

## **Why doesn't Halakhic Man Learn Aggada?**

The arts of defining, categorizing and systematizing are hallmarks of the modern age. Indeed, sociologist Max Weber dubbed this an era in which “one can, in principle, master all things by calculation.”[i] Along with a whole tradition of German thinkers, Weber felt that a spirit of rationalism had ingrained itself within modern man. Much like the persona of Adam the First described in R. Soloveitchik’s *Lonely Man of Faith*, the dominant approach to life in today’s society is entirely result-oriented, seeking to mechanically explain and produce concrete results rather than to ponder abstract and existential notions about the world. In this atmosphere of extreme rationalism, Weber understood that “the world’s processes become disenchanting, lose their magical significance.”[ii] Importantly, Weber saw this modern “drive to methodology” as a distinctively negative phenomenon, distancing man from his natural and healthy mode of life.[iii]

However, this sentiment is a far cry from the dominant view of *talmud Torah* in the yeshivah world. As many articles in this issue will no doubt suggest, a methodological and systematic approach is not only tolerated but highly esteemed within the *dalet ammot* (four cubits) of the beit midrash. Methodology is so ingrained in the very fabric of the yeshivah world that a particular *derekh ha-limmud* is to be expected of its students. The benefits of developing a conceptual framework and methodology hardly need enumeration. As R. Aharon Lichtenstein has noted, “There is power, majesty, and grandeur in Torah, conceptually formulated, that a patchwork of minutiae, largely molded by *ad hoc* pragmatic considerations, simply cannot match.”[iv] Not only is a theoretical methodology viewed as logically elegant, but it is also seen by many of its contemporary practitioners as the most efficient and effective way to understand a given *sugya*. This “Brisker” approach to learning, which has achieved almost complete acceptance in the yeshivah world, largely due to the influence of R. Hayyim Soloveichik, seeks to emphasize the “how” of a given concept rather than the “why.” Strict legal and result-oriented methodology is preferred over fanciful metaphysical musings.[v] For the purposes of this article, it

will be useful to condense the nature of *derekh ha-limmud* to its two principle elements: it adopts a certain group of key questions in which one ought to engage, and it utilizes a very specific set of tools and models with which to answer these questions. In short, the ideal type of Torah study remarkably resembles the mindset of R. Soloveitchik's Halakhic Man, whereby the entire world is to be broken down into lucid conceptual halakhic categories.

But where is the Halakhic Man when it comes to the world of Aggadah? Does he discard his critically systematic approach to life when studying it? Noticeably, when it comes to learning Aggadah and Midrash, there are very few, if any, well-developed *derekh ha-limmud*.<sup>[vi]</sup> Together, these portions of *Torah she-be-Al Peh* stand in stark contrast to the halakhic sections of the Gemara, focusing upon biblical interpretation, stories and moral messages rather than strict legal regulations.

Whenever a wandering attempt to enter the chambers of Aggadah is braved, it is invariably approached in a haphazard and sporadic manner. This methodological dearth warrants particular analysis given the singularly high value placed on an orderly attitude in studying the other spheres of Torah. Maharsha, in his introduction to *Hiddushei Aggadot*, criticizes a remarkably similar trend in his own generation, lamenting that “many who learn Aggadah are not careful when examining the words of Hazal and do not seek to understand the full truth of their words, only to utter their voices in public.”<sup>[vii]</sup> Similarly, in a recent article on the current state of Aggadah learning in yeshivah high schools, R. Yitzchak Blau points out the widespread practice of Torah educators to skip midrashic passages altogether when teaching Gemara.<sup>[viii]</sup> Although this phenomenon remains perhaps axiomatic for most yeshivah students, one ought to examine why this trend has become so rife.

