

The Darshan: Preacher and Teacher of Talmudic Times

by Marc Bregman

Throughout the Rabbinic period, one main instrument of popular education-particularly what would today be called "adult education" - was the scriptural sermon given in the synagogue on Sabbaths and Festivals. The "preacher" who fulfilled this important pedagogic function was known as the *darshan*, from the Hebrew root DRS^H, meaning to interpret or explicate scripture. The public explication and elaboration of the Bible has a long and varied history. Its roots may well reach back even to Biblical times (see, for example, Ezra 7:10). And though public preaching in the synagogue may have been banned by the Byzantine authorities at the end of the Talmudic period, Jewish homiletical art did not die, but has continued to flourish up to the present day. While a great proportion of the voluminous Talmudic-Midrashic literature seems to be derived from actual sermons given in the synagogue, the development of the Darshan's role and the nature of his oral homily are not entirely clear. For, the main sources of our information about this living institution are literary adaptations of such homilies which were largely redacted at the close of the Talmudic period when oral preaching was apparently in decline. These sources reveal some aspects of Jewish homiletics which were remarkably similar and others which were surprisingly dissimilar to what we are accustomed to in the modern synagogue. The following discussion is an attempt to describe some of these aspects by looking at the role of the Darshan as preacher and teacher of Torah.

Masters of the Aggadah

Though many Darshanim were certainly ordained rabbis, a scholar who was truly master of all liturgical skills was apparently rare enough to deserve special note. Such a talented teacher was R. Elazar berabbi Shimon, who served as "Torah reader (or: "Bible teacher"), prayer leader (or: "Mishnah teacher"), synagogue poet and preacher" (Leviticus Rabbah 30:1 according to some versions, cf. ed. Margulies, p. 690). However, some rabbis seem to have specialized more in Halakhah (*ba'ale halakhah*), while others were more renowned for their homiletical achievements. It was apparently these "masters of the Aggadah" (*ba'ale aggadah*) who normally served as Darshanim in the synagogue.

Some synagogues seem to have had not only a head rabbi who preached the main sermon on the Sabbath, but "assistant preachers," who received a salary, as well. This arrangement naturally led to the occasional exegetical disagreement, as the following story illustrates:

Rabbi Levi and Rabbi Yehudah bar Nahman would receive two *selaim* each Sabbath to assemble and occupy the congregation before Rabbi Yohanan would enter. Rabbi Levi entered and taught that Jonah the prophet was from the tribe of Zebulun. But when Rabbi Yohanan entered he taught that Jonah was from the tribe of Asher. The next week Rabbi Levi said to Rabbi Yehudah bar Nahman: Though it is your Sabbath, you take the two *selaim*, but let me enter and assemble the congregation before Rabbi Yohanan. When he entered he said to the congregation: Though Rabbi Yohanan taught last Sabbath that Jonah

was from the tribe of Asher, actually his father was from the tribe of Zebulun and his mother from the tribe of Asher.

According to the version of this story in Genesis Rabbah, R. Yohanan responded to Rabbi Levi's resolution of their difference of opinion by expressing the hope that his assistant would "deserve" to teach his own opinion when he became a full-fledged Darshan. Happily, the Midrash tells us that Rabbi Levi did go on to serve in that capacity for no less than twenty-two years (Genesis Rabah 98:11, cf. P. Sukkah V.1, 55a, Deuteronomy Rabah 7:8).

Itinerant Preachers

Smaller synagogues, however, were not able to employ even one Darshan on a regular basis; and some of the Darshanim seem to have been itinerant preachers (see B. Sanhedrin 70a, 88a, Hullin 27a, cf. Matthew 4:23, Acts 13:4). The arrival of a Darshan in such a smaller community was an event of such significance that certain leniencies in the observance of the Sabbath were permitted to allow people living nearby to attend: "A man may make conditions about his Eruv by saying: If a sage comes from the East, let my Eruv be to the East; but if from the West, let my Eruv be to the West; if one comes to here and there, let me go to the place I wish" (M. Eruvin III.5). Similarly, though it was generally deemed improper to run on the Sabbath, it was acceptable and even praiseworthy to do so in order to arrive in time to hear a sermon (see B. Berakhot 6b, Sheiltot Bereshit 1, Tanhuma Bereshit 2).

