

# Radical Aggadic Readings

Modern scholars have offered various definitions for Aggadah -as scientific mythology (Franz Rosenzweig) , a tale implied or derived from scripture (Shalom Spiegel), or speculation with edification in view (Raphael Loewe) – the Aggadah is in fact a widely heterogenous body of materials that range from extra biblical legends and tales about the rabbis to snippets of popular folklore and fully elaborated homilies (David Stern, Aggadah, Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought)

Aggadah essentially designates all the traditions, statements, and beliefs in early Judaism that fall outside the bounds of Halacha, the system of Rabbinic law...it touches upon virtually every conceivable aspect of human life, every subject and matter that drew the sages' attention or shaped their world. Its literary form similarly ranges across the entire spectrum; from biblical exegesis and extra biblical legends – stories elaborating upon biblical characters and episodes in their careers not found in the Bible itself – to fully developed sermons that may once have been delivered in ancient synagogues, to snippets of popular folklore, anecdotes about the sages' own lives and about their contemporary history, and not least of all, the entire body of Rabbinic thought – every belief held by the sages from their theological ideas about God to their views on creation, the reasons for the commandments, and much material that some would call popular religion and others superstition – namely topics like magic angelology, demonology, folk medicine, the science of amulets, secret charms, astrology, and so on. (David Stern, introduction to Sefer Ha-Aggadah)

In Halacha you find power and might, which in Aggadah there is grace and love [*chesed*]. Halacha has a voice of power – it breaks cedars – while Aggadah is the still, small voice. Halacha is like a rush of mighty waters; Aggadah, the spirit of God hovering over the waters...Halacha presents the letter of the law; Aggadah brings us the spirit of the law [*lifnim me-shurat hadin*]. Halacha deals with matters that are quantifiable; Aggadah speaks of matters of conscience...Halacha speaks in precise terms, while Aggadah speaks poetry. Halacha is rooted in tradition, while Aggadah is the flourishing of the heart. (Abraham Joshua Heschel, Heavenly Torah)



# An Encounter 'Fraught with Background'

It would be difficult, then, to imagine styles more contrasted than those of these two equally ancient and equally epic texts. On the one hand, externalized, uniformly illuminated phenomena, at a definite time and in a definite place, connected together without lacunae in a perpetual foreground; thoughts and feeling completely expressed; events taking place in leisurely fashion and with very little of suspense. On the other hand, the externalization of only so much of the phenomena as is necessary for the purpose of the narrative, all else left in obscurity; the decisive points of the narrative alone are emphasized, what lies between is non-existent; time and place are undefined and call for interpretation; thoughts and feeling remain unexpressed, are only suggested by the silence and the fragmentary speeches; the whole, permeated with the most unrelieved suspense and directed toward a single goal (and to that extent far more of a unity), remains mysterious and "fraught with background." (Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*)

God said to Abram: Go forth from your native land . . . " (Gen. 12:1) R. Isaac commenced the discourse with 'Listen O daughter, and consider, and hearken your ear; forget our own people and your father's house (Psalms 45)

Said R' Isaac: "This may be compared to a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw a building **דולקת**.

'Is it possible that the building lacks a person to look after it'. The owner of the building looked out and said, 'I am the owner of the building.'

Similarly, because Abraham said, 'Is it conceivable that the world is without a guide?'

The Holy One, blessed be He, looked out and said to him 'I am the Guide, the Sovereign of the Universe'...' hence it is written: And God said to Abram: 'Get out from your country, from your birthplace, from the home of your father, to the land which I will show you ...' Midrash Rabbah

ויאמר ה' אל אברם לך לך מארצך וגוי

ר' יצחק פתח: שמעי בת וראי והטי אזנך ושכחי עמך  
ובית אביך (תהלים מה).

אמר רבי יצחק: משל לאחד שהיה עובר ממקום  
למקום וראה **בירה אחת דולקת**.

אמר: תאמר שהבירה זו בלא מנהיג? הציץ עליו בעל  
**הבירה** אמר לו: אני הוא בעל הבירה.

כך לפי שהיה אבינו אברהם אומר: תאמר שהעולם  
הזה בלא מנהיג, הציץ עליו הקב"ה ואמר לו: אני הוא  
בעל העולם.



