual exegesis on that foundational, living document.

After he is convinced to give up books in favor of a shiny new äppärät, Shteyngart’s hero Lenny reports to his readers: “I’m learning to worship my new äppärät’s screen, the colorful pulsating mosaic of it, the fact that it knows every last stinking detail about the world, whereas my books only know the minds of their authors” (78).

In contrast to a post-literate future, Shteyngart himself does not just draw attention to an amnesiac America, which is turning its back on classical texts and literacy, but he also draws upon many of his own literary forbears as well to make his case—extending their reach and relevancy. The entire novel of *Super Sad True Love Story* might be thought of as a recasting of the Russian master Anton Chekhov’s novella, *Three Years*. Shteyngart liberally quotes from Chekhov throughout *Super Sad True Love Story*, drawing attention to the many parallels as well as the disjunctions between Lenny Abromov’s predicament and the tragic story of Chekhov’s hero Laptev. Despite the obvious importance of Chekhov’s novella undergirding Shteyngart’s deeply literary novel (this is part of the midrashic irony he employs), I believe there is yet another Russian writer lurking beneath the surface of Shteyngart’s novel—the Jewish short story writer, who was initially hailed by the Soviet-system as an important writer and respected comrade, only to be murdered by Stalin as a Jew and a parasite on the state: Isaac Babel. Babel might have had as profound an influence on the twentieth century and contemporary Jewish imagination (from Saul Bellow and Cynthia

Ozick to Shteyngart, Nathan Englander, and Dara Horn) as any other Jewish writer. After reading of the displacement of the *aron kodesh*, the ark of the Torah, in Shteyngart's novel, Babel's short story, "My First Goose," comes to mind. Nearly a century before Shteyngart replaces the Torah ark with Solari information boards, Isaac Babel, in his well-known short story, "My First Goose," replaces the promised land of Israel with the false promise of a communist paradise on earth.

VII

"My First Goose" was published in *Red Cavalry,* a collection of Babel's stories drawn from his years fighting on the front lines with a Cossack unit (The First Cavalry of the Soviet Red Army) during the Polish-Soviet Warof 1920. The purpose of this war was to spread communism and the doctrines of the Revolution to Poland, and then, to the rest of the world. Babel was raised in a traditional Jewish home in Odessa, and according to Cynthia Ozick he "was at home in Yiddish and Hebrew, and was familiar with the traditional texts and demanding commentaries" (15). In one of his stories, Babel describes himself (the Jewish intellectual) as follows: "you have glasses on your nose and autumn in your heart" (146)**.** Despite these poetic leanings, as a young man Babel was assigned to a murderous Cossack unit fighting to spread the gospel of communism. "My First Goose" tells the story of the pivotal first hours of Babel's service with this Cossack unit (or Lyutov—his fictional, but deeply autobiographical, first-person narrator of "My First Goose," as well as many of the *Red Cavalry* stories). Things do not go well for the Jewish intellectual Lyutov. As an insular fighting group, the Cossacks have rejected him as an educated "cream-puff." To the amusement of the unit, one handsome young Cossack has thrown Lyutov's suitcase out into the street; he then impresses his comrades by farting in the intellectual's face. Yet, other men incessantly make fun of the new recruit:

> I went down on my hands and knees and gathered up the manuscripts and the old, tattered clothes that had fallen out of my suitcase. I took them and carried them to the other end of the yard. A large pot of boiling pork stood on some bricks in front of the hut. Smoke rose from it as distant smoke rises from the village hut of one's childhood, mixing hunger with intense loneliness inside me. I covered my broken little suitcase with hay, turning it into a pillow, and lay down on the ground to read Lenin's speech at the

> Second Congress of the Comintern, which *Pravda* had printed. The sun fell on me through the jagged hills, the Cossacks kept stepping over my legs, the young fellow incessantly made fun of me, the beloved sentences struggled toward me over thorny fields, but could not reach me. (232)

