H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Dina Stein. *Textual Mirrors: Reflexivity, Midrash, and the Rabbinic Self.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012. 216 pp. $79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-4436-6.

Reviewed by Herbert Basser (Department of Religious Studies - Queens University)

Published on H-Judaic (May, 2013)

Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

Exploring the Wor(l)ds of Rabbinic Story

All stories, while addressing the human condition, as a matter of course must be deciphered through the symbols of their respective cultures. What else is available to the teller? For Jews the rich wording of the Hebrew Bible, a hidden revelation seeking meaning, provides the teller of the tale (based on factual account or not) with a platform to engage in the tale. In *Textual Mirrors* a quasi-postmodern read, Stein plays the role of the equivalents of Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Claude Levi-Strauss, Umberto Eco, Salvador Dali, Dov Noy, and the Marx brothers. All of them, speaking through her, analyze various *aggadot* (stories) portraying *une tranche de vie* in accord with suppositions provided by psychology, sociology, anthropology, comparative literature, myth, semiotics, folklore, and satire.

The book represents a theater of brave and daring forays into the meaning behind the meaning of stories in midrash compilations and Talmuds. Not open to tests of falsification, Stein's work cannot be proven wrong (or right) on any assertions–it is a matter of imaginative guesses and tantalizing images. Trying to find social realities behind any texts is always fraught with pitfalls and the creativity of the search always depends on making plausible choices. Of course all story shows conflict: conflicts with self, with others–the *id* versus the *ego*, the master and the student, the nations and Israel. And as Stein digs into story, one palpably senses her asking: Is this a surrealistic story to be analyzed by recourse to boilerplate genres (e.g., the tall tale made famous by such characters as Baron von Munchausen) or should we consider some kind of mythic infrastructure, or some philosophic allegory, or some mixture of all of these? Here the mindset of the commentator cannot be overcome. And these very tales have been analyzed by many over the course of a thousand years.

Here themes are varied. Is the story a psychological drama of characters looking at themselves from the inside and from the outside? It is the basis of therapy to critique a reduced self when seen outside the body, as if another. Stein considers how the stories show us a projection of the self, of the society. She shows us both engagement and rejection of foreign literatures (in one

case the Jewish hero resists what Ovidâs Narcissus could not). She looks at the mirror of the self against the ideal, the tension of conforming to authority against the freedom of the individual to decide matters. She shows us stories which betray anxiety over sexuality and gender issues, holding chaos at bay. All the while she wrestles with the magic of language that constructs personal universes as opposed to shared spaces, in order to explore possible selves. Ultimately her work is concerned with finding the social order that God wants. Who can dare interpret the divine word into the complex dynamic of any particular circumstance? What is to be seen as satire and what as accurate description? These issues and a plethora of others may create some convoluted gridlock for those uncomfortable in following her paths.

Stein consciously treats some stories of her heroes as seamless wholes, dependent on other stories–to be looked at all at once. The life of any one text breathes throughout many other texts–what a rabbi does in one text may inform what he does in other texts. Let me dwell on one example–her chapter 1–of her methodology, which might shed light on her title. A story which found its way into almost every major corpus of classical Judaism tells of the piety of a young shepherd meeting the famed high priest Shimon Ha-Zaddik. Now the latter routinely refused to consume the *asham*–guilt offerings prescribed on the eighth day for Nazirites who became ritually defiled for seven days (by unavoidably touching a dead body). The defiled Nazirite had to shave his/her head as did all Nazirites, even pure ones, when their term of vow ended. But additionally the defiled ones had to offer a guilt sacrifice (and *olah*–burnt offering and sin offering), after which they had to begin their term of the Nazirite vow (still avoiding wine products and haircuts) anew. Since virtually everyone by that point would normally regret their impulsive Nazirite vow, that regret sufficed perforce to invalidate the ensuing offerings and vows (which needed to be offered with enthusiasm âfor God–for the sake of heavenâ in order for their term to renew). This exegesis is the point of *b. Nazir* 4b introducing the story and Stein thinks the exegesis is something else, as we will soon see. Thus the saintly priest would not partake of the guilt offerings which were invalidated by the normal aforementioned misgivings and had not been offered for the sake of heaven. Simon the Justâs interpretation of the Nazirite vow according to the Talmud was that it must be for âGodâ (Num. 6:2), for the sake of heaven–*le-shem shamayim*–and not for some self-serving impulsive motive. The saintly priest, atypically for him, gladly accepted the offering of this southern shepherd. (Here Stein notes a connection with King David [but not versions like Yerushalmi Nedarim 1:1 and Num Rab. 10:7, which explicitly describe him as âred-headed, *ademoni*, with beautiful eyes, and goodly appearanceâ], utilizing verbatim scriptureâs description of David in 1 Sam. 16:12, which verse she quotes.) So why did Simon accept his offering and consider this shepherdâs case to be deserving of his attention? Intrigued by his hair and eyes, the priest asks (as she translates) âMy son, why did you see fit to destroy this beautiful hair of yours?â (p. 18). Perhaps to strengthen her point that the story is driven by sight she might have better rendered *mah raâita* literally as âWhat did you *see*â?