From a certain perspective, the lack of clear methodology in the realm of Aggadah is justified in light of the issue of priorities. People simply devote a comparatively minute proportion of their precious learning hours to the world of Aggadah. To an

extent, this is justifiable; the bread and butter of Torah study most definitely ought to lie within the discussions of Abaye and Rava.[ix] Rambam iterated a similar outlook, asserting that when a sufficient level of wisdom is attained, “one should devote one’s days solely to Gemara according to the breadth of his heart and the peace of his mind.”[x] No mention, at least here, is made of Aggadah. There is, however, a more elementary argument that lies at the very heart of this attitude. Midrash and Aggadah, as a common justification goes, do not necessitate advanced proficiency; they can be penetrated with relative ease and little effort. Conversely, Gemara demands a level of expertise and a breadth of knowledge that requires a lifetime to master. Aggadot are seen as a mere collection of fanciful Talmudic stories that ultimately require neither systematic nor critical thought. The Gemara in *Ta’anit* 7a reflects a certain strand of this sentiment: “R. Yirmiyah asked R. Zeira to teach him (Halakhah). R. Zeira replied: ‘*Halish libba’i ve-la yakhilna,*’ ‘I do not feel well and am unable to learn.’[xi] Whereupon R. Yirmiyah said: ‘Then tell me, master, something aggadic [...]’” The message that R. Yirmiyah imparts is that Aggadah is a lighter and more relaxed endeavour. This suggests that serious and devoted intellects ought to spend the lion’s share of their time and efforts on other, more challenging realms of Torah. Whilst this remains a rather pervasive belief in contemporary society, this article will attempt to correct this misconception.

This article will not focus so much on the sociological explanations for this phenomenon as much as the theoretical role that Aggadah plays in Jewish thought.[xii] Understanding the function of Aggadah in Judaism will shed light upon the issue of methodology in that realm. Consequently, a brief analysis of the two broad traditional approaches to Aggadah that contemporary Jewish thought has inherited will provide an excellent point of departure.

### **Aggadah as Human Creation**

At first glance, it appears that many of the Geonim and Rishonim understood Aggadah as a human commentary running parallel to *Torah she-bi-Ketav*. This approach became particularly strong during the early medieval period. As

Aristotelian Rationalism began to permeate medieval society, initially through the Muslim world, many Christian and Karaite thinkers latched onto seemingly outlandish aggadic passages in order to attack and expose the supposed fundamental irrationality of Rabbinic Judaism.[xiii] “The problem of the Aggada,” in Jewish historian Marc Saperstein’s assessment of this age, “had become bound up with the very survival of the books in which it was contained.”[xiv]

In this volatile context, an eclectic range of rabbinic responses developed to counter the challenge.[xv] In a famous response to Pablo Christiani, Ramban explained that aggadot were not meant to be accepted at face value and read literally. Given their human origin, one does not suffer any harm by either rejecting or reinterpreting their meaning.[xvi] At the turn of the eleventh century, R. Hai Gaon adopted a similar approach to the problem, claiming that Aggadah does not enjoy such a sacred status in the corpus of *Torah she-be-Al Peh*: “Know that aggadic sayings are not like a received tradition; they are simply what an individual expresses of what occurs to him personally. [...] That is why they enjoy no authority.”[xvii] R. Sherira Gaon, too, wrote that aggadic statements “are approximate assumptions [*umdena*].... Therefore, we do not rely on aggadic utterances; that portion of their words which is confirmed by reason and the Biblical text is correct.”[xviii]

Thus, one crucial Geonic school of thought adopted the stance that Aggadah remains within the realm of individual creative interpretation of *pesukim* and of the world.[xix] This explains the rich use of imagery and parables in midrashim, whose primary goal is to express individual and novel conceptions of Torah. The human origin of Aggadah should not, of course, degrade its significance; after all, it still emanates from the mouths of the very same Tannaim and Amoraim who fill every page of Gemara. Still, if certain midrashim remain incomprehensible, Rambam calmly allays any cause for distress: we can comfortably dismiss the setback, stating, “I do not understand the words of this prophet or the words of this sage.”[xx]

### **Aggadah as Part of *Torah mi-Sinai***

A drastically different approach has been exemplified by R. Hayyim of Volozhin. R. Hayyim categorically reinstated the divine authority of Aggadah. Just as the *Torah she-bi-Ketav* and *Halakhah le-Moshe mi-Sinai* were issued in their entirety at Har Sinai, so, too, were all the midrashim. R. Hayyim posits:

*“And he should direct his thoughts towards attaching himself with all his might to the Word of God. [...] And even if he involved himself in the study of Aggadah, which has no implications regarding law, this, too, is attachment to the Word of the Holy One, blessed be He, for all the Torah, down to the last detail [...] came from His mouth to Moshe at Sinai.”[xxi]*

On one plane, Aggadah, thus understood, commands absolute authority and forms a fundamental part of the *Masorah* that finds its roots at Sinai. This approach not only asserts the divine origin of Aggadah, but also impacts the way in which we ought to practically relate to this world of learning. Presumably, if midrashic passages were iterated at Sinai, then a commensurable response of diligent acceptance ought to follow. In this vein, R. Moshe Taku (thirteenth-century Germany) defended a fierce commitment to the plain and simple *peshat* of the aggadot.[xxii] Not only did he dismiss allegorical and literary understandings of Aggadah, but he viewed Aggadah as a source of historical fact. Thus, midrashim presenting accounts absent in the simple reading of Tanakh are to be regarded as factually accurate truths. In this light, the world of Aggadah is much closer to the realm of Gemara, which we understand as literal, than we might previously have assumed. Consequently, a similar methodological approach perhaps ought to be applied to the study of Midrash. If Aggadah is not merely a mode of expression used by Hazal, but rather contains divine truths and facts, a stricter methodology ought to aid the discovery of this information.

### **A Synthetic Approach**

At the current juncture, it would appear as though we need to decide whether Aggadah is firmly rooted in the celestial spheres of Har Sinai or if it springs from the more humble and earthly origins of human interpretation and exegesis. Upon reflection, though, perhaps these two approaches are not as starkly opposed as our senses might have us believe. In a recent article outlining his theory on Midrash, R. Mosheh Lichtenstein adopts a model that reconciles these two extremes. R. Mosheh writes: “Through the midrash, a further layer is added to the story, one that joins the pre-existing strata to create an expanded narrative [...] in the same way as the *Torah Shebe’al Pehis* built upon the *Torah Shebichtav* in the halakhik [sic] sphere.”[xxiii] In a dialectical manner, Aggadah adds new layers to the existing mass of Torah, but simultaneously becomes part of its essence. When Hazal developed these midrashim, they were not doing so in a theoretical vacuum. They were reacting to themes and ideas already latent in the *pesukim* themselves. Just like Hazal were given the authority to create and add *Torah she-be-Al Peh* in the halakhic sphere, so, too, were they afforded this authority in the realm of Aggadah.

Thus, in many respects, Aggadah bears a remarkable resemblance to Halakhah. Both are undeniably shaped by Hazal but also form part of the corpus of Torah that demands complete deference and respect. However, despite these similarities, it is also clear that Hazal were acutely aware of the fundamental differences that separate the worlds of Halakhah and Aggadah. The Gemara in *Bava Kamma* 60b relates the following incident which encapsulates this point:

*“R. Ammi and R. Assi were sitting before R. Yitshak Nafha. One said to him: ‘Let the master teach Halakhah.’ The other said to him: ‘Let the master teach Aggadah.’ He started to teach Aggadah, and one student did not let him proceed; he started to teach Halakhah, and the other student did not let him proceed. He said to them: ‘I will give you a parable for comparison to this matter: A man had two wives, one older and one younger. Since the younger wife plucked out his white hairs, and the older wife plucked out his black hairs, the two of them made him bald.’”*

Evidently, there are a number of important messages embedded within this story. Most prominent, however, is that Halakhah is placed in stark opposition to Aggadah. R. Yitshak Nafha does not even attempt to refute the notion that these two realms are distinct; he merely criticizes the hostile attitudes that both R. Ammi and R. Assi adopted towards each other. So what are these differences?

