In memory of my beloved rabbi, Arthur Oleisky, who died last week, I want to explore a broad understanding of the function of midrash in everyday life.

Midrash is a rabbinic tool to squeeze out possible meanings hidden within a biblical text. {Like this one: After Cain killed his brother Abel, God asked him, “Where is your brother Abel?” Are you kidding? There are exactly 4 people on the earth and the Creator of the Universe doesn’t know where one of them is? Of course God knows where Abel is, according to the midrash. Rather, God asked this question deliberately. God sought to draw Cain into a gentle conversation so that Cain might say, “I killed my brother. I sinned against You and want to do t’shuvah.

None of this is written in the Torah. It’s all beneath the surface.

Torah is laconic. It speaks, as it were, with the minimum of words, leaving gaps and questions that Midrash seeks to fill in. Sometimes Midrash spins a whole narrative to fill in missing information. {For example} Maybe you’re familiar with that beloved biblical story of Avraham smashing the idols in his father’s shop. If you don’t know it –here’s a quick recap: In the days before humanity knew of the One true God our ancestors worshipped idols. Terach, Avraham’s father, had an idol shop. Terah went out of town one weekend – maybe an idol retailer’s
conference – and he left his son in charge of the shop. When he returned home he was aghast to see the idols in his shop smashed to bits. All except the largest idol, still intact, with a baseball bat in his stone hand. “What happened here?” Terah demanded of his son. “Well Dad, it was crazy. The idols started fighting and mouthing off to the big one so he smashed them all to bits.” I imagine Terach looked at his son Avraham the way your parents might have looked at you that time you tried to convince them that the beer in the fridge drank itself. “OK, son, that’s an idol. It’s inanimate. I carved it myself so I know it has no power to move, let alone destroy other idols.” And Avraham of course, was ready with his reply: “Then why do you pray to them, Dad?”

It’s a great biblical story. It’s a favorite of Hebrew school students. But of course it’s not in the Bible at all. It’s Midrash. It’s a narrative (and not the most profound but probably the most memorable) that responds to a lacuna in the text. It answers a question which is not explicit, but cannot be ignored: Why did God choose Abraham to enter an eternal covenant?

What are some questions, under the surface of the text, that today’s parasha might prompt?
Chayyei Sarah the life of Sarah, the very title of this parsha is weighted with a heavy irony – As if everything about her life is summarized in her death. Or the time to contemplate her life is at her death.

I’m certainly not the first to note this. And within this community we have over the years, pondered Sarah’s life – not just her actions, but her internal life – the history, the pain and hope that led to those actions. Listen, some of what Sarah does makes us very uncomfortable, particularly her cruelty to her handmaid Hagar. Our response to that discomfort can be to dismiss Sarah as cruel and petty. But our other option is to try to peek beneath the surface and speculate – what would make a person behave this way. Through the tool of Midrash we contemplate what might have led Sarah to such cruelty. Is there more to Sarah than a barren, jealous wife who cannot abide the presence of the very woman she presented as a surrogate and the child she anticipated would fill a void in her family? In other words, let’s explore Sarah’s internal life. Is it possible we can understand (even if we don’t approve) Sarah’s actions when we consider them in light of the cruelty and disappointment she herself endured?

If we engaged in midrashic thinking we might explore a lot of questions like --
What was it like to be married to the guy who was commanded *lech lecha*? Avraham may have had questions and misgivings about his mission, but he heard the voice of the Kadosh Baruch Hu, holy, blessed God, address him directly and personally — *lech lecha* -- get going -you- off you go on a quest that I will reveal to you over time. Avraham responded to this divine call without missing a beat: off he went. But what divine call did Sarah hear? At best she got a retelling, a secondhand account. Nevertheless, off she went, too, following her husband as he followed the voice of a God she herself never heard. No promises for Sarah of a future of blessing and children to rival the stars in the sky. What was it like to traipse behind Avraham from Ur to Canaan to Egypt and back, as he responded to a promise never proffered to her?

And what of her interactions with others during those journeys? I read the accounts of Sarah’s interactions with Egyptians – from kings to slave-girls – as an exercise in humiliation. Passed off to the king’s bed as a bargaining chip. Mocked by her maidservant who carried her husband’s child. What does that do to a person’s sense of self?

How far will a mother go to protect her child? Commentators have long noted the juxtaposition of Sarah’s death and the akeida. Midrashim draw a straight line directly from Sarah learning that Avraham bound her son and laid
him on the altar, that he was a heartbeat from bringing down the knife, and her sudden, shocked death.

All these questions about what might be under the surface, what might be at play in Sarah’s internal life, all this effort to fill in the blanks, this is midrash.