The answer to what he saw follows by way of story: One day this boy happened to see his reflection in a spring-well (while going to fill vessels). He noticed his flowing locks of hair as reflected in the water and immediately his animal drives began to entice him âto make me rashâ (*pahaz*). She might have mentioned, to strengthen her argument, its *locus classicus* âpahaz-kemayimâ (so noted by Ran [Nissim of Gerona] in his comments to *b. Nazir 4b*), Gen 48:4 in sexual contexts. According to Radakâs [David Kimhi] Genesis commentary and his dictionary, the phrase refers to the rush of evil intentions, perfectly compared to water, the nature of both being to flood every available nook and cranny. So too in this story the water itself embodied the potentially drowning tides of fantasy engulfing the *Nazir* by showing himself his enticing head of hair. But he, unlike Narcissus and unlike Jacobâs sons, informed the animus of this drive he was cutting off the urge objectified in his hair. This single heroic act of self control constituted in perfect form a Nazirite vow: âYou wicked one [dissociating himself from his prideful alter ego] â¦ I swear that I will shave you for the sake of heavenâ (pp. 18-19).The vow, made for the sake of heaven, stopped his erotic urges from overcoming him. This kind of vow, according to Simon, the only kind to effect the perfect Nazirite, became an accepted view for codified rabbinic tradition. The story appears in the Talmuds as justification for a rabbinic view of what effects the vow.

So the question of âwhat did your seeâ in turn brought the answer of his reflective seeing into himself and into the image within the water. The resulting internal conflict was cut short by his resolve to become a Nazirite and destroy his erotic hair. I mention parenthetically, that eroticism of male hair is alluded to in Gen R. 11:7 by utilizing the Syriac expression in Christian texts: âcutting off hair because of its âeroticismââ (*shtiutha,* Codex Harris 4a), which Christian act is com-

pared by the rabbis to Jewish circumcision.

The hermeneutic background here is intriguing. Conveniently, the phrasing of Num. 6:2 defines âpronouncing a Nazirite vowâ as âseparating and sanctifying oneâs drives [here his hair symbolizes his essential challenge] for Godâ and so seemed to foresee the circumstances of this boy. He, uniquely, phrased the vow to conquer his passions âfor the sake of heaven.â Stein suggests Simon midrashically (a method of exegesis) read the verse as âperform the wonder of vowingâ (rather than the conventional âclearly pronouncing a vowâ) which I would tend to see as overkill with little point but must admit it is possible to read the biblical *yafli lidor* in such a way. I know Jacob ben Asher, author of the Tur legal code and a biblical commentary, claims it means âto accomplish miraculous feats by vowingâ and also claimed this to be the *pshat* of the verse. Now Stein notes the saintly Simon told the shepherd that just for this case (and hopefully for other Nazirites like him) the scriptures engineered its curious phrasing. The wonder for Stein, unlike for Tur, is the fortuitous congruence between the words of scripture (to effect the Nazarite state through a vow unquestionably for the sake of heaven) and the coincidental real world (of the story) where this actually happened.

Now for the psychological and social analysis, which is really the central focus of this book: The story is told by Simon the high priest as he reflects upon the direct internal story of the Nazirite. Both Simon (who saw the Naziriteâs hair) and the Nazirite (who saw into himself by looking at and reflecting on his reflected image) have their stories triggered by seeing something unusual. Stein notes the story is driven by sight–seeing reflections, seeing himself as other: inner other and outer other (detached from himself to allow critical analysis). But the story also is about rabbinic sages who struggle between vain narcissism and serving a higher ideal. The priest and the Nazirite are both embodiments of holiness and so find possible other selves in their dialogue. It is a rabbinic story and the heroes have ârabbinic selves,â one unwittingly fulfilling a scripture, the other recognizing the congruence between scripture and the boyâs behavior. Simon is not just a priest here; he reads scripture closely in the rabbinic mode.

The young shepherd is described as having a âhead of curlsâ and Stein shrewdly sees here sees the connection to Song 5:7 and its *midrashim* (exegesis), where the image of âcurlsâ not only denotes outwardly attractive features but inwardly represents the intricacies and beauty of Torah interpretation, the world of the sages. She also finds reason here to discuss the tension in rabbinic society between those who championed asceticism and those who denounced it. In short the story, for her, provides a reflection of the living issues within the social and religious contexts of its authors.

Steinâs work reduces and enlarges for us the mystery of rabbinic stories to the realms of psychology, sociology, and anthropology but keeps intact the mystique and beauty of the rabbinic story *qua* story through her own reflexivity. Thus her title *Textual Mirrors* produces an infinite progression of mirrors mirroring mirrors forward and infinite regressions backward into words, rabbinic minds, biblical texts–and unwritten outlooks.

Personally I think she might have gained some literary traction by noting the Yerushalmi and Numbers Rabba texts that tell us that Simon opens his narrative by noting the Nazirite â*came up to me* [i.e., up to the Temple]â and then tells what he heard from the shepherd. Then, to highlight the symmetry which frames the story, Simon closes the shepherdâs narrative by noting he himself *lowered* his priestly âheadâ so as to kiss the heroâs âheadâ–literally a meeting of and figuratively a blending of the heads. In effect, the story is framed by the lowly shepherd raising himself and the exalted priest lowering himself, physically and metaphorically, to forge a bond. Stein actually sees the bonding of identities as a major theme in the story but inexplicably omits to dwell on the kiss on the head (which is in her text). This kiss, this union, shows more than Freud, Jung, or Durkheim could ever say about melding identities. But her choice of text precluded entering this particular hermeneutic circle of âcoming upâ and âlowering,â which she more than makes up for in the rest of this fascinating book. If nothing else, the volume brings one to reflect upon the intricate stitching of images and words that weaves the fabric of rabbinic *aggada*.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic

Citation: Herbert Basser. Review of Dina Stein, *Textual Mirrors: Reflexivity, Midrash, and the Rabbinic Self.* H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. May, 2013.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37972

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.