YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Talmudic Aggadot**

**By Rav Dr. Yonatan Feintuch**

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Dedicated by Steven Weiner and Lisa Wise with prayers for *refua* *sheleima* for all who require healing, comfort and peace –

those battling illnesses visibly and invisibly, publicly and privately.

May Hashem mercifully grant us strength, courage, and compassion.

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In honor of Oma Ina Sondheim, our matriarch,

from her children, grandchildren and great - grandchildren,

who all love her and are davening for her refuah shelaymah

so that she can continue to share her wisdom, insight and wit with all of us.

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Shiur #01: Introduction to the Series

 Our aim in this series, God willing, is to study various *aggadot*, mainly from the Babylonian Talmud.[[1]](#footnote-1) Our study will be based on a literary analysis of each *aggada*, with the goal of grasping its theme, message and meanings. Similarly, we will examine the broad context of the Aggada in the Talmud, and we will attempt to determine what each *aggada* contributes to the general context of the *sugya* within which or next to which it appears, and what, in turn, that context adds to the reading of that *aggada*. We will also consider the parallels and variants of each *aggada* in the Babylonian Talmud that appear elsewhere in the literature of *Chazal*, in order to dissect the different contexts in which the *aggada* is integrated.

In these *shiurim*, we proceed based on two assumptions discussed in the previous series.

The first assumption is that Talmudic tales are not simplistic or precise descriptions of historical events; this is not what they are designed to do. Without delving into an in-depth proof of this matter, we may point to the various versions of a given tale that appear in various sources in the literature of *Chazal*. We read these stories as literary creations designed by *Chazal* to transmit their views and messages in many areas: theology, philosophy, spirituality, education, and ethics. Their literary design is extremely significant and contributes significantly to the development of the theme or message of each *aggada*.

An additional assumption underpinning our analysis is that the *aggadot* that appear in the *gemara* do not exist in a vacuum, but rather in a certain Talmudic context. Often the context is halakhic, as the *aggada* appears in a halakhic passage analyzing a Mishnaic text (though at times the *aggada* concludes the debate or even opens it). In other cases, the broader context is purely aggadic, mainly when the passages are composed of narrative or exegetical collections. Sometimes, at first glance, the connection between the *aggada* and what surrounds it seems to be merely associative or technical in nature – for example, when the *aggada* mentions the name of a certain sage or some other issue previously raised in a halakhic debate. However, often exploring the context of the *aggada* exposes new meanings; indeed, it may even lead to an entirely new reading of the *aggada*. This reading is fundamentally different from any consideration of the *aggada* out of context and regarded as an independent unit. Analyzing the context also reveals the educational or ideological role that the *aggada* plays in the passage.

The Aggadot of Tractate *Chagiga*’s Opening *Sugya*

For this series, we will turn to a number of *aggadot* from the first pages of the Talmudic tractate of *Chagiga*, an appropriate subject for this period, immediately after the *chagim* that open the new year. *Chagiga* begins by examining the *mitzvot* of pilgrimage for the festivals (as well as the *mitzva* of *Hakhel*, which occurs once every seven years during Sukkot). These *aggadot* offer a golden opportunity to demonstrate the links between halakhic debates and aggadic passages.

These *aggadot* are quite well-known and well-researched. Regarding the aggadot themselves we will draw a not-inconsiderable amount from what has been written on this subject, and our main innovation will be to explore the connection between these *aggadot* and the wider context of these passages.

We will dedicate several *shiurim* to these *aggadot*. Taken together, these *shiurim* present a comprehensive approach, but each is constructed to stand on its own, so that each *shiur* consists of a complete analysis of one specific *aggada* or a comparison of that *aggada* to its parallels and the like. Nevertheless, our ultimate goal is a comprehensive, cohesive approach, based on the cumulative nature of all the *shiurim* dealing with these *aggadot*.

In the next few *shiurim*, we will compare and contrast the various versions of the *aggadot* in the first part of *Chagiga* and their parallels throughout the literature of *Chazal*, pointing out their differences. In addition, we will analyse the connection between these *aggadot* and the halakhic context in which the Babylonian Talmud places them.