Elaborating upon some of the key distinctions between these two realms will allow us to appreciate the unique features of Aggadah. On a superficial level, the very composition of the aggadic literature indicates that its ambition differs from that of Halakhah. Whilst Aggadah is generally cryptic, free-flowing and esoteric, Halakhah strives to be concise, precise and plain. In contrast to Halakhah, Midrash, by its very nature, does not seek to root itself in day-to-day mundane actions, but rather focuses on values, emotions, human existence and God. A further difference between Aggadah and Halakhah is the way in which argument and opposition are treated. In the halakhic realm, one is generally forced to choose between the different legal positions. Although not always true, contrasting halakhic positions are often viewed as mutually exclusive of one another. If a *posek* (halakhic authority) decides upon a halakhic conclusion in a truly legal fashion, he seeks to apply his ruling universally.[xxiv] Conversely, the world of Aggadah is much less concerned with different parties adopting seemingly contradictory “aggadic positions.” The multilayered and obscure nature of aggadic passages not only implies that Hazal intended to imbue diverse messages within their words, but that they also sought to invite individual interpretation. Thus, whilst multiple truths present a perennial conceptual quandary in the halakhic realm, R. Michael Rosensweig suggests that no such problem exists when it comes to debates in midrashim.[xxv] The reason for these discrepancies, I would contend, is that Aggadah at its very core is a drastically different entity.

The *Sifrei* offers a crucial perspective which augments this approach to Aggadah: “If you want to know (*lehakkir*) the One Who said and the world came into being, learn Aggadah, for through this endeavour you will come to know God and cleave to His

ways.”[xxvi] The goal of Aggadah, in this light, is to accentuate and rekindle our perception of the infinite and transcendental nature of life. Rather than focusing upon external actions, Aggadah offers a timeless insight into the human condition and man’s relationship to God. Thus, a vital aspect of midrashic texts is lost if we view them solely as mere tools to glean historical information about the Avot. Aggadah is aimed primarily at influencing the individual’s existential interaction with the world, and, only as a secondary consequence, stimulating his external actions. Given the variegated and multifaceted nature of individual life, it is expected that there will exist multiple layers and themes within the aggadic world. Within the walls of Aggadah, opposing opinions unite to offer a multilayered perspective on life aimed at diverse people, creating an environment where contrasting and disparate views can sit much more comfortably side by side.[xxvii]

In this sense, there appears a rather convincing explanation for Halakhic Man’s absence from the halls of Aggadah. Applying traditional *darkhei ha-limmud* and approaching one’s learning with a specific set of tools and questions would harm the infinite spirit of Aggadah. The beauty and brilliance of Midrash lies in its ability to capture the imagination and to inspire the individual with a sense of the limitless and divine nature of the world. In addition, its triumph is its ability to communicate with all minds and all intellects. Subjecting this to a strict methodology would critically impede this aggadic achievement. Methodology is vital when seeking to obtain hard data and to achieve results. Aggadah, though, is based upon experience and existence.

Although the emphases of Halakhah and Aggadah are noticeably distinct, a balance between these two worlds is clearly the ideal. Returning to our story in *Bava Kamma* 60b, R. Yitshak Nafha’s retort to the standoff between R. Ammi and R. Assi illustrates this point with the utmost profundity:

*“That being the case, I will teach you something that will please both of you. ‘If a fire goes out and finds thorns’[xxviii] – even though the fire goes out on its own, the*

*person who kindled the fire must nevertheless pay. So the Holy One, blessed be He, says: 'I must pay for the fire that I kindled. I lit a fire in Zion, as it says: "He kindled a fire in Zion and it consumed the foundations." [xxix] I will, in the future, rebuild it with fire' [...] The halakhic part is as follows: Scripture begins with damages caused by a person's property and then concludes with damages caused by the person himself. This teaches that one's fire is considered like one's arrow (for the purposes of determining tort malfeasance)."*

The message with which R. Nafha leaves the reader is that both Aggadah and Halakhah are enmeshed in the very same *pesukim* of Torah. A single verse can convey both pure dispassionate law and inspiring moral messages. A heavy focus on Halakhah, whilst shunting the plethora of aggadic literature to one side, fails to realize the richness and fullness of the Torah. By placing Aggadah alongside Halakhah on the very same pages of Gemara, Hazal patently sought to emphasize the point that both of these perspectives on life ought to be embraced. This explains why the greatest compliment one could bestow upon any individual is that "he did not neglect Torah or Mishnah, Talmud, Halakhah, or Aggadah." [xxx] Evidently, a balance between systematic *lomdus* and free-flowing Aggadah is vital. However, one ought to be aware of the significant differences between these realms. The world of Brisk hath indeed wrought upon us a great deal, but perhaps Halakhic Man might benefit from the occasional leap into the uncharted waters of Aggadah.