A Darshan arriving in such a community did not necessarily know ahead of time on what verse he would be expected to preach (see Leviticus Rabbah 3:6). This is understandable in light of the fact that in Talmudic Palestine there was no single fixed lectionary cycle. Rather, each community seems to have read through the Torah, not in one year, but in about three years, determining its own consecutive Torah portions and related Haftarah portions. This custom made considerable demands on the Darshan's ability to improvise an entire sermon on short notice. However, anyone planning to preach was warned against relying on previous knowledge and experience to give him the right words on the spur of the moment. The Darshan was expected to rehearse what he was going to say on any particular occasion; though the actual delivery could be, and most likely was, largely extemporaneous (see Exodus Rabbah 40:1).

Aggadah: A Laughing Countenance

The lively and dramatic inventiveness of the Darshan's homily was probably one of the main factors that contributed to its enormous popularity, particularly among the less academically inclined levels of society. Indeed, the sages bewail the fact that many people avoided the rigorous study of the Halakhah, preferring instead to listen to the more entertaining Aggadic elaborations of Biblical stories (see, for example, Pesiqta DeRav Kahana 12:3). Significantly, in comparing the major divisions of rabbinic study, the Bible is described as having "an angry countenance," Mishnah "a neutral countenance," and Talmud "an understanding countenance"; but Aggadah is described as having "a laughing countenance" (Pesiqta deRav Kahana 12:25). Such a statement points up the fact that the

Darshan, while fulfilling an important pedagogic function, was expected to do so with a sense of humor and even with an attitude of intellectual play.

One feature of preaching in Talmudic times that added to the listeners' affective involvement in the educational process was the possibility for the active participation of the audience within the framework of the homily. Several sources suggest that the sermon, like the liturgy, was sometimes punctuated by congregational responses such as the public recitation of the Kaddish (See Ecclesiastes Rabbah 9:15.7; Midrash to Proverbs Ch. 10). One kind of homily, found frequently in the Tanhuma and related midrashic works, actually may have begun with a question raised from the audience, usually about a halakhic point, which was asked in a formalized pattern: "Let our Master teach us..." (*yelamedenu rabbenu...*).

A variation on this pattern, somewhat similar to the format found in the Sheiltot, is recorded in the Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat 30a-b). Here, Rabbi Tanhum develops an elaborate homily in answer to a question about the permissibility of extinguishing a lamp on the Sabbath in order to help a sick person to sleep. However, other scholars could be overcome by such questions offered from the audience. It is related that when Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi sent a scholar to the people of Simonia at their request, they built him a pulpit, sat him upon it and began by asking him questions of Halakhah. Though he did in fact know the answers, the young scholar, Levi bar Sisi, was so flattered by all the attention that words failed him. Whereupon, the people asked him to address himself to a purely exegetical question, which he also failed to answer. Realizing how unsuccessful he had been in publicly imparting his knowledge, he rose early the next morning, left town and returned to the school of his teacher (Genesis Rabbah 81:2). Happily, Levi bar Sisi seems eventually to have mastered the art of public preaching, for elsewhere he is numbered among the "masters of words, good readers, good preachers" (Pesiqta deRav Kahana 24:18).

Discourteous Congregations

It would appear that some congregations could be quite discourteous when they found the Darshan's comments unacceptable. According to several sages, when Mordecai was once unable to find a wet-nurse for Esther, he himself produced milk and was able to suckle her. However, when Rabbi Abbahu related this legend in a sermon, his audience is said to have laughed. But this Darshan was well prepared to counter their incredulity by retorting: "But is this not in accordance with the Mishnah which teaches: Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar says: The milk of a male is ritually pure!" (Genesis Rabbah 30:8).