The situation is desperate for Lyutov. If he is not accepted by the men of his unit, he realizes he will not survive very long in the midst of war in a very unforgiving environment. Lyutov decides to act. He gets up from his intellectual pursuit of Lenin's latest speech and approaches the mistress of the house (undoubtedly a Jewish woman as are so many of the poor peasants we meet in Babel's *Red Cavalry* stories):

> I put away the newspaper and went to the mistress of the house, who was spinning yarn on the porch.
>
> "Mistress," I said, "I need some grub."
>
> The old woman raised the dripping whites of her half-blind eyes to me and lowered them again.
>
> "Comrade," she said, after a short silence. "All of this makes me want to hang myself."
>
> "Goddammit!" I muttered in frustration, shoving her back with my hand. "I'm in no mood to start debating with you."
>
> And, turning around, I saw someone's saber lying nearby. A haughty goose was waddling through the yard, placidly grooming its feathers. I caught the goose and forced it to the ground, its head cracking beneath my boot, cracking and bleeding. Its white neck lay stretched out in the dung, and the wings folded down over the slaughtered bird.
>
> "Goddammit!" I said, poking at the goose with the saber. "Roast it for me mistress!"
>
> The old woman, her blindness and her spectacles flashing, picked up the bird, wrapped it in her apron, and hauled it to the kitchen.
>
> "Comrade," she said after a short silence. "This makes me want to hang myself." As she pulled the door shut behind her. (232)

This act of violence, so out of character for the mild-mannered Lyutov (Babel's Jewish-intellectual alter-ego), impresses the Cossacks, and he is subsequently accepted by the tough, violent men of the unit. By the end of the story, he is seen reading Lenin's speech to group of fighting men gathered round him, their legs entwined together under the stars, yet the guilt of this first act of violence (there will soon be many more to come) troubles Lyutov's fitful dreams:

> …then we went to sleep in the hayloft. Six of us slept there warming each other, our legs tangled, under the holes in the roof which let in the stars.
>
> I dreamed and saw women in my dreams, and only my heart, crimson with murder, screeched and bled." (233)

It is this seminal midrashic moment in Isaac Babel's *Red Cavalry* that I believe Gary Shteyngart is building upon and extending in *Super Sad True Love Story*. In Babel's story, Lyutov is rejected by the regiment of Cossacks to which he has just been assigned to. One of the older men has, in fact, thrown his suitcase into the street and, at the beginning of the paragraph, the narrator, on his hands and knees, is in the process of retrieving its contents. Once he has collected the many manuscripts together, he places them beneath his head as a pillow of sorts. Only his rest is troubled and he quickly abandons the notion of sleep in favor of the violent act that ingratiates him to his comrades. Notice the obvious reworking of the midrash that Rashi writes extending the original biblical story of Genesis 28:11. While fleeing his brother Esau, Jacob leaves Beer-sheba and travels toward Haran. In Genesis 28:11 the Torah says that before preparing to sleep, Jacob "took of the stones of the place and put them under his head." Later in the same chapter of Genesis 28, in section 18, the language of the Hebrew Bible refers to Jacob taking one "stone," singular. Rashi, (see Babylonian Talmud, *Hullin* 91b as well), tells a midrash to help explain this seeming grammatical error or inconsistency:

> "**And he put it under his head**—He made them into a sort of cape round his head, for he was afraid of wild beasts. The (stones) began to quarrel with each other, one saying, 'Upon me shall the righteous man place his head," and the other (stone) said, 'Let him lay (it) upon me.' Immediately the Holy One Blessed Be He made them into one stone (sing, in verse 18)

that he had put under his head.'" (Rashi 28:11, *The Pentateuch with Rashi's Commentary*, p. 275)

