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## 'Wicked': A midrash on 'The Wizard of Oz'

(RNS) — Not surprisingly, many midrashim — these imagined Torah backstories — are about women.

By [Jeffrey Salkin](#) December 16, 2024



Cynthia Erivo as Elphaba, left, and Ariana Grande-Butera as Glinda in "Wicked." (©Universal Pictures)

(RNS) — I loved “Wicked” — the story, the music, the visuals, the sheer magic of it all.

I enjoyed all the parallels, resonances and allegories: the story threads of gender, racism, Glinda/Galinda’s white savior complex. And, of course, antisemitism — the parallels between the growing persecution and silencing of the animals and the persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany — complete with storm troopers. Others have written about this; I am hardly the first to notice them.

But, here is something that others have heretofore missed (and count on me to raise this issue): “Wicked” is a midrash on “The Wizard of Oz.”

What is a “midrash?” It is how the ancient sages uncovered meanings in biblical text. While the process starts as early as the first century before the Common Era, it continues to this day through modern midrash (I highly recommend “[Dirshuni: Contemporary Women’s Midrash.](#)” It is a treasure of precious insights.)

Let me put it this way: Midrash is a way of reading the white spaces between the black letters in the scroll. To paraphrase my friend and teacher, Amichai Lau-Lavie: It reminds us that the traditional text is not a PDF, but a Word document — or, at the very least, an editable PDF.

What initially drew me to midrash? That it was often a story about a story in the Torah; that it expanded the narrative in order to respond to a problem in the text, an unanswered question, a missing detail.

So, for example:

- The Torah says the sun and moon and stars were not created until the fourth day. So, when God said, at the dawn of creation, “let there be light,” what was that light?
- The Torah says right before he murdered Abel, Cain spoke to him, but it does not report the content of the conversation. What did he/they say?
- Why did Noah remain silent about the potential casualties during the flood?
- Why did God choose Abraham?
- What did the angels on Jacob’s ladder represent?
- Who was the man who showed Joseph how to find his brothers?
- What happened to the pieces of the tablets that Moses shattered?

On and on and on ... over the centuries, and even/especially today, Jews wove their lore out of the playful and deep answers to these questions.

Sometimes, a midrash will re-tell a familiar story from the point of view of a minor character. Sometimes, it will give voice to a character who had been either absent or silent.

So, in the story of the binding of Isaac, poets have enjoyed giving us an account of how the ram, who was ultimately sacrificed in Isaac’s stead, felt about the whole thing. Or how Sarah, Isaac’s mother — absent from the text — felt about what would have happened.

Not surprisingly, many of these midrashim and backstories are about women.

- In this past week’s Torah portion, we meet Dinah, the tragic daughter of Jacob and Leah. A midrash says that initially, in the womb, she had been a boy, but Leah prayed it would be a girl, because “we already have enough males!” (Jerusalem Talmud Berachot 9:3).
- Asenath, the daughter of Poti-phaera, an Egyptian priest, marries Joseph. A midrash imagines she was really Dinah’s daughter, born of her rapacious encounter with Shechem — and therefore, Jewish all along! (Pirkei De’Rebbe Eliezer, 35 and 37)
- There is the totally “random” minor character of Serach, the daughter of Asher. One of my favorite midrashim says she lived into advanced old age, and she showed Moses where the bones of Joseph were buried so he could carry them into the land of Israel (Mechilta D’Rabbi Ishmael).

Again, in this past week’s Torah portion, there is a long list of the descendants of Esau, Jacob’s brother, who had been cheated out of the rights of the first born. Esau is the rejected brother.

Esau’s son had a relationship with an otherwise unknown biblical woman, Timna, who is described as a concubine.

The midrash imagines that Timna had sought admission to the Jewish people and was turned away. And so, she turned to Esau, becoming the concubine of his son, Eliphaz. The result of that union was Amalek, the prototype of genocidal evil and the ancestor of the wicked Haman in the book of Esther (Talmud, Sanhedrin 99b).

The lesson: Be careful what you reject; evil might emerge from that act of rejection.

Which, by the way, is also a lesson in “Wicked.”

The whole midrash thing ... commenting and expanding on a text: Does it exist in modern, secular literature?

I am glad you asked. Just a few examples:

- [“James: A Novel,”](#) in which Percival Everett re-imagines the story of Huckleberry Finn — this time, from the point of view of Jim, the runaway slave.
- [“Grendel,”](#) in which James Gardner retells the ancient Anglo-Saxon epic of Beowulf — this time, from the point of view of the female monster.
- [“Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead,”](#) — a play by Tom Stoppard, in which the playwright tells the story of Hamlet from the point of view of those two minor, doomed characters.

So, yes, in that sense, “Wicked” is a midrash on “The Wizard of Oz.” It offers a backstory of the tale’s villain — who is no longer just the Wicked Witch of the West, but is given a real name (Elphaba) — and of Glinda, the good witch. “Wicked” exposes us to Elphaba’s birth story, her ostracism due to her green color and her relationship with her “frenemy,” Glinda.

Why does this work as well as it does? Because “The Wizard of Oz” is an American text. It is ingrained in the mind and soul of every American. It is a canonical American tale. It has a place in the American scroll and is therefore wide open for interpretation and expansion.

It is American mythology at its best. “Wicked” shows why and how that text lives forever.