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[i] Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, eds. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 139.

[ii] Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, eds. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 506.

[iii] Wolfgang, Schluchter, *The Rise of Western Rationalism: Max Weber's Developmental History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), p. 256.

[iv] R. Aharon Lichtenstein, “The Conceptual Approach to Torah Learning: The Method and Its Prospects,” in R. Yosef Blau (ed.), *Lomdut: The Conceptual Approach to Jewish Learning* (Jersey City, N.J.: Ktav, 2006), pp. 1-44, at p. 36.

[v] For an excellent analysis of the Brisker approach, see R. Mosheh Lichtenstein, “What’ Hath Brisk Wrought: The Brisker Derekh Revisited,” in *ibid.*, pp. 167-188.

[vi] Although there exist important differences between Aggadah and Midrash, for the purposes of brevity and clarity, this article will refer to the two synonymously. Given the conceptual similarities between the two realms, I believe that this position is indeed justified.

[vii] Maharsha, Introduction to *Hiddushei Aggadot*.

[viii] Yitzchak Blau, “Redeeming the *Aggadah* in Yeshivah Education,” in Jeffrey Saks and Susan A. Handelman (eds.), *Wisdom From All My Teachers: Challenges and Initiatives in Contemporary Torah Education* (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2003), pp. 305-322, at p. 305.

[ix] *Bava Batra* 134a.

[x] Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 1:12.

[xi] Rashi ad loc., s.v. “*lo yakhilna.*”

[xii] For a brief analysis of the sociological reasons for this trend, see Blau’s aforementioned essay (above, n. 8).

[xiii] Marc Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis: A Thirteenth-Century Commentary on the Aggadah* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 6.

[xiv] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

[xv] One must always be cautious when extrapolating beliefs from polemical situations. However, given the array of legitimate alternatives open to these Geonim and Rishonim, one can assume that they were indeed being sincere in the statement of their beliefs here. However, a debate on this issue within the Aharonim can be found in the footnotes of *Kitvei ha-Ramban* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1964), p. 308.

[xvi] *Kitvei ha-Ramban*, *ibid.*

[xvii] *Otsar ha-Geonim, Hagigah* 14a.

[xviii] Saperstein, p. 10.

[xix] Michael Gross, Yair Barkai, and Yossi Melamed, *Derakhim be-Parashanut ha-Aggadah* (Tel Aviv: Mekhon Mofet, 2008), p. 37.

[xx] *Teshuvot ha-Rambam*, II, p. 715.

[xxi] R. Hayyim of Volozhin, *Nefesh ha-Hayyim*, part 4, ch. 6.

[xxii] Saperstein, p. 7.

[xxiii] R. Mosheh Lichtenstein, *Moses: Envoy of God, Envoy of His People* (Jersey City: Ktav, 2008), p. 236.

[xxiv] This is not to deny the fact that halakhic authorities, often out of necessity, issue different opinions to people in extenuating circumstances.

[xxv] R. Michael Rosensweig, "Elu Va-Elu Divre Elokim Hayyim: Halakhic Pluralism and Theories of Controversy," *Tradition* 26,3 (1992): 4-23, at p. 6.

[xxvi] *Sifrei, Parashat Ekev*.

[xxvii] This is not to say that those engaging in halakhic debate cannot do so with respect and reverence. After all, the Gemara in *Hagigah*

[xxviii] *Shemot* 22:6.

[xxix] *Eikhah* 4:11.

[xxx] *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, ch. 5.