The *Aggadot*

The *aggadot* that we will analyze appear in the beginning of Tractate *Chagiga* (3a-b) in the Babylonian Talmud (note that the word “*haggada*” here is equivalent to *aggada*):

Our Rabbis taught: Once R. Yochanan b. Beroka and R. Elazar Chisma went to pay their respects to R. Yehoshua at Peki'in. He said to them: “What new teaching was there at the *beit ha-midrash* today?” They replied: “We are your disciples, so it is your waters we drink.” He said to them: “Even so, it is impossible for a session of the *beit ha-midrash* to pass without some novel teaching. Whose Sabbath was it?” “It was the Sabbath of R. Elazar b. Azarya.” “And what was the theme of his *haggada* today?” They answered: “The passage of *Hakhel*.” “And what exposition did he give thereon?” “‘Assemble (*Hakhel*) the people: the men and the women and the little ones’ (*Devarim* 31:12). If the men came to learn, the women came to hear, but wherefore have the little ones to come? In order to grant reward to those that bring them.” He said to them: “There was a fair jewel in your hand, and you sought to deprive me of it!”

He further expounded: “‘You have avouched the Lord this day… and the Lord has avouched you this day’ (*Devarim* 26:17-18). The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel: You have made me a unique object of your love in the world, and I shall make you a unique object of My love in the world. You have made me a unique object of your love, as it is written: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One’ (*Devarim* 6:4). And I shall make you a unique object of My love, as it is said, ‘And who is like unto Your people Israel, a nation one in the earth’ (*I Divrei Ha-yamim* 17:21).”

And he also took up the text and expounded: “‘The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails well planted are the words of the masters of assemblies, which are given from one shepherd’ (*Kohelet* 12:11). Why are the words of the Torah likened to a goad? To teach you that just as the goad directs the heifer along its furrow in order to bring forth life to the world, so the words of the Torah direct those who study them from the paths of death to the paths of life. But [should you think] that just as the goad is movable so the words of the Torah are movable; therefore the text says: ‘nails’. But [should you think] that just as the nail diminishes and does not increase, so too the words of the Torah diminish and do not increase; therefore the text says: ‘well planted’; just as a plant grows and increases, so the words of the Torah grow and increase. ‘The masters of assemblies’: these are the disciples of the wise, who sit in manifold assemblies and occupy themselves with the Torah, some pronouncing impure and others pronouncing pure, some prohibiting and others permitting, some disqualifying and others declaring fit. Should a man say: How in these circumstances shall I learn Torah? Therefore the text says: ‘All of them are given from one Shepherd’. One God gave them; one leader uttered them from the mouth of the Lord of all creation, blessed be He; for it is written: ‘And God spoke all of these words’. Also make your ear like the hopper and get a perceptive heart to understand the words of those who pronounce impure and the words of those who pronounce pure, the words of those who prohibit and the words of those who permit, the words of those who disqualify and the words of those who declare fit.”

He [then] spoke to them in the following words: “It is not an orphan generation in which R. Elazar b. Azarya lives.”

But they could have told him directly! It was on account of a certain occurrence.

For it is taught: Once R. Yosei b. Durmaskit went to pay his respects to R. Eliezer[[2]](#footnote-2) at Lod. Said the latter to him: “What new thing was taught in the *beit ha-midrash* today?” He replied: “They decided by vote that in Ammon and Moab the tithe of the poor should be given in the seventh year.” Said [R. Eliezer] to him: “Yosei, stretch forth your hands and receive your eyes.” He stretched forth his hands and received his eyes. R. Eliezer wept, saying, “‘The secret of the Lord is with those that fear him and he will show them his covenant’ (*Tehillim* 25:14). Go and tell them: Do not be anxious about your vote. I have received from R. Yochanan b. Zakkai, who heard it from his master, and his master from his master, **a rule to Moses from Sinai**, that Ammon and Moab give poor man’s tithe in the Sabbatical year.” What is the reason? Many cities were conquered by those who came up from Egypt, which were not conquered by those who came up from Babylon; since the first consecration held [only] for the time, but did not hold for the future [permanently], therefore they were left in order that the poor might be sustained upon them in the seventh year. It is taught: When his mind was calmed, he said: “May it be granted that Yosei's eyes be restored.” And they were restored.