Other Darshananim, faced with the difficulty of holding their audience's attention, did not hesitate to purposefully shock their listeners:

Once when Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi was sitting and preaching, he realized that the congregation was beginning to doze off. In order to awaken them he said: In Egypt, a woman gave birth to six hundred thousand at one time! There was a student there by the name of R. Yishmael berabbi Yosi who asked: Who was that? He replied to him: That was Jochabed who bore Moses who was equivalent to all the six hundred thousand of Israel!

(Song of Songs Rabbah 1:15.3).

It would seem that, by and large, such questions raised by members of the congregation during the sermon were not a sign of disrespect. Rather, such interchanges between the Darshan and his audience reveal the dialogical nature of rabbinic homiletics and the Darshan's willingness to adapt his presentation to the specific needs and responses of each individual audience.

The Seat of Moses

In a very literal sense the Darshan did not stand above his audience. Though, as we have seen, the preacher might speak from a raised platform or pulpit (*bimah*), he did not stand, as we might expect a public speaker to do today. Rather, the Darshan normally was seated. This practice is clear from the fact that throughout Talmudic literature the expression used to introduce what happened or was said by a particular Darshan during a public sermon is "He sat and preached" (*yashav vedarash*) (see Avot deRabbi Natan, Version A, Ch. 4; Song of Songs Rabbah 1:15.2; cf. Luke 4:20) It may be that in some synagogues the Darshan was seated facing the congregation on a kind of special throne. This may well have been the function of the "seat of Moses," mentioned already in the New Testament (Matthew 23:2) as occupied by "scribes and Pharisees." Examples of such thrones have been discovered in the excavations of synagogues from Talmudic times, at Hammat Tiberias and Chorazin in Israel. A splendid example comes from the synagogue on the Aegean island of Delos, thought to date from the first century B.C. The Darshan could actually make use of such synagogue fixtures in graphically illustrating his interpretation of scripture, as we can see from an otherwise elliptical midrash on the biblical description of Solomon's throne: "And the top of the throne was round behind" (I Kings 10:19). R. Aha said: Like this seat of Moshe (*kehada kathedra demoshe*) (Pesiqta deRav Kahana 1:6). It would have been most fitting to refer to the throne on which the Darshan sat as the "Seat of Moses," since his role was specifically equated with the role of Moses as teacher of Torah, as we can see from the following midrash: "And Aaron thy brother shall be thy prophet" (Exodus 7:1). Just as the preacher (*hadoresh*) sits and preaches and the Amora speaks before him, so you (Moses), "Thou shalt say all that I command thee and Aaron thy brother shall speak, etc." (*Ibid.*,2) (Tanhuma Va'era 10, Exodus Rabbah 8:3).

A Living Loudspeaker

This midrash also illustrates another interesting feature of the public sermon in Talmudic times. The Darshan did not speak in a loud voice directly to his audience. Rather, this was the function of the Amora or Meturgeman, who served as a kind of "living loud-speaker." The Darshan apparently communicated his comments in a low voice or whisper to the Meturgeman who, standing, then "broadcast" them to the congregation with great rhetorical flourish which may even have taken on the character of chanting or a kind of song (See Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:5). Similar to the practice of having the Darshan seated, possibly on a special throne, the use of the Meturgeman was probably meant to emphasize the dignity of the Darshan. For the sage was expected to speak only in a quiet, restrained voice, leaving any histrionics to the Meturgeman. Indeed, the Meturgeman, who did not hesitate to raise

his voice to the audience was thought to lord it over the simple congregants: "The words of sages are better heard in quiet" (Ecclesiastes 9:17). This refers to the Darshanim. "Than the shout of him who rules over the simple" (*Ibid.*). This refers to the Meturgemanim who stand over the congregation (Ecclesiastes Rabbah, *ad loc.*).

