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*“My Children, Read This Passage Every Year”*: Composition  
and Meaning in *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* by Arnon Atzmon  
(review)

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Arnon Atzmon. *“My Children, Read This Passage Every Year”*: *Composition and Meaning in Pesikta de-Rav Kahana*. Jerusalem: Magnes, 2021. 451 + 8 pp. [in Hebrew]

Arnon Atzmon’s book, billed as a study of “composition and meaning” is so much more than that. It is a new and important introduction to the curious work *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* (PdRK), offering new answers to basic questions of provenance and dating regarding this work.

Although PdRK was not printed during the Italian Renaissance, it became known to scholars when Leopold Zunz published his *Die gottesdienstlichen Vorträge der Juden* (Leipzig, 1832). Zunz reconstructed its structure and posited its order, and also noted that its medieval readers knew it alternatively both by the name *Pesikta* and the longer *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana*. Zunz’s work paid off: in 1868 Solomon Buber had already found manuscripts of this work and published an edition of the full work (Lyck, 1868). A hundred years and two world wars

later, the European communities that produced this scholarship were no more. In New York, Bernard Mandelbaum published a new edition of PdRK (New York: JTS, 1969).

Like Vayikra Rabbah, and unlike Bereshit Rabbah, PdRK is a homiletic midrash—that is, it expands and expounds selected verses of a lection read in a synagogue. It is conventionally grouped with those two works as a “classical midrash” as opposed to “late midrash,” like Tanḥuma or Pesikta Rabbati. Each of its sections, called *pesikta* in the manuscripts and in scholarship, begins its first few subunits with an exposition of the first verse of the lection. The final subunits of the *pesikta* often end with a homily on the last verse of the lection, with homiletic expansions on some of the middle verses in between. The lection is from the Torah in some *pesikata* (the plural form), from the Prophets or the haftarah in others.

PdRK only contains homiletic material for special days: holidays and Sabbaths where the regular order of reading a lection from the Torah and a corresponding haftarah was stopped for a calendar event, like the weeks between 17 Tammuz and Sukkot, or the weeks between 1 Adar and Passover. It presents a lectionary similar in many ways to the one practiced in modern synagogues.

However, this was not the lectionary that the earliest rabbis knew. The Mishnah (M. Megillah 3:4–6) prescribed completely different readings for many of the holidays. Some are mentioned as an alternative tradition found in the parallel Tosefta (T. Megillah 3:5–9), while others are not known in tannaitic literature at all. At some point, the lections in the Mishnah—all from the laconic list of holidays in Leviticus 24—were abandoned and the new lections adopted. These new readings are significantly more narrative oriented: the Exodus story is read on Passover; the story of the giving of the Law at Sinai on Shavuot; and the story of Sarah’s pregnancy (Gen 21) on the New Year. These readings are also reflected in the synagogue poetry of Eleazar ha-Kallir.

Atzmon offers the novel theory that Pesikta and its lectionary grew in tandem, with homilists scrambling to assemble sermon material from across the rabbinic tradition for these new lections. He does this through detailed studies of “composition and meaning” concentrated in part B of the book—its central and longest part. The detailed readings of part B cover almost all of PdRK and carefully support the claim that there was a conscious redactor shaping the message of each *pesikta* by using older materials, many of which are known from elsewhere in the rabbinic canon (including, Atzmon claims in part A, chap. 6, Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah). For some lections—like those with parallels in Vayikra Rabbah—this was an easy process. But for others, the task was harder. Some *pesikata* are not smoothly read; their seams show and so does the redactor’s effort. Atzmon shows that the most infelicitous *pesikata* are the ones for lections not mentioned in the Mishnah.

The fact that the sources of PdRK are found all over the rabbinic canon shows that it postdates them: it is not then a “classical midrash” but rather derivative of these works—perhaps a nascent exemplar of a postrabbinic midrash, like Tanḥuma and Pesikta Rabbati, which utilizes an already established rabbinic canon and remixes its materials in new ways. It should thus be dated later than

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it is conventionally dated and situated in a synagogal rather than a scholastic setting.

Atzmon also tackles two questions that have vexed students of Pesikta since its discovery. The first is the name of the work, “Pesikta.” Atzmon contends that this does not mean “verses” but rather “interruptions,” following the Mishnah (M. Megillah 3:4): “They interrupt [the regular reading of the Torah] for everything [בְּכֹל מְפָסְקִים]: for the new moon, for Hanukah, for Purim, for fasts, for *Ma’amad* [see M. Taanit 4:2] and for the Day of Atonement.” These interruptions (*hafsakot*) are what gave Pesikta its name: it is the midrash for the interruptions in the regular order of readings. The second question regards the order of the *pesikata*. Following this same mishnah—and a comparison to the parallel Pesikta Rabbati, which has a similar structure—Atzmon explains that the first *pesikta* is the one for Hanukah, which appears on pp. 1–15 of ed. Mandelbaum.

“*My Children, Read This Passage Every Year*” is an important resetting of the stage, but it is far from a comprehensive study of PdRK. Some significant areas awaiting renewed study based on Atzmon’s theories are: (1) the relationship between PdRK and synagogue poetry; (2) the Roman context of PdRK, especially based on the numerous Greek loanwords in this midrash but also on descriptions of real life; (3) the relationship between sources in PdRK and their parallels in the Babylonian Talmud. Atzmon’s insistence on the agency of a “redactor” (עוֹרֵךְ) in assembling homilies from existing materials should be tested in other rabbinic works. This hypothesis could also be examined in comparison to contemporary Christian homilies attributed to single authors. All this is to say that Atzmon’s careful work and bold claims have charted out a path for any future engagement with Pesikta. “*My Children, Read This Passage Every Year*” is thus a groundbreaking study of PdRK, which shakes up previous scholarship. It will doubtless engender significant debate in the field and should be consulted by anyone attempting to engage with this work.

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