This aggadic passage is composed of two narratives about various *Tanna’im*, linked by a connective sentence. The *gemara* remarks: “But they could have told him directly!” In other words, why in the first story do the students not immediately accede to R. Yehoshua’s request to recount what happened that day in the *beit ha-midrash*, instead of avoiding the question by saying: “We are your disciples, so it is your waters we drink.” The *gemara* responds, “It was on account of a certain occurrence,” and immediately goes to on to tell the second story, in which R. Yosei b. Durmaskit tells R. Eliezer the innovation from the *beit ha-midrash* that day, and he is severely punished for doing so. According to this connection, R. Yehoshua’s students were scared to tell their master about the innovative teachings in the *beit ha-midrash*, due to the horrific experience of R. Yosei b. Durmaskit.

Direct Connection of the *Aggadot* in the Passage

We have seen that the second story, about R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanos, is cited incidentally to address the *gemara*’s question about the first story. But what is the context for citing the first story in the passage?

The passage is dealing with the *mitzva* of pilgrimage on the festivals, as the verse commands: “Three times a years, all of your males must appear before the Lord, the Lord God of Israel” (*Shemot* 34:23; cf. ibid. 23:17). The first *mishna* in the tractate deals with this *mitzva*. The *gemara* deduces, by the textual analogy of a *gezera shava*, that pilgrimage is not a binding *mitzva* for those who are either mute or deaf, based on the similar mitzva of *Hakhel* (found in *Devarim* 31:10-13):

With regard to appearing, it is deduced by forming an analogy between the expressions for appearing from *Hakhel*, for it is written: “Assemble the people, the men and the women and the little ones;” and it is [further] written: “When all Israel is come to appear.” But whence is it deduced for the latter? For it is written: “That they may hear and that they may learn.” And it is taught: “That they may hear,” [this] excludes one who can speak but not hear; “and that they may learn,” [this] excludes one who can hear but not speak. (*Chagiga* 3a)

The *gemara* goes on to cite R. Tanchum, who derives another exemption from the passage of *Hakhel*: “R. Tanchum said: One who is deaf in one ear is exempt from appearing [at the Temple], for it is said: ‘In their ears.’”

In light of R. Tanchum’s statement regarding the *mitzva* of pilgrimage, two others statements of his are cited. These are followed by the first narrative concerning R. Yehoshua’s students, which at its center expounds the *mitzva* of *Hakhel*, analyzing the demographics of the *mitzva*, echoing the debate about the *mitzva* of pilgrimage:

“And what was the theme of his *haggada* today?” They answered: “The passage of *Hakhel*.” “And what exposition did he give thereon?” “‘Assemble (*Hakhel*) the people: the men and the women and the little ones.’ If the men came to learn, the women came to hear, but wherefore have the little ones to come? In order to grant reward to those that bring them.”

We will return to these two Talmudic stories and the link between them, so it is recommended to recall the context for the weeks to come. However, before we consider that, let us examine the earliest sources in which these Talmudic stories appear.

**The First Story and Its Sources**

The first story, about R. Yehoshua and his students, appears in full in the Tosefta (*Sota* 7:9-12):

Once R. Yochanan b. Beroka and R. Elazar Chisma went to pay their respects to R. Yehoshua at Peki'in. He said to them: “What new teaching was there at the *beit ha-midrash* today?” They replied: “We are your disciples, so it is your waters we drink.” He said to them: “Even so, it is impossible for a session of the *beit ha-midrash* to pass without some novel teaching. Whose Sabbath was it?” “It was the Sabbath of R. Elazar b. Azarya.” ”And what was the theme of his *haggada* today?” They answered: “The passage of *Hakhel*.” “And what exposition did he give thereon?” “‘Assemble (*Hakhel*) the people: the men and the women and the little ones’. If the men came to learn, the women came to hear, but wherefore have the little ones to come? In order to grant reward to those that bring them.”

He further expounded: “‘You have avouched the Lord this day… and the Lord has avouched you this day.’ The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel: You have made me a unique object of your love in the world, and I shall make you a unique object of My love in the World to Come.”