Rashi's midrash is clearly glossed in the decisive moment in Babel's "My First Goose." Lyutov takes his manuscripts and creates a sort of pillow using the communist manuscripts just as Jacob had done with the stones during his moment of crisis fleeing his brother Esau. In the original biblical story, after his dream, Jacob then uses the stones to make an altar for an animal sacrifice to God who, in his dream, has promised Jacob the land of Israel. Lyutov's sacrifice of the goose in his short story does not lead to the dream of Jacob's ladder as it does later in Genesis Chapter 28 and God's promise of a homeland. Instead, in Babel's story this sacrifice leads to the joining of Lyutov with his fellow violent comrades in this vicious Cossack unit, off fighting a war for the dubious mission of spreading the gospel of communism to neighboring Poland. Thus, Babel's "My First Goose" functions as a midrashic extension of the seminal story in Genesis. Rather than gaining the promised land of universal brotherhood, the communist dream that both Babel and his first-person narrator Lyutov are so enamored with at the outset of *Red Cavalry*, in actuality, what transpired was the murder of Isaac Babel before one of Stalin's firing squads. Thus, Babel's personal history adds another tragic layer of meaning and commentary to "My First Goose."[v] [See **Figure 5** and**Figure 6**at http://academics.utep.edu/Default.aspx?tabid=69307]

In Babel's retelling of this midrash, the stones that would become part of Jacob's altar to God and the basis for the future temple on that same site are replaced by the many communist manuscripts contained in his little suitcase, which are gathered into a pillow. Lyutov's sleep does not lead to a dream of redemption by God and the promise of a great nation and homeland as in the biblical story of Jacob's ladder. Instead, it foretells a midrashic replacement of God's temple and promise with the hope for the new religion of communism and Lenin's Comintern speech reprinted in *Pravda*. As we have already seen, this displacement of the Torah with other political or social ideas is glossed throughout Gary Shteyngart's 2010 novel, *Super Sad True Love Story*, particularly in the scene with the Solari flip boards replacing the Torah ark.

So, to recapitulate the narrative timeline we have been sketching: the redactors of the Talmud tell a midrashic story to explain a grammatical inconsistency in Genesis 28; many centuries later Rashi re-interprets and retells this talmudic midrash in his commentary on the Hebrew Bible; in the early twentieth century Isaac Babel recasts this midrash to explain the predicament of being a Jewish intellectual in a Cossack unit fighting for the spread of Communism; and early in the twenty-first century Gary Shteyngart builds upon each of these midrashim to

reinterpret the story anew in his satire, *Super Sad True Love Story*, using the displacement of the wisdom and multiple interpretations of the Torah with simple Solari information boards to prophesize his vision of America's future bereft of midrashic storytelling. In following this timeline we can begin to glimpse the many ways that midrash is central to understanding the contemporary Jewish imagination.

VIII

To understand more fully the contemporary Jewish imagination and the ways midrash spurs creativity, I turn my attention here to the work of renowned contemporary artist Tobi Kahn, who, from the very beginning of his career three decades ago, has been using biblical texts and stories to connect viewers to the stories of their own lives and experiences.

While Gary Shteyngart has created a modern midrash in which the ark of the covenant contains Solari train schedule boards to replace the ancient stories of the Bible, graphic artist, Tobi Kahn has not created a metaphorical ark as his midrash, but rather an actual *aron kodesh*, *Orah* (1987). *Orah* was originally commissioned as a moveable ark to hold a Torah scroll for prayer services in a New York-area hospice. In place of the customary lions holding the rounded form of the Decalogue, Kahn has created a beautiful, and somewhat abstract, landscape painting with two mountains in the distance and a flowing river moving from the right foreground of the painting into the distant mountains in the center of the painting at the "vanishing point" of the image corresponding with the lowering arc of the second mountain to the right. In this evocative painting, Kahn tells a story about *olam haZeh* (this present world) and *olam haBa* (the world to come).