Elites vs. Masses

Though the public sermon given in the synagogue seems to have been particularly intended for the instruction of the less well educated strata of society, such instruction was considered important for all. The Talmud warns that two respected families in Jerusalem died out because they preferred to take their Sabbath meal at home just when the sermon was being given (see B. Gittin 38b). It is possible that such people felt that the public sermon was too popular in content and style, or they may have disdained to mingle with the lower classes who attended the sermon both as a source of entertainment and education. Indeed, in Sepphoris, apparently even the thieves came to hear the sermon; though what they learned about the "modus operandi" of the Generation of the Flood was, unfortunately, put to professional use! (See P. Ma'aser Sheni V.1, 55d, cf. B. Sanhedrin 109a).

Given the great differences in educational level, the Darshan had to be able to adapt his remarks to the audience he was addressing on a particular occasion. It is related that Rabbi Levi had two very different metaphoric interpretations of the same scriptural passage, "And the clouds return after the rain" (Ecclesiastes 11:2). The one which he reserved for his academic colleagues (*lehavraya*) is quite poetic: "*When a man begins to cry his eyes stream with tears.*" But when he preached to the uneducated (*leboraya*), he did not hesitate to interpret this biblical passage using an analogy which, to us at least, seems shockingly scatological: "*When a man begins to make water, feces come first*" (see Leviticus Rabbah 18:1). The Darshan's willingness to relate to his audience on their level reflects not disdain but rather a certain respect for those who were less academically inclined. Indeed, even the most respected rabbis were willing, it seems, to include in their public sermons a good midrash learned from an ignorant man, and were even willing to quote it in his name:

An ignorant man (in the Aramaic: *am deara*, i.e., Am HaAretz) said to Rabbi Hoshaya: If I tell you a good one, will you quote it in my name in public? He answered: What is it? All the gifts that our father Isaac gave to Esau, the nations of the world will return to the messianic king in the time to come; what is the proof? "The kings of Tarshish and the Isles will return gifts" (Ps. 72:10). It is not written that "they will bring gifts," but that "they will return gifts." R. Hosayah said to him: By your life, you did tell a good one; I will quote it in your name (Genesis Rabbah 78:12).

"He...will sit in Paradise and Preach"

The many different forms which the public homily may have taken on various occasions and at different times during the Talmudic period is an interesting and complicated question which deserves fuller discussion elsewhere. However, one feature, which is suggested by the complex "literary" homilies found in such works as Leviticus Rabbah and Pesiqta deRav Kahana, bears mention here. It was apparently customary to conclude the homily on a note

of hope, by mentioning the promise of the messianic age. The same tendency to conclude each section or session of learning on a similar or positive note can be seen in the conclusions of many tractates of the Mishnah, Tosefta and Talmudim and in the formal ending of the Passover Haggadah with the hopeful expectation: "Next year in Jerusalem!" Perhaps the greatest compliment paid to the Darshan as preacher and teacher of Torah was to compare his role to that of God Himself in the world to come:

In the future the Holy One, blessed be He, will sit in Paradise and preach. And all the righteous will sit before him. And all the righteous will sit before him. And the heavenly host will stand on their feet; to His right, the sun with the constellations and to His left, the moon and the stars. And the Holy One, blessed be He, will interpret to them the teachings of a new Toah which He will give to them in the future through the Messiah. And when He comes to teach Aggadah, Zerubbabel ben Shealtiel will rise to his feet and say: May His great name be magnified and sanctified, etc. And his voice will be heard from one end of the Universe to the other. And all those who dwell on the earth shall answer: Amen! (Alpha Beta deRabbi Aquiva, Bet HaMidrash, ed. Jellenik, III, p.27-28).

Published in *The Melton Journal*, Spring 1982, No. 14, Sivan 5742

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