And he also took up the text and expounded: “‘The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails well planted.’ Just as the goad directs the heifer along its furrow in order to bring forth life to the world, so the words of the Torah are only life for the world, as the text says, ‘It is a tree of life,’ etc. But [should you think] that just as the goad is movable so the words of the Torah are movable; therefore the text says: ‘nails’. But [should you think] that just as the nail diminishes and does not increase, so too the words of the Torah diminish and do not increase; therefore the text says: ‘well planted’; just as a plant grows and increases, so the words of the Torah grow and increase. ‘The masters of assemblies’: these are the disciples of the wise, who sit in manifold assemblies, pronouncing the impure to be impure and the pure to be pure, the impure in its place and the pure in its place. Should a man say: Since Beit Shammai pronounce impure and Beit Hillel pure, this one prohibits and that one permits, how in these circumstances shall I learn Torah? Therefore the text says: ‘Words,’ ‘These words,’ ‘All these words,’ ‘All of these words.’ ‘Are given from one Shepherd’: One God created them; one leader uttered them from the mouth of the Lord of all creation, blessed be He. Also make your heart into chambers within chambers, wherein you may place the words of Beit Shammai and the words of Beit Hillel, the words of those who pronounce impure and the words of those who pronounce pure.”

He [then] spoke to them: “It is not an orphan generation in which R. Elazar lives.”

Let us consider the differences between the Tosefta and the Talmud. At first glance, these may appear to be identical narratives, with only a few stylistic idiosyncrasies, which would only be natural. However, if we delve deeper and take into account the recent literature reevaluating these texts, we may uncover the truth that each sources has its own theme and its own moral, wildly divergent from the other. The substantial distinction between the messages of each emanates from the textual differences, which might ostensibly seem minor and inconsequential. Nevertheless, if we examine these parallel texts, we may demonstrate a point that is essential for the current series of *shiurim* – how the same story makes its way through various sources in the literature of *Chazal*, donning and doffing different meanings.

The initial *derasha* (exposition) of R. Elazar b. Azarya is quite similar in both texts. He cites the verse from *Devarim* 31 concerning the *Hakhel* ceremony and explains the reason to bring “the little ones” to this assembly: “In order to grant reward to those that bring them.”

The subsequent *derasha* is also quite similar in both texts, analyzing the verse from *Devarim* 26: “You have avouched the Lord this day,” although the Talmud elaborates, citing verses to prove each side of the unique relationship between Israel and God. We will deal with these later when we return to the Talmudic text.

However, the third *derasha*, expounding a verse in *Kohelet*, is vastly different between the Tosefta and the Talmud. The verse states: “The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails well planted the words of the masters of assemblies, which are given from one shepherd.” Let us focus on the varying interpretations of “the masters of assemblies” by examining them side-by-side.

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|  | **Tosefta**  | **Babylonian Talmud** |
| 1. 1
 | 1. “The masters of assemblies”: these are the disciples of the wise, who sit in manifold assemblies, pronouncing the impure to be impure and the pure to be pure, the impure in its place and the pure in its place.
 | “The masters of assemblies”: these are the disciples of the wise, who sit in manifold assemblies and occupy themselves with the Torah, some pronouncing impure and others pronouncing pure, some prohibiting and others permitting, some disqualifying and others declaring fit.  |
| 1. 2
 | 1. Should a man say: Since Beit Shammai pronounce impure and Beit Hillel pure, this one prohibits and that one permits, how in these circumstances shall I learn Torah? Therefore the text says: “Words,” “These words,” “All these words,” “All of these words.”
 | Should a man say: How in these circumstances shall I learn Torah?  |
| 1. 3
 | 1. “Are given from one Shepherd”: One God created them; one leader uttered them from the mouth of the Lord of all creation, blessed be He.
 | Therefore the text says: “All of them are given from one Shepherd.” One God gave them; one leader uttered them from the mouth of the Lord of all creation, blessed be He; for it is written: “And God spoke all of these words.” |
| 4 | Also make your heart into chambers within chambers, wherein you may place the words of Beit Shammai and the words of Beit Hillel, the words of those who pronounce impure and the words of those who pronounce pure. | Also make your ear like the hopper and get a perceptive heart to understand the words of those who pronounce impure and the words of those who pronounce pure, the words of those who prohibit and the words of those who permit, the words of those who disqualify and the words of those who declare fit. |

It becomes immediately apparent that the Talmud interprets this *derasha* as a reference to dueling sages differing on halakhic matters: “some pronouncing impure and others pronouncing pure, some prohibiting and others permitting, some disqualifying and others declaring fit.” This is a famous *derasha* addressing a well-known conundrum concerning the Oral Torah: how is the multiplicity of views to be understood as it relates to the tradition from Sinai of unitary commandments and messages not subject to dispute? The *derasha* maintains that even though there are many contradictory views among the sages, they all emanate from the same divine source, God’s Torah as transmitted by Moshe, or as *Chazal* phrase it elsewhere: “These and those are the words of the Living God.”