In an interview with art critic and historian Emily Bilski, Kahn notes: "Although Judaism has emphasized words, language, and commentary, I have found the visual elements of the tradition equally illuminating. For me, the life of the spirit is integrally bound up with the beauty of the world, with the rituals and symbols that are a Jewish medium to transcendence. Like language, what we see can be a benediction" (6). [See **Figure 7** at http://academics.utep.edu/Default.aspx?tabid=69307]

As Bilski explains, Kahn builds up the surfaces of his paintings by

> adding over ten layers of gesso, each layer sanded before the next one is applied, to ensure an extremely smooth surface, with no trace of the texture of the material. On this prepared surface, Kahn executes a black-and white drawing; he then starts building up the surface with a mixture of modeling paste and acrylic polymer. This is followed by eight to ten layers of opaque pigment, over which Kahn applies a final fifteen layers of transparent washes of acrylic paint that resembles glazes. Thus he achieves the richly luminous surfaces that have been a hallmark of his expressive paintings. By building up multiple layers of modeling paste and pigment, he creates tactile surfaces resonating with a rare depth of color. (16)

As Bilski explains, just like most midrashic art, there is paradox and contradiction (irony) in much of Tobi Kahn's artwork: "a simultaneous embrace of the human experience and celebration of the physical world, along with a desire to transcend that world and achieve a higher spiritual state" (17). This paradox is poignantly seen in Kahn's portable ark for a Torah scroll, *Orah*, acrylic on wood (1987). This work of ritual art tells a midrashic story of Kahn's own family history. Kahn's father was born in Frankfurt Am Mainz, Germany, a member of the Breuer's Kehillah. For generations of Kahns (Kohanim, members of the priestly tribe), Germany was home—until during Kristallnacht in 1933, an uncle of Kahn's was among the very first group of Jews murdered by the Nazis. The remaining members of the family soon managed to flee Germany for America, and Kahn was born and raised as a member of the Breuer's Kehillah, which was re-established by Rav Joseph Breuer in the Washington Heights neighborhood of upper Manhattan. Kahn's father is, in fact, a "*haver*" one of Rav Breuer's inner circle of adherents and leading members of the Kehillah, the Breuer community. Although the Kahn family found respite and safety in Washington Heights in what became euphemistically known as "Frankfurt on the Hudson," given the Kahn family history, the necessity for an easily transportable ark—one that can easily be moved in times of crisis and exile—becomes apparent.

Orah contains other midrashic and historic elements as well. The architectural form of the ark is simple and hearkens back to Shaker furniture, which influenced the American arts and crafts movement and the furniture of Gustav Stickley. Kahn's borrowing from this somewhat obscure Christian religious sect for his variation on the traditional form of a Torah ark deeply resonates with

Andy Statman's continual borrowing and improvisation with indigenous American musical forms: Blues, Jazz, and Bluegrass. As already mentioned, the central image in most arks from at least the middle ages, are the twin forms of the Ten Commandments—the Decalogue. In Kahn's American reimagining of this central conceit, however, the two rounded tablets are replaced by the form of two mountains with a river running through them. Although there are clearly two mountains discerned in *Orah*, Emily Bilski sees in this landscape painting a modern reinterpretation on the midrash on *Proverbs*, 68.9, which tells the story of how there were actually three mountains present at the giving of the Torah: Mount Tabor, Mount Carmel, and Mount Sinai, each competing to be the site for the giving of the Torah (*Ritual Art*, p. 26). Bilski sees the suggestion of yet a third mountain ciphered within *Orah* in the hollow, rounded door knob on the front of the ark. While I agree with Bilski's brilliant commentary on the midrashic elements hidden within Kahn's sculptural form and the painting contained within *Orah*, I believe there may be yet another hidden meaning contained in *Orah*.