And midrash is essential to how we read and understand Torah. Because we simply don’t have enough information about Sarah’s internal life from Torah itself. Without that information Sarah’s actions, specifically toward Hagar, are incomprehensible. We might never be able to excuse her harshness but we can try to understand what prompts it.

Midrash is, in the extreme, speculation. We have to be careful with midrash to remember that. Our conjectures might make sense, they may be based on careful reading and analysis, but they are guesswork nonetheless.

And yet, it feels an injustice to not ask these midrashic questions. It feels overly harsh to consider Sarah’s actions on their face and not speculate what in her background might have led to them. What hurt and fear does she live with that she lashes out with such cruelty? We are, in other words judging l’chaf z’chut, a favorable reading to try to see Sarah in all her fullness, not jump to the least charitable conclusions about her character.
I’m using midrash in the widest sense – not just to fill in the lacunae in our sacred text, but to fill in the missing pieces in general. I’m suggesting we consider midrash as a curiosity about people – what don’t we know about them? Why might they behave a certain way? What pain do they carry inside that we can’t see? What are the passions and talents and wishes that remain tucked away?

Tina Pesce lived in Stockton Springs, Maine, overlooking the scenic Penobscot River. For a time her middle-aged son lived with her. Theirs was a quiet life. Her son was mildly autistic and Tina was his caretaker. Her neighbors knew Tina to say hello, but not well. Another son described the last months of her life, “She was pretty private and as her health declined people saw her less and less.” Tina Pesce died this past August, and as her house was being cleared out a neighbor noticed that Tina Pesce was a painter. But an extraordinary painter. She painted murals throughout the walls of her house. Floor to ceiling in some rooms. Spectacular seascapes of the Penobscot, landscapes of the surrounding towns and forests.

The life inside Tina Pesce’s walls – not just her décor, but her talent, her passion was completely unknown to the people who lived around her for decades. If you didn’t know Tina well, as few people did, you would not have suspected her talent and her passion.
There is so much we don’t know about our neighbors, our co-congregants, people all around us. And often we aren’t curious enough to learn.

I hate grocery shopping. There are a couple of scenarios that always seem to happen. They can go one of two ways. Someone in the produce department parks his shopping cart across the aisle blocking access to 4 types of vegetables as he inspects every red pepper. Someone else has a question for the cashier about 7 of the 10 items being rung up. The first way this scenario can unfold involves me muttering under my breath and scowling. The other option is wondering why. It’s writing a spontaneous midrash. I wonder why this person is so particular. So concerned about expenses. So slow. I can come up with all kinds of possibilities: a sick spouse who doesn’t eat much, a sudden loss of income, an injury. I don’t know if my musings are an accurate reading of the text. But the very act of wondering why about someone reminds me that this annoying person has an internal life, a history, pressures from work or health or family. I unclench. I find a reserve of patience. We just don’t know all the wrinkles of someone’s internal life.

Sometimes, in my line of work, someone will be unpleasant. {They will complain excessively.} They might speak to me disrespectfully. Sometimes people are ill mannered or inattentive to the feelings of others or oblivious that
their words or actions are hurtful. So I try to do a little midrash. What is under the surface? Why would someone be so angry about a program or an interaction? How does someone not notice that their words or tone are hurtful? You could say I’m presumptuous. Who am I to second-guess someone else’s actions? But even if I’m wrong, the very act of speculating, or wondering, why this is person behaving badly – that very act humanizes the person, gives him or her the benefit of the doubt. This is midrash as benefit of the doubt, an act of dăl l’chaf z’cut, judging someone favorably.

One more example, not exactly real life: David and I are rewatching every episode of season 2 of Ted Lasso to look for clues to the pain that prompted Nate’s cruelty.

I understand that we have to be careful. I know that it is presumptuous to assign motive to a person’s actions. What I am suggesting is that the answers may or may not be right. But the questioning is what’s important. The willingness to not write someone off as ill-mannered or unworthy in any way. But rather to wonder – is there something I don’t know about this person? Is there some reason for this behavior?
My rabbi, Rabbi Oleisky was not a brilliant orator – he had one or two outstanding sermons that everyone remembers fondly, but that was not his strength. Rabbi Oleisky loved his congregants. He watched out for those of us who needed it. He made it his business to know everyone – to know their fears and their hopes and what made them laugh and cry. He didn’t call it midrash. He was just compassionate and eager to presume there was more to any of us than meets the eye. He taught me that getting to know someone, seeing their internal life takes work – that we don’t all give up our secrets or share our vulnerabilities easily. But, he taught me, the actions we see on the surface are not the full story. For that, for Torah with all her richness, for a human story in all its fullness, we have to ask some questions. We have to look deeply into one another to see the fullness and the beauty of our humanity. He taught me the grace of midrash.