YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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UNDERSTANDING AGGADA

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In Loving Memory of  
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Shiur #1: Introduction

If you want to recognize the One who spoke and the world came into being, learn *aggada*. (*Sifrei, Devarim* 49)

Despite the above rabbinic endorsement of learning the *aggada*, the non-legal sections of the Talmud, these parts of the Talmud have not received their due in our educational structures. Due to the centrality of the norm in Judaism, most of our best energy was historically channeled towards elucidating the halakhic parts of the Talmud. Many great medieval commentaries, such as Ramban, Ba'al Ha-ma'or and Tosafot Rid, almost never comment on aggadic sections. The contemporary world of *yeshivot gevohot* tends to focus gemara *shiurim* almost exclusively on conceptual analysis of the legal principles, leaving little to no room for aggadic analysis. Even on a high school level, it is not uncommon for a rebbe to avoid the *aggada*.

I believe that this situation is problematic, and that we have much to gain from broadening the focus of our talmudic study to include the entirety of talmudic texts. This may have particular significance in Israel, where there is currently widespread concern about students not enjoying their gemara study.

Although there can be no denying the paramount significance of Halakha, Judaism also incorporates ideals and values that complement the specific legal norms. As the Ramban pointed out in response to the first Rashi on the Torah, the Torah could not skip *Sefer Bereishit* and begin with the *mitzvot* because it is precisely the stories of *Bereishit* that teach us the fundamental beliefs and moral values that necessarily stand alongside the codes of Jewish law. Our sages of the Talmud clearly deemed it worthwhile to interweave legal discussions with aggadic material to create this balance, and we would be wise to follow their example.

Educationally, we would then teach our students that *Chazal* engaged in more than debates about the finer points of halakhic minutiae, however crucial these may be. While I think this an important message irrespective of the current educational situation, it takes on added significance in light of the difficulties faced by gemara teachers in our classrooms. Study of *aggada* may enable those students struggling to find existential meaning in talmudic texts to view the gemara in a far more positive light. (For a more extensive discussion of these ideas, see my article, "Redeeming the *Aggadah* in Jewish Education," in *Wisdom From All My Teachers*, ed. Jeffrey Saks and Susan Handelman, Jerusalem 2003.)

These *shiurim* will try to show how such analysis might be accomplished. Two principles will guide us in this endeavor. First, we will show that Jewish tradition has many more resources for explaining the *aggada* than is normally assumed, if we only expand our range of reading. Traditional commentaries on the *aggada*, such as Maharsha, Maharal, the commentaries found in the *Ein Yaakov* and Rav Kook's *Ein Ayah*, all contain valuable material. Although the *rishonim* often skip *aggadot*, many *acharonim* contributed significantly to the study of agadda. Among these more recent rabbinic greats, we shall utilize commentaries of *Arukh Le-Ner*, *Sefat Emet*, and *Keren Ora,* among others. Perhaps the main reason that students don't find helpful commentary on *aggada* is that much good material is not found in commentaries on the talmudic page but rather in commentaries on *Chumash* (*Netziv* and *Meshekh Chokhma* come to mind), Chassidic works (R. Tzadok Hakohen's *Divrei Soferim* is a shining example), and works of Jewish thought (such as the essays of Rav Hutner and Rav Soloveitchik). In addition to all of the above, we shall try to show how background in the literature and philosophy of the Western world helps equip one to read *aggadot* well. The more insights one gleans from the humanities, the more one can understand the profundity of the *aggada*.

Our second guiding principle is the assumption that the text has religious/ethical import, and it behooves us to look for those messages. At the same time, our search for meaning will not lead us to abandon the simple meaning of the words. Thus, we shall eschew the types of talmudic readings featured in R. Nachman's *Likkutei Moharan*,in which every word in a talmudic story is interpreted in a metaphorical fashion until the interpretation bears no relationship to the words on the page. Yet sticking to the plain sense of the words should not prevent us from searching for the moral of the talmudic stories. *Chazal* included these stories and maxims in the Talmud precisely to teach us religious messages; a search for those messages, when done properly, should lead to a more accurate reading of the texts. As James Kugel pointed out in another context, it was Malbim's assumption that every phrase in the Torah should have significance that led him to a more correct understanding of one aspect of Biblical poetry than the approach of those who thought that Biblical parallelism is mere repetition. In the same way, looking for the import of a talmudic story will enhance our ability to read those stories well.