This painting calls to mind the famous landscape artists of the Hudson River School of landscape painting: Thomas Cole, Frederic Church, Asher B. Durand, even Sanford Gifford in the luminous, shimmering surface of Kahn's paintings, including *Orah*, a Hebrew name, which means "light." As a boy, Tobi Kahn spent each of his summers in Tannersville, NY, a vacation spot in the Northern Catskill Mountains, as his family would follow Rav Breuer up to some of the highest peaks in New York State. I see the river running through the center of *Orah* as a visual representation of the Hudson River, which not only meanders beside the Catskill Mountains, Kahn's summer home, but also flowed past Kahn's boyhood residence in Washington Heights overlooking the Hudson River one hundred and twenty miles south of Tannersville. Thus Kahn's abstract reimagining of a Hudson River School landscape such as Cole's *Sunrise From the Catskill Mountains* is not only an homage to his childhood homes, but it is also a means for Kahn to tell a personal story of family redemption in this art work. Through *Orah*, Kahn also suggests the union of ancient Jewish culture with indigenous and contemporary American art forms. In creating his landscape midrash as a house for a Torah scroll, Kahn is also suggesting the many imaginative ways that contemporary America has served as a home for the Torah—its stories, wisdom, and lessons—and the myriad, new interpretations being spun from the ancient Hebrew scroll contained within *Orah* by so many contemporary writers and artists. Thus, Kahn is typologically and midrashically transposing three Northern Catskill high-peaks for the ancient Judean hills from the Hebrew Bible, and in so doing, through the shimmering surface of *Orah* he allows us to glimpse the reflection of an endlessly inventive contemporary midrashic imagination.

Kahn's interpretive improvisation with indigenous American art forms and religious movements from Shaker furniture to Hudson River School landscape painting to his reimagining of the ancient ritual object of an *aron kodesh*, parallels the powerful midrashic imagination evidenced by Andy Statman, Bob Dylan, and Gary Shteyngart. Although it might not be immediately apparent, upon studying *Orah*, Kahn's transgressive and subversive imagination is stunning. When one considers *Orah* as a functioning piece of ritual art, a working *aron kodesh*, a house to hold a Torah scroll, the holiest object in Judaism, its full import and beauty is recognizable. Kahn is not making his statement of blurring borders and boundaries between old-world ideas of sacred and secular, between what constitutes "acceptable religious iconography," at the margins of Jewish culture, but instead he is forcing viewers to take up his aesthetic and spiritual challenge right at the center of Jewish life and ritual. Kahn confronts these questions and ideas through the literal house of Judaism's most sacred object. All of Kahn's ritual art objects are made within the halakhic specifications and are fully functioning ritual objects. Kahn's midrashic imagination purposefully blurs the boundaries between text and commentary and suggests a seemingly ceaseless number of interpretations for his Torah ark. In so doing he creates a contemporary midrash on the ways that New York City itself, and by extension America, has been a welcoming home for Torah and the millions of Jewish people who have made their modern lives on the shores of the Hudson river. Stern suggests all great midrashic works should "tease out the nuances of Scripture rather than use (artistic) interpretation to close them off" (3). This is precisely what Kahn's art does: it invites viewers to re-imagine ritual and reinterpret biblical stories through aesthetic beauty. Whether he slyly references ancient midrashic stories about the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, as Bilski suggests, or whether he evocatively alludes to Shaker simplicity or the complex story of exile and survival that is his own personal and familial history, Kahn's Jewish imagination works midrashically—in so doing he returns all viewers of his art to the fundamental principles of Judaism and the complex negotiations required of cosmopolitan Orthodox citizens of the contemporary American scene. Rather than seem heretical and problematic, as might have been the view of an earlier Jewish audience, say a mid-nineteenth-century Hirschian worldview, in the twenty-first American century, Kahn's objects of the spirit truly inspire all who view them.

IX

The last midrashic work I would like to take a look at is a series of photographs taken of “décollage” images by Ahron Weiner, a contemporary New York artist. His show, titled *Bible AdInfinitum*, opened in June of 2011 at *Superfine*, a Brooklyn gallery in Dumbo. I was able to attend this opening with my Jewish Studies students from the University of Texas at El Paso when we were all in New York for my summer class, *New York Through the Literary Imagination*. Weiner’s midrashic aim for *Bible AdInfinitum* is to combine advertising “décollage” and digital photography to uncover new interpretations of the Hebrew Bible. The French word “décollage” translates into English literally as “take-off” or “to become unglued.” Essentially, what Weiner does is walk the streets of Manhattan looking for old advertising posters placed around the city at major construction sites. After many months, or years, (just ask any New Yorker about the speed of contractors and construction in Manhattan…), there could be twenty or thirty advertising posters pasted one on top of the other plastered onto the protective scaffolding around a construction site. In an act of “archeological semiology,” Weiner removes a large section of these pasted-together advertising posters and, back at his Long Island studio, begins the task of stripping away at the palimpsest to reveal iconic images and story fragments redolent of tales from the Hebrew Bible.

