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# THE REST IS JEWISH HISTORY: USING THE RABBINIC VIEW OF HISTORY AS A RESPONSE TO BLAIRE FRENCH'S D'VAR TORAH

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In her essay, "The Search for Evocative History," Blaire French describes an elusive dilemma: without "the sense of divine purpose,"<sup>1</sup> does Jewish history still have a meaning? Or stated differently, outside of divinely inspired texts, what is the purpose of recording and retelling Jewish history? French's question is reminiscent of, and can best be understood by reference to, a ubiquitous rabbinic phrase, "Whatever happened happened" (*mai de-hava, hava*),<sup>2</sup> which is the Talmud's way of

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<sup>1</sup> French, "A D'var Torah for Beha'alotcha: The Search for Evocative History," *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 9, no. 1 (2016): 6-11.

<sup>2</sup> See b. Ketubot 3a; b. Yuma 5b; b. Horiyut 10b. The underlying assumption for this type of question can best be seen from another rabbinic quip, "[Do you think the tanna] is a salesman?" (*tana kirokhla*), when someone asks why the Mishnah did not list more cases pertaining to a given law, by which the rabbis mean that the teachers of the Mishnah valued brevity and would not include an unnecessary detail if there was no need. See b. Gittin 33a.

asking what purpose there can be in mentioning events that have already happened. Although the Talmud is concerned primarily with legal or normative matters, which is why details that appear to have no immediate bearing or application are deemed on a *prima facie* basis as superfluous, French's dilemma, while focused primarily on meaning, is similarly inherently based on a doubt about the relevance of past events. It stands to reason then that the response in the Talmud, which is to illustrate the practical significance to the detail that was challenged, may be relevant for French's purposes as well. By exploring why the Talmud poses that question and what type of answer the rabbis find satisfactory, light can be shed on the search for meaning in the recording of Jewish history.

Indeed, if the rabbis attempted to continue the project of the Bible – that is, if they sought to record history in a similar way,<sup>3</sup> even though revelation had already ceased and their writing could not be seen as divine in any way – then their project bears a strong resemblance to French's dilemma, a question of finding meaning in secular history. Moreover, the Talmud is the first traditional source after the Bible to record Jewish history. In my response, I intend to show that the rabbis were interested in recording Jewish history, provided it was recorded in a way they found relevant, and that the canonization of the Jewish Bible did not represent an unbridgeable chasm for the continuous recording and retelling of Jewish history.

Answering French's question by drawing on the rabbinic view in this way requires challenging the influential position of Moses David Herr, who argues that the rabbis had no interest in history. As support for his

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<sup>3</sup> Scholars have generally pointed to the continuity between the message of the Bible and the Talmud. See Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Creation of History in Ancient Israel* (London: Routledge, 1995), 2, 19; John H. Hayes, *Interpreting Ancient Israelite History, Prophecy, and Law* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2013), 1; Michael Meyers, *The Ideas of Jewish History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 71-75. For the opinion that Rabbinic Judaism has a paradigmatic view of history, a perspective which differs from Yosef Hayyim Yerushalmi's conception of Jewish memory, see Jacob Neusner, *The Idea of History in Rabbinic Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 193-230; Yosef Hayyim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982).

claim, Herr points to the same phrase, “Whatever happened, happened,” so as to demonstrate that the rabbis have no interest in what [already] happened.<sup>4</sup> I argue, however, that by their concern with showing that historical details have practical applications, the rabbis evince more interest in history than Herr acknowledges. In the pages that follow, I demonstrate that the Bible itself shows a concern with recording “historical” details and that the rabbis had similar criteria for recording history. I conclude that the phrase of *mai de-hava hava* betrays a deeply held rabbinic view of history’s ongoing relevance and posit that the answer to the question—namely, that a given detail is applicable in the present or future—can be applied to French’s dilemma by illustrating the way that history can remain relevant.

Even divinely inspired texts like the Bible include “historical” detail when it is pertinent to the narrative. As Marc Zvi Brettler writes, in antiquity, a storyteller would mention details about past events “because they were important, not because they were true.”<sup>5</sup> The most prominent example of this, to my mind, is the frequent mention of locations and times in the sojourn of the Israelites in the desert.<sup>6</sup> Less obvious, but more significant for my argument, is the story of the voices of dissent in the Bible, such as the “murmurings” in Exodus and Numbers. In those cases, what lends importance to those details are the responses to those complaints,<sup>7</sup> but the voices of those murmurers are recorded for posterity.

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<sup>4</sup> Moshe David Herr, “The Conception of History among the Sages,” in *Proceedings of the Sixth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Vol. 3 (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1977), 129–142.

<sup>5</sup> Marc Zvi Brettler, *How to Read the Bible* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2005), 101.