# Lit up, Aight, or something else?

Lit, aglow, kindled, switched on, excited by

זלוק

To chase

זלק

**Spiritual Quest:** "I propose that spirituality has a biological mechanism akin to birdsong, albeit a far more complex and nuanced one. Spirituality is one of our basic human inheritances...The God gene refers to the idea that human spirituality has an innate genetic component to it. It doesn't mean that there's one gene that makes people believe in God, but it refers to the fact that humans inherit a predisposition to be spiritual--to reach out and look for a higher being." (The God Gene, Dr. Dean Hamer, a molecular geneticist)

**Through Nature:** What is the way to love and fear God? Whenever one contemplates the great wonders of God's works and creations, and one sees that they are a product of a wisdom that has no bounds or limits, one will immediately love, laud and glorify [God] with an immense passion to know the Great Name (Rambam)

# A Palace in Flames

**Dissonance:** Abraham sees a palace – that means he sees the world has order. Therefore it has a creator. But the palace is in flames – which means the world is full of disorder. It is full of evil, violence, injustice. Now nobody builds a building and then goes away and deserts it. Therefore if there is a fire there must be somebody in charge of putting it out. The building must have an owner. Where is he? And that is Abraham's question –where is God in the world?

That is the question that gives Abraham no peace...that is the starting point of Jewish faith. In Judaism, faith that does not begin with an answer. It begins with a question. It doesn't begin in harmony. It begins in dissonance. Here it is. If God created the world then God created man. Why then does God allow man to destroy the world? How can we reconcile the order of the world with the disorder of society? Can God have made the world only to desert it? That is Abraham's question. Can it be that this world has no one in charge, no owner? (Jonathan Sacks)

**Heresy:** To see any purpose in the death camps, the traditional believer is forced to regard the most demonic, anti-human explosion of all history as a meaningful expression of God's purposes. The idea is simply too obscene for me to accept." (Richard Rubenstein)

# A Plea for Help

If one who has eaten forgets to say grace: Bet Shammai say: he should return to the original place of where he ate. Bet Hillel say: let him say grace in the place in which he remembers.

We have learned: Bet Hillel said to Bet Shammai: According to your words, someone who ate at the top of a *Birah*, and forgot and came down without saying grace, should return to the top of the *Birah* and say grace.

Bet Shammai responded. Someone who left their wallet at the top of a *Birah*, would they not go back up to get it? If he will ascend for his own sake, how much more so for the sake of heaven?

The parable tells the story of a man travelling from one place to another, passing through a city on his way. He sees one of the (many) tenement houses going up in flames, and wonders: no doubt there is no manager (מנהיג) in this house – otherwise he surely would have organized the tenants to help out the flames. At that moment from on high, a man peers down at this bystander who stopped to look, and cries out: 'I am the owner!'. In the present literary and linguistic context, the only place that the owner can possibly be is somewhere in the upper stories of the *Birah*, or perhaps on the roof – not a very safe place if the building is going up in flames! His cry to the bystander must therefore be understood as a cry for help; it is an elliptic remark, implying the following 'You who have stopped to look for a manager – there is none!...Be you the manager, and save me my building!' The bystander who is still in the middle of his journey, can now continue on his way – or he can stop and help organize the tenants in extinguishing the fire.

Such is the situation of Abraham at this crucial stage in the history of the world. Abraham, upon seeing, throughout his journey, the discord and conflagration among the 'tenants' of the world, correctly deduces that the world is lacking a manager, a leader to guide the various peoples to mutual peace. At just that time, God, the 'owner' of the world looks down and cries out – a cry that is more a cry for help than a revelation. God's call to Abraham (and, through the open ended character of the parable itself, to the reader!) is a call for action. Abraham may heed God's call, stop in his tracks, and take on the task of leader; or he may continue along his way.

(Paul Mandel, The Call of Abraham, A Midrash Revisited)

**דף נא, במשנה :** מי שאכל ושכח ולא בירך בייש אומרים  
יחזור למקומו ויברך ובי"ה אומרים יברך במקום שנוזר  
תניא אמרו להם בי"ה לבייש לדבריכם מי שאכל בראש  
הבירה ושכח וירד ולא ברך יחזור לראש הבירה ויברך  
אמרו להן בייש לבי"ה לדבריכם מי ששכח ארנקי בראש  
הבירה לא יעלה ויטלנה לכבוד עצמו הוא עולה לכבוד שמים  
לא כל שכך