Unlike Tobi Kahn’s painstakingly slow building up of an image through numerous layers, Ahron Weiner employs a reverse method of décollage, of tearing at a surface to reveal the hidden meaning within. Instead of an image being built up of all or parts of existing images (as is done in collage), it is created by cutting, tearing away, or otherwise removing pieces of an original image. It is this “un-mooring” of the original image from its advertising intent that frees it to be manipulated back into a biblical context.

In an interview, I asked Weiner to elaborate on his choice of décollage as his compositional method. He responded: “I think the ancient Kabbalistic tradition of permutation—rearranging words and letters to uncover deeper meanings-—foreshadows what I’m doing. The semiotic archaeological aspect of this series quite literally echoes the work of archaeologists working on *tels* across the Middle East, seeking physical evidence of biblical sites and stories” (interview). Weiner’s attempt to find hidden meanings in advertising images, particularly allusions and reinterpretations of ancient biblical stories, partakes in the midrashic imagination that has animated so much of Jewish art over the centuries. The element of ironic reversal, which, as we have already seen in this essay, is a defining characteristic of the current midrashic imagination, is apparent in Weiner’s image *The Creation of Man*—a work that retells a Hebrew Bible story (Genesis 1:26) through obvious allusion to Michelangelo’s *The Creation of Adam* from the *Sistine Chapel*, one of

the most revered and copied images in Christian iconography and Western art. Yet Weiner sees this image as relevant to the Hebrew Bible as well: “My compositional appropriation of Michelangelo’s iconic Sistine Chapel fresco in my “Creation of Man” is relevant, important, and ironic. In addition to being an homage to an artist I revere, it suggests all that Christianity appropriated from Judaism” (interview). [See **Figure 8**at http://academics.utep.edu/Default.aspx?tabid=69307]

Weiner goes on to suggest that through *Bible AdInfinitum*, he is “appropriating advertising—a medium that appropriates from everything else—to retell these biblical stories. Whereas the Bible is eternal, holy, and written by God, advertising is temporal, unholy, and most certainly written by man” (interview). Despite this “unholy” quality infusing advertising, Weiner still believes that he can use this medium to retell these ancient biblical stories. When I visited the opening of *Bible AdInfintum* in Brooklyn in June of 2011, I witnessed an eclectic mix of advertising executives, art gallery owners, inquisitive Williamsburg hipsters, former and current Yeshiva students, and my students and I from West Texas. All of us together stood around discussing these ancient biblical stories as if they were current news—whether it was the rape of Dinah (Genesis 34) or the Creation of Man (Genesis 1:26)—stories uncovered through Weiner’s décollage technique.

Weiner has been an advertising executive for several decades, and, he says about drawing biblical tales out of the most unlikely of places: “I didn’t set out to create an advertising-based abstract biblical narrative. I’ve been working with *AdInfinitum* since 2002—it took me eight years before I realized that I could use it to tell the biblical narrative. This series is a synthesis of my three major influences: Jewish history, art history, and advertising. It’s that mother’s milk, sub-rosa, informing my artistic expression” (interview).

Although graphic artists—Kahn and Weiner—use somewhat oppositional methods of composition, they share a similar fascination with the ancient stories of the Hebrew Bible: they both give new life to ancient biblical stories and recast Jewish history on the contemporary American stage thus making it relevant and meaningful to new audiences.

X

In *Midrash and Literature*, David Stern asks us to consider the many ways we, as citizens of the modern world, inscribe meaning in our lives. Stern asks: "how are we to secularize our understanding of [midrash] this inherently religious literature, as we must, without profaning it?" (2). The numerous artists and writers that I analyze here, Andy Statman, Bob Dylan, Isaac Babel, Gary Shteyngart, Tobi Kahn, and Ahron Weiner challenge us to find new and innovative ways of incorporating biblical stories into our contemporary American lives.

