YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**TALMUDIC AGGADA**

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The htm version of this shiur is available at:

<http://vbm-torah.org/archive/aggada72/16aggada.htm>

**Shiur #16: Meaning in the Details? Aggadic Methodology**

In her review of my book, *Fresh Fruit and Vintage Wine: The Ethics and Wisdom of the Aggada*, Simi Peters criticizes the absence of a methodology of interpretation (*Tradition* Summer 2010 43:2, pp. 69-72). While I have reservations about focusing on methodology, her point has cogency, and I would like to use this lesson to discuss one methodological issue in analyzing *aggadot*.

All stories include details, and we wonder whether or not to attribute symbolic significance to these details. On the one hand, locating deep meaning in every detail seems overdone. Some details simply help flesh out the story, and others are present for basic pragmatic reasons. On the other hand, some details appear ripe with significance. What principles enable us to more easily determine when to look for a grand religious message in the details?

A comment of Maharal proves quite helpful. The Gemara (*Shabbat* 31a) tells a story of three prospective converts who come to Shammai and HiIlel. One wants to only accept the written law but not the oral law, one wants to convert on condition that he learn the entire Torah while standing on one foot, and the third’s condition is that he become the High Priest. Shammai rejects all three candidates, while Hillel accepts them and finds ways to inspire them in a more authentic direction. In the first instance, Shammai rejects the fellow with anger; in the following two, he rebuffs the potential converts with a builder’s cubic meter.

We could say that Shammai happens to have a builder’s meter around, and that he used it to chase away the latter two. However, Maharal raises two objections to that approach. It seems unlikely that Shammai would happen to have this tool handy in two of the episodes. Moreover, why do we need to hear about the specific tool with which he chases these people away? In addition, the transition from the first story, in which the meter does not appear, to the latter stories, where it does, is suggestive.

Maharal explains the tool symbolically as conveying the character of Shammai. Shammai stood for precision and exactitude, for getting things fully right. Such a personality invariably rejects potential converts whose requests reveal an absence of total commitment. Maharsha finds different symbolic resonance. Buildings rest on multiple foundations, and any structure built on one pillar will not endure. Shammai instructs the potential converts not to reduce Judaism to a single theme. Standing on one foot means the desire to view Judaism through the lens of a single ideal. Similarly, the fellow who wanted to become High Priest limited the essence of Torah to the priesthood. Shammai’s builder’s meter clarifies the nature of their mistake. Maharsha’s approach explains why this symbolic gesture does not appear with regard to the fellow who resisted accepting the oral law; that issue did not revolve around reducing Judaism to one idea.

Should we view these interpretations as nice homiletics or as close readings of the story? Two criteria help guide us. Are the details necessary for the story or not? If there was no need to tell us how Shammai chased people away, a symbolic reading becomes more convincing. Secondly, does the symbolic interpretation work? Does it have resonance? Though answering this second question proves more subjective, it remains an important consideration. Sometimes, a detail will have symbolic resonance because it alludes to other Torah texts. On other occasions, the symbolism will come from the nature of the detail itself. A builder’s meter conveying exactitude seems eminently reasonable. Thus, Maharal offers us sufficient reason to take his interpretation seriously as potential *peshat* (simple meaning) of the story.

Let us use some concrete examples to illustrate the above methodology. In one Talmudic story, Hillel is taking a shower when a fellow comes to ask him silly questions in a futile attempt to get Hillel angry (*Shabbat* 31a). The shower in this story has no deeper symbolic significance; it is simply part of a pragmatic strategy. This fellow tries to enrage Hillel by coming at the least convenient time – when Hillel bathes in preparation for Shabbat. There is no reason to look for symbolic significance regarding baths or water.

On the other hand, sometimes the choice of detail demands an explanation. An elderly woman complains that the Exilarch and his rabbis are sitting in a stolen *sukka,* since the Exilarch’s men took her wood. When R. Nachman pays no attention to her, she cries out: “A woman whose ancestor had three hundred and eighteen servants cries out to you, and you pay her no heed?” (*Sukka* 31a). This woman clearly refers to the biblical episode in which Avraham and his three hundred and eighteen men defeat the four kings and rescue Lot. Yet why in the world should she mention this story specifically now? This detail must have deeper import.