<sup>6</sup> See for instance Exodus 40:17; Numbers 1:1, 33:38; Deuteronomy 1:3. The 12<sup>th</sup> century philosopher and exegete Moses Maimonides believes the locations mentioned in the Bible authenticate its narratives. While he is not a modern scholar by any means, this interpretation cannot be discounted. For our purposes, however, it is enough to note that the Bible must have some reason to include those details. See Maimonides, *Guide to the Perplexed*, ed. Yosef Qaffi (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1977), 3:50.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Walzer frames the struggle between the people on the one hand and Moses and the Levites on the other as one between materialists and idealists and posits that the

Thus, even divinely inspired texts include “profane” voices when they serve the narrative in some way.

Rabbinic literature uses a similar criterion: narrative details should be recorded because of their ongoing historical (not merely moral or legal) importance. This point emerges from the phrase “whatever happened, happened,” seen for instance in the first chapter of tractate Yuma. The Talmud asks how Moses dressed the priests at the consecration of the tabernacle. Since that event already took place, it seems superfluous, and so the Talmud states, “Whatever happened, happened!”<sup>8</sup> In the exclamation itself we can already sense the Talmudic approach to history. If a detail is purely historical, there is no need to record it. The Talmud’s response is that the teaching pertains to the way Moses will dress the priests in the eschaton. This answer clearly has no moral component, and it cannot be considered halakhic either, since it has no perceivable legal impact. It seems, therefore, that the rabbis’ interest in history is not limited to its moral lessons or even its legal implications. Anything that has a bearing on the near or distant future – even if the source for it is historical – is considered to be of import.

Further support for the position that the Talmud sees the Bible’s approach to history as similar to its own can be found in the Talmudic tale involving Esther’s inclusion in the canon.<sup>9</sup> The Talmud writes that Esther requested that the scribes should establish Purim as a holiday for future

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murmurings are mentioned to uphold the position of Moses and the Levites. See Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 103.

<sup>8</sup> B. Yuma 5b.

<sup>9</sup> French also mentions Esther in her D’var Torah, and that may not be a coincidence. It could be that the Talmudic tale relating to the process of Esther’s canonization is an expression of what French calls the secular nature of the book. See Blaire French, “A D’var Torah for Beha’alotcha: The Search for Evocative History.” For the view that this *sugya* is an indication of the early interest in the text’s canonization rather than a reflection of the ambivalence towards it, see Schnayer Z. Leiman, *The Canonization of the Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1976), 114. For a view that challenges Leiman’s broader argument about canonization, see Lee Martin McDonald, *The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2007), 58-62.

generations. The scribes objected on the grounds that it would be politically provocative to do so, but Esther assures them that the Jewish victory is already publicly known. Esther also asks that the scribes “write [her] for generations (*kitvuni le-dorot*).”<sup>10</sup> Basing their response on a verse in Proverbs, “Have not I written unto thee excellent things of counsels and knowledge,”<sup>11</sup> the scribes say there is no further need to mention the struggle against Amalek, Haman’s ancestor. That is, until they found a verse in Exodus 17:14 that says, “Write this for a memorial in the book,” which the rabbis interpret to mean: write a memorial about Amalek in Esther’s scroll. Shmuel later adds that the extra words in Esther 9:27, “the Jews ordained, and took upon them” was an indication of heavenly approval.<sup>12</sup>

What emerges from this late story is that the rabbis viewed the books of the canon as having relevance for the future. There was no room in the canon for any book that simply repeated an event that has already been recorded elsewhere in the canon. For the rabbis at least, this story seems to show, the Bible’s sense of history resembled their own.

The position I have presented is at odds with Herr’s position that the rabbis had no interest in history or historiography as such, other than for its moral lessons.<sup>13</sup> Herr argues that, because the rabbis perceive history through a moral lens, historical figures are seen as valuable only for their

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<sup>10</sup> B. Megillah 7a.

<sup>11</sup> Proverbs 20:22. The meaning behind this rabbinic interpretation of the verse is that the Bible has already written everything that is necessary.

<sup>12</sup> For a lengthy treatment of the *sugya* and its context, see Judith Z. Abrams, *Talmud for Beginners* (Northvale: Jason Aronson, 1993), 19-31. For a feminist approach, see Leila L. Bronner, “Reclaiming Esther: From Sex Object to Sage,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (1998): 3-11; Bronner “Esther Revisited: An Aggadic Approach,” in *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith, and Susanna*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 195-97. In the former, Bronner sees the incident as expanding on Esther’s skill of writing letters, a feature of her leadership. In the latter, Bronner raises the interesting possibility that the incident is a reflection of the rabbis’ own discovery of her role in the saving the Jews. My argument complements these ideas, since I am suggesting that Esther carefully measured the words she used to convince and prevail over the scribes.

<sup>13</sup> Further, from ahistorical accounts of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, Herr suggests that his model applies to recent history as well. See Herr, *ibid*.

message.<sup>14</sup> He also adds that this model is true for both aggadic (homiletic) and halakhic (legal) matters.<sup>15</sup> If “whatever happened, happened” is to be understood in the way Herr suggests, then the rabbis purposely chose to disregard any mention of historical detail any time they had the opportunity to do so. What would follow from this is that my argument, and French’s cause for that matter, is jeopardized. It is difficult to argue for the continued importance of recording Jewish history if the rabbis willfully abandoned that project.