Before I conclude, I would be remiss if I did not mention that in a future essay I will be looking at the particular ways that Jewish women writers, interpreters, and artists—people such as Dara Horn, who reanimates lost Jewish worlds and languages, Basya Schechter, the lead singer for *Pharoah's Daughter*, and biblical scholars Nechama Lebowitz and Aviva Zornberg—after thousands of years of being silenced and shut out of midrashic storytelling and biblical exegesis, are reinvigorating this ancient form of analysis. The incredible variety of midrashic reinterpretations currently ongoing by female scholars and artists requires and deserves its own analysis—one that looks at the many ways that for centuries women's voices were silenced. Today women midrashists, having largely overcome this centuries-long neglect, are among the most innovative practitioners of this ancient exegetical compositional method.

XI

As Dylan says, it's funny how circles always seem to hook up with themselves. Or as Walt Whitman reminds us in his meditation on the timelessness of change, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," when it comes to people connecting to each other through great art, "it avails not, time nor place—distance avails not" (20). As I sit in the Charles Street Synagogue, surrounded by my students from West Texas, together we listen to Andy Statman play his clarinet in the heart of Greenwich Village, like the Hassidic masters of old, listeners and fellow travelers, each of us can begin to discern a path to redemption through *niggun*, through song. Although Bob Dylan was speaking about Aaron Neville when he said, "There's so much spirituality in his singing that it could even bring sanity back in a world of madness" (*Chronicles*, p. 178), had he ever stumbled into the Charles Street Synagogue on a Thursday night, he would have to agree that the same description would just as easily apply to Andy Statman as well.

Whether contemplating one's life journey in a makeshift synagogue through Tobi Kahn's painstaking layering of abstract forms into shimmering surfaces which reveal the journey of contemporary Jewish history, or whether one considers the travails of Jewish history and the plight of African American's migrating north up Highway 61 while listening to Bob Dylan's apocalyptic songs, or perhaps while viewing Ahron's Weiner's slow, meticulous scraping away at contemporary advertising culture to reveal a small biblical kernel within its unholy wrapping, when one notices the smoke rising from Isaac Babel's lonely childhood hut and when one heed's Gary Shteyngart's prophetic warning of a post-literate world (think of the implications for the people of the book!)—we are, each of us, participants in the midrashic imagination. Midrash is what unites each of these distinct Jewish artists—the vibrant, renewable, midrashic imagination, which is rediscovered anew for each generation. We today in the twenty-first century are seeing the completion of a circle—the long arc of Jewish imagination that knows no linguistic limitations and admits no geographic boundaries. Nearly half a century ago at the height of the youth movement in the 1960s, Bob Dylan stridently warned his listeners: "Don't look back." For the artists and writers that I examine here, as well as so many other contemporary Jewish artists from Jerusalem to New Orleans, one need not turn around to see what might be gaining ground. With the steadying force of the timeless midrashic imagination behind them, contemporary Jewish artists confidently face the future knowing that following the long arc of tradition, like a circle hooking up with itself, will, eventually, bring them right back home again.

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[i]The *niggun* or tune is called “*Mizmor L’David*,” since the Rebbe sang the niggun to the words of Psalm 23. For more information about this composition see the website www.modzitz.org.

[ii]According to midrash, even *taggin*, the crown-like calligraphic flourishes that appear over certain Hebrew letters in the Torah, have great significance and meaning.

[iii]I am indebted to the work of Professor Sandor Goodhart, Director of Jewish Studies at Purdue University, who, through numerous discussions on midrash,

helped codify my argument presented in these pages.

[iv]For a wonderful discussion of the youth movement and the 1960s counter-culture, see Morris Dickstein's definitive "biography" of the decade, *The Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties*. Dickstein's title is an allusion to the influential Bob Dylan song of the same name.

[v]See also Isaac Babel's, "The Story of My Dovecote," for even more ironic and tragic parallels between the violence within his stories and the violence that ended his life.