However, the Tosefta’s version is reversed initially (part 1). This variant does not describe disagreement, but rather distinction: “pronouncing the impure to be impure and the pure to be pure, the impure in its place and the pure in its place.” Still, the next section (part 2) does venture into the paradigmatic disputes of Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel. The logic of the sequence is unclear. Moreover, the final line (part 4) is somewhat puzzling as well, as it is unclear what it means to “make your heart into chambers within chambers,” or what this has to do with the preceding sentences.

Prof. Shlomo Naeh suggested a creative solution for understanding the Tosefta, offering an original interpretation of the *derasha*.[[3]](#footnote-3) In his view, the Tosefta has an interlaced structure, so that in order to understand it, we must read parts 1 and 3 and then turn to parts 2 and 4. Thus, Naeh’s reading would go as follows:

(1) “The masters of assemblies”: these are the disciples of the wise, who sit in manifold assemblies, pronouncing the impure to be impure and the pure to be pure, the impure in its place and the pure in its place. (3) “Are given from one Shepherd”: One God created them; one leader uttered them from the mouth of the Lord of all creation, blessed be He.

(2) Should a man say: Since Beit Shammai pronounce impure and Beit Hillel pure, this one prohibits and that one permits, how in these circumstances shall I learn Torah? Therefore the text says: “Words,” “These words,” “All these words,” “All of these words.” (4) Also make your heart into chambers within chambers, wherein you may place the words of Beit Shammai and the words of Beit Hillel, the words of those who pronounce impure and the words of those who pronounce pure.

The first half expounds the verse from *Kohelet* as applying to the Oral Torah, which has its source at Sinai, while the second half raises a question – not the fact of differing views, as the Talmud might indicate, but the massive quantity of information in the Oral Torah. After all, the Oral Torah in that era was a literal term, as they studied by heart, which meant that the students had a challenge in keeping all of the many views on sundry issues straight in their memory. Thus, Naeh explains, the “chambers within chambers” method is presented, a technique for organizing and arranging material in the student’s mind. He adduces numerous proofs to this approach,[[4]](#footnote-4) summarizing thusly?: “This is what ‘make your heart into chambers within chambers’ means: you must prepare your heart and build within it different chambers and partitions — not unlike an organized library — in which you may store material classified according to ‘the words of Beit Shammai and the words of Beit Hillel, the words of those who pronounce impure and the words of those who pronounce pure.’”

The *derasha* in the Tosefta, on the other hand, is not concerned with the dilemma of the unitary source at Sinai yielding variegated views and disagreements. Indeed, the first half (parts 1 and 3 in the table) describes, without any connection to the issue of disputes, the direct link between the Torah as given at Sinai and the Oral Torah. In the second half, the many disagreements raise a very different challenge, that of recollection and memory, so that the text presents a solution, much like others suggested by various *Tanna’im* to address this problem, which was a serious concern for many as the Oral Torah continued to develop.[[5]](#footnote-5)

What is fascinating in this interpretation of the Tosefta is that we may learn from it how the Babylonian Talmud took this narrative, dealing with one matter, and by introducing a number of minor changes (apparently) in formulation and putting it in a different context, dramatically altered its focus and message. Next week, we will return, God willing, to the Talmudic *derasha* and analyze its meaning.

Translated by Yoseif Bloch

1. This series is a sequel to the series I wrote several years ago for the Virtual Beit Midrash (see [here](https://etzion.org.il/en/series/talmudic-aggadot-1)), but it may be studied independently. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Vilna edition has “R. Elazar,” but reliable manuscripts have “R. Eliezer,” i.e. R. Eliezer ben Hyrcanos, and I have emended accordingly. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. S. Naeh, “*Omanut Ha-Zikaron, Mivnim shel Zikaron, Ve-tavniyot Be-sifrut Chazal,” Mechkerei Talmud* 3, pp. 570-586. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cf. ibid. We will not cite his words at length here. See also his explanation of the reasons for the corruption of the text, leading to an interlaced structure in the Tosefta. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Naeh’s list of sources, pp. 584, 586. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)