However, I defend my view with the following three arguments. First, the notion that the rabbis had absolutely no interest in history is untenable. At least some history, such as the relevant names, places, and ways of identifying individuals such as their family relation or their master, are included in numerous teachings. And since such details in a homiletic or legal teaching are often challenged, it is doubtful that the rabbis would have chosen random names, places, or even periods just in order for the moral or legal component of the story to emerge.<sup>16</sup> To cite an example, if the only value of the tale in tractate Sabbath 33b-34a of the escape of Rabbi Shimon son of Yochai and his son to a cave is the moral one—namely, the values and dangers of asceticism—why must the Talmud discuss the Roman historical and political context? At the very least, it would seem that the rabbis must have a common understanding of when things took place.

Second, in his article, Herr presents *halakha*, legal discussions, and *aggada*, homiletic discussions, as two distinct categories. However, *halakha*

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> As evidence for this claim, Herr also mentions *mai de-havahava*. As I have shown, however, that question is more likely to mean, “why is this important for the future?” not, “why are we mentioning this detail?” See Moshe David Herr, “The Conception of History among the Sages,” in *Proceedings of the Sixth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Vol. 3 (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1977), 129-142.

<sup>16</sup> The Talmud often cannot relate an entire teaching without someone challenging the saying on technical grounds. Examples of this phenomenon are too numerous to cite, but one particular instance stands out, namely that of the Talmud challenging a chronology and the difference being of no noticeable moral import. See b. Avodah Zara 8b-9a.

and *aggada* are not easily separated.<sup>17</sup> Herr therefore overlooks the subtle point that if *halakha* and *aggada* are not two distinct categories, meaning that what is homiletic, philosophical, or even historical can also have a legal bearing, then even before the Talmud says, “whatever happened, happened,” the rabbis are already open to the possibility that historical detail may be relevant.

Finally, my third argument is that Herr ignores one typical response of the Talmud to the statement “whatever happened, happened.” In a number of instances, the answer explains why the historical detail is of immediate concern. In tractates Ketubot and Yuma, for instance, the answer provided by the Talmud is that the matter is relevant for the immediate (or distant) future.<sup>18</sup> I have already observed this in the example that I cited earlier about the way Moses dressed the priests.

If the rabbis have an interest in recording history, however, then they value not just the laws and morals of the Torah they purport to uphold, but also the method of the Torah in transmitting them. For French this means that, as the rabbis did, we ought to keep recording history as long as future generations find meaning in its content. Although the rabbis recognized that divine inspiration was no longer attainable, and that what they were writing could not compare to the Bible, that did not stop them from recording their legal debates but also their history. Moreover, they implicitly – and here I think the point is made stronger by the fact that the rabbis do not state their view explicitly – assumed that a historical detail

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<sup>17</sup> See *ibid.*, esp. 123-128. See also Abraham Goldberg, who notes that aggadic and halakhic discussions are often woven together in the Talmud (“The Babylonian Talmud,” in *ibid.*, 336).

<sup>18</sup> See b. Ketubot 3a; b. Yuma 5b; b. Horiyut 10b. In Ketubot, the question relates to relevance of the history of court dates and its impact on the choosing of wedding dates, and the answer is that, if courts are still in session, wedding dates are still set on the original days; In Yuma, the question relates to the way Moses dressed the priests, and the answer is that Moses will dress the priests in that particular way in the future. The example in Horiyut is somewhat unlike the other examples, in that the response to the question is simply a moral lesson. The question relates to what already happened to Lot with his first daughter, and the answer is that he should not have become inebriated again. (The same teaching is found in b. Nazir 23a.)



can and should contain meaning, one worthwhile enough to record. Conversely, had the rabbis felt that the recording history is simple storytelling, they would have abandoned it entirely.

Having challenged Herr's view, I want to make one further point about Esther's directive and its bearing on French's dilemma. It would have been sufficient for Esther just to say, "Write me" (*kitvuni*),<sup>19</sup> since the canon is clearly understood to serve future generations as well. By adding the word "*le-dorot*" (for generations), the heroine was saying that the writing itself can and should be done *for the sake of* future generations, that is, in a way that future generations would find relevant.

Further, since Esther's argument had already withstood the test of time at the point the Talmud recorded this story, it can be argued that the Talmud implicitly recognizes that the scroll's continued existence supports Esther's argument and proves the scroll's "heavenly approval." To return to French's dilemma, I believe that when Jewish history meets that basic criterion, when it is written not simply to record what has occurred but in a way that serves future generations, it too will withstand the test of time and thereby merit "heavenly approval" as well.

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<sup>19</sup> Unlike Esther's request to have her holiday established for eternity, where the words "for generations" are necessary, since some holidays are only established temporarily, "write me" would already imply that the scroll would remain in the canon forever. It should also be noted here that Purim is said to remain a holiday even at the time of redemption, and that makes its relevance more obvious, but that is beside the point. See *Midrash Mishlei*, ed. Shlomo Buber (Vilna, 1893), 9:2.

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