R. Yaakov Ettlinger explains that Avraham instructs his soldiers not to engage in battle for monetary gain. He cites a *midrash* that Avraham paid his soldiers extremely well so that they would remain uninterested in the spoils of war (*Tanchuma Lekh Lekha*). Even without that *midrash*, we know that Avraham personally refused to benefit financially from his victory (*Bereishit* 14:2-23). If so, this woman selected a perfect symbol. Unlike the Exilarch, Avraham and his band did not pursue wealth or take advantage of their status to seize property belonging to another.

R. Tzadok Ha-kohen of Lublin develops an extensive theory in which Avraham symbolizes refusal to despair. R. Nachman thought he could ignore this woman, because she surely despaired of ever getting her wood back from the powerful forces of the Exilarch. If so, she had legal rights to demand financial compensation, but not to demand the wood itself. In response, she makes reference to her descent from Avraham to indicate that she does not give up so easily. Just as Avraham bravely took on the four kings, she confronts the rich and influential without a trace of despair. Even if we describe R. Tzadok’s approach as *derash* (an interpretation that aims to get at some meaning extrinsic to the text itself), the need to find meaning in this detail stems from a *peshat* orientation.

In instances when the detail is not superfluous, we should still investigate potential resonance or associations. If the detail has a certain resonance or association, we may be convinced of its symbolism even if it is not superfluous. Bar Kamtza gets the Jews in trouble with the Caesar by placing a blemish in the animal sent by the Caesar so the Jews will not offer it on the altar. The blemish is either on the animal’s tongue or eye (*Gittin* 56a). Granted, the blemish has to be somewhere. Yet, the choice of the locations resonates. Maharsha explains that this placement reflects the groundless hatred causing the Second Temple’s destruction. Interpersonal enmity finds expression in how we speak of others and how we look at them; thus, this generation had blemished lips and eyes.

No doubt we will find some cases borderline and debatable. When Rav has marital difficulties with his wife, she insists on choosing the dinner dish he does not want. If he asks for peas, she makes lentils and vice versa. I had always thought that the *gemara* needed some example of discord, and we need not find special resonance in the choice of food. However, the *gemara* later turns to a question of dishonesty for a good cause. Rav’s son Hiyya misleads his mother about Rav’s requests so that she would make the desired dish, and Rav instructs him to stop doing so. R. Shmuel Klitsner once suggested that lentils allude to the Yaakov and Esav story, where issues of honesty to parents come into play. I am not fully convinced, but his clever reading highlights the significance of symbolic connections to other Torah sources.

When a Sadducee mocks the water libation offering by pouring the water on the ground, people at the Temple pelt him with *etrogim* (*Sukka* 49b). Here, again, a pragmatic explanation suffices. Only one of the four species can be used as a projectile, so they chose to throw that species. Nothing forces a symbolic interpretation. Some authorities claim that the *etrog* represents the oral law, since we cannot identify this species based on its biblical description without our oral tradition. If so, the people metaphorically pelted the Sadducee with the need for an oral tradition. This ingenious interpretation may be more homiletic and less necessitated by literary considerations.

After R. Shimon bar Yochai and his son emerge form the cave a second time, an encounter with a Jew carrying myrtle branches to honor Shabbat reconciles them to the world (*Shabbat* 33b). This fellow had to be carrying something for Shabbat, and roses or lilies would work just as well. Perhaps myrtles are simply an example with no broader association. Jeffrey Rubinstein connects this *gemara* with the famous *midrash* identifying the myrtle with Jews who have good deeds but lack Torah knowledge. This fits our *gemara* beautifully since these two scholars need to learn how to appreciate the religious lives of the farmers and carpenters. I find this reading more convincing than the reading above, since it coheres with known rabbinic symbolism and fits the broader themes of this story.

[We will continue this topic next week while giving special attention to the use of numbers in the *aggada*. Many of the examples discussed above appear in my book which originated as a series for the Virtual Beit Midrash and can be found on the [VBM archives](http://www.vbm-torah.org/aggada.htm).]