Let us move away from a discussion of methodology and begin with some real Torah. We described *aggada* as the non-legal sections of the Talmud; this includes stories, ethical maxims, psychological insights, medical advice, and much more. We shall now examine two different types of *aggadot*, and come to appreciate the help offered by traditional commentaries.

The Rabbis taught: Once a Sadducee poured the water of the libation offering on his feet (instead of on the altar) and the people stoned him with their *etrogim*. That day, the corner of the altar was damaged and they sealed it up with a fistful of salt, not because this renders it fit for service but so that people will not see the altar damaged. (*Sukka* 48b)

Our story takes place on the festival of Sukkot, on which a Sinaitic tradition records that we shall enact a libation offering involving water. The Sadducees, who rejected the oral traditions of the Rabbis, wanted to sabotage this ritual. A parallel account in Josephus informs us that the Sadducee in question was Alexander Yannai, one of the later Hasmoneans. Yet our concern here is more with the religious meaning of the story than with the historical details of the event. While the image of pelting someone with *etrogim* is somewhat amusing, the reader would be justified in looking for some deeper significance to this story. In addition, Rashi assumes that the people must have thrown stones, as *etrogim* would not have dented the altar. If so, the question of why the text mentions the throwing of *etrogim* becomes even stronger.

R. Yaakov ibn Habib, in his *Ein Yaakov*, suggests a clever answer. He points out that the Torah identifies the *etrog* with the somewhat ambiguous phrase "*peri etz* *hadar*." Our ability to identify the correct fruit comes from the help offered by the oral tradition. This alludes to one of the classic arguments made by Rabbis for the Oral Law. The written Torah itself assumes an accompanying oral tradition, as it does not independently furnish all the information necessary to be put into practice (see Ibn Ezra's introduction to his commentary on *Chumash* for one version of the argument). Furthermore, eschewing a tradition that helps guide our interpretation of Torah leads to a state of religious anarchy. Indeed, despite the fact that Anan, the founder of the Kaarites, preached that each follower should interpret the Torah for himself and not rely on Anan's opinion, traditional communal interpretations became the norm among Karaites as well. If so, the people pelted the Sadducee with a metaphorical *etrog*. Namely, they argued that the Sadducee rejection of *Torah* *she-be-al peh* does not work and is ultimately incompatible with the written Torah itself.

Having seen a commentary on a short talmudic story, we turn to a different type of *aggada*, in which a short maxim requires analysis.

R. Yochanan said in the name of R. Eliezer bar Shimon: "The Holy one, Blessed be He, said to Israel: 'My sons, borrow money upon My credit in order to sanctify the festival day and have faith in Me and I will pay.'" *(Beitza* 15b)

R. Akiva said: "Make your Shabbat like a weekday and do not become dependent on others." (*Shabbat* 118b)

As *Tosafot* and others note, these two statements seem to contradict each other. The latter citation directs us to simplify our Shabbat meals in order not to rely upon financial aid, while the former quote tells us to procure funds from others, and that God will take care of our debts. One approach toward reconciling these passages might differentiate between Shabbat and holidays. *Tosafot* do not accept that distinction, and they explain that the gemara in *Beitza* refers to someone who has the means to pay back, as he owns possessions that he could sell. The gemara in *Shabbat*, on the other hand, refers to someone with no foreseeable means of paying back a debt.

R. Yehuda Arye Leib of Ger adds a powerful comment in his *Sefat Emet* (on *Beiza*). He writes, "Even though one has a Divine promise for the *mitzva* of sanctifying the day, when it comes to one's friends' money, one can not rely upon this to borrow." Based on this gemara, the Gerrerrebbe lays down an important principle. Faith and trust in God are wonderful traits, but not when they come at the expense of others. All good traits can be taken too far, including *emuna* and *bitachon*. Authentic faith demands sacrifice on the part of the individual in question, and not the sacrifices of others.