YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Rabbinic Tales: In the Talmud and in *Chassidut***

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**Shiur #02: Rabbinical Narrative in Dialogue with the Chassidic Story - Introduction (2)**

The previous *shiur* discussed the similarity between Rabbinical narratives and Chassidic stories, my point of departure being that stories occupy a central place in the totality of the Torah during both periods. We looked at some characteristics of the Ba’al Shem Tov and his disciples that explain their liberal use of stories, and raised the possibility of projecting some of these characteristics onto the Sages who also made extensive use of stories in their teachings: a positive attitude towards the material world; a more unified view of the material and spiritual aspects of existence; and an appreciation for the various layers of meaning in a story, which appeal to different parts of the intellect and psyche.

**The Dual Role of Stories**

To the above we might add another point that is common to *Chazal* and *Chassidut*, and that is their target audience, which in fact consists of two groups: first, the close circle of spiritual leadership (the scholars, the population of the *beit midrash*); and second, the broader circle of the greater Jewish public.

Prof. Yona Frankel, a researcher of *aggada*, argues that Rabbinical narrative is integral to Talmudic literature. In his view, it is first and foremost a product of the *beit midrash* – part of the learned discourse among religious scholars.[[1]](#footnote-1) At the same time, Frankel acknowledges that some *drashot* (sermons), delivered in synagogues, included aggadic teachings that were meant for this broader audience and that eventually found their way into the various works of Rabbinical literature. Other scholars, such as Yosef Heineman and Ch.N. Bialik, argue that the aggadic material produced by *Chazal* was meant primarily for the masses.[[2]](#footnote-2) For example, regarding *aggada* and *midrash* in general and stories in particular, Heineman writes:

No less important for them than the aim of revealing all that was contained in the Bible and its wording was the aim of guiding their generation, resolving their [textual] difficulties, answering their questions, and delivering them from their spiritual perplexity… Many of the biblical interpretations offered by the Sages in the *aggada* are therefore meant as parables and allegories. More than attempts to elucidate textual obscurities, they are intended to take a stand on real contemporary questions, to guide the people and bolster their faith. However, since their words are directed at the broader public, the ignorant masses, women, and children, a strategy of formulating questions in abstract language and then providing in-depth, theoretical answers would not be effective. For the purpose of penetrating and being absorbed in the hearts of their audience, their teachings needed to be garbed in narrative form, with extensive use of parables and suchlike literary means that are accessible to all. While we might also view *aggada* as a type of philosophical literature from the period of *Chazal*, it takes the form of popular philosophy, avoiding systematic, theoretical discussion and abstract formulations. The latter are certainly to be found in Rabbinical teachings [*ma’amarei Chazal*], usually as brief and pithy principles. But these principles take on a different form in the narrative *aggada* – both in the teachings that elucidate biblical narratives and in those that record events involving the Sages themselves.

It is reasonable to assume that both positions – that of Frankel, and that of Heineman and Bialik – have some truth to them, and that *Chazal’s* stories were meant to appeal to the masses as a way to effect broad-based spiritual discourse and spiritual impact, and were *also* part of the internal discourse among the Sages. As noted in the previous *shiur*, the manner in which these stories are integrated into Talmudic discussions supports the perception of stories as part of the intellectual, in-depth discourse of the *beit midrash*, as Frankel argues. Thus a story is, on one hand, a rhetorical device designed to capture the imagination or to provide a medium through which unlearned people could be taught Torah. On the other hand, we might say that *Chazal* made a deliberate choice to speak in the language of *aggada* in order to enrich the array of channels and devices for expressing their ideas, in language that is clearly different from the language of halakhic discussion. There are concepts and thoughts that cannot be formulated in halakhic language, such as layers of meaning and profound spiritual experiences, both of which *Chazal* viewed as integral to religious activity. Moreover, within the realm of *aggada*, *Chazal* sometimes choose the genre of the story, which allows for expressing meaning that goes beyond what can be conveyed through abstract conceptual teachings – especially in the experiential, sensual, and emotional realms.

The choice to take advantage of the special qualities of stories is also apparent in *Chassidut*, in more deliberate and explicit form. We might illustrate this point with the aid of a story that recounts how R. Yaakov Yosef of Polnoe drew close to the Ba’al Shem Tov. It is a different and more “original” version of the story with which I introduced the previous *shiur*:

R. Yaakov Yisrael of Tcherkes recounted how the holy R. Yaakov Yosef […], author of *Toldot Yaakov Yosef* […] became a close disciple. The holy rabbi [R. Yaakov Yisrael] had not previously been acquainted with the Ba’al Shem Tov, for he had not seen him face to face; he had only heard about him, and did not believe in him, but the Ba’al Shem Tov wanted to draw him closer. On one occasion the Ba’al Shem Tov came to the town of Sharigrad early on a summer’s morning, while the herds were being led to pasture. R. Yaakov Yosef was the rabbi of Sharigrad at the time. The Ba’al Shem Tov stood with his wagon in the town square and called out to a man who was leading his cow to pasture, and told him a story. Another man was passing by at the time; he, too, stopped to listen to what he was saying, and he liked the story. Afterwards someone else came along, and then more, until the Ba’al Shem Tov, with his stories, had drawn in all the townspeople, who all came and stood around him, listening to his stories. The shamash (beadle) of the synagogue, too, was standing among them. […] R. Yaakov Yosef arrived at the synagogue and saw that it was still closed. It is well known that R. Yaakov Yosef was extremely strict by nature, and he was very angry about this. The Ba’al Shem Tov arranged events such that the shamash would leave [the gathering around] him, and the shamash went to open the synagogue. When R. Yaakov Yosef saw him, he berated him and asked why the usual congregants who prayed every day had not arrived. The shamash told him that someone – a traveler – was standing in the town square telling stories, and all the townspeople were standing with him. R. Yaakov Yosef was angry, but he had no choice but to pray alone. After his prayer he ordered the shamash to bring the storytelling traveler to him so he could be beaten for preventing the townspeople from [fulfilling their obligation of] public prayer. The Ba’al Shem Tov had [meanwhile] finished telling stories and had gone off to an inn. The shamash went about searching for him, until he found him. He told him that the rabbi of the town had summoned him. The Ba’al Shem Tov immediately made his way to R. Yaakov Yosef. Upon his arrival R. Yaakov Yosef spoke with him very harshly, addressing him directly in the second person [like a commoner]: “Are you the one who prevented the townspeople from [fulfilling their obligation of] public prayer?” He said to him, “Rabbi, it is I,” addressing him as “Rabbi.” He continued, “I ask of your honor not to be angry with me, and I will tell you a story.” [R. Yaakov Yosef] responded, “Tell.” So the Ba’al Shem Tov told one of his stories, and R. Yaakov Yosef was greatly amazed by the story, such that he was appeased and was no longer angry with him. And he began addressing the Ba’al Shem Tov in a slightly more respectful manner, using the second person plural. The Ba’al Shem Tov did not address him again as “Rabbi,” but rather used the plural form [out of respect] and said to him, “If you wish, I will tell you another story.” [R. Yaakov Yosef] said, “Tell.” So the Ba’al Shem Tov told him another story. And R. Yaakov Yosef was so impressed that he began calling the Ba’al Shem Tov “Rabbi,” and the Ba’al Shem Tov began to address him in the second person singular, saying to him, “If you [singular] wish, I will tell you another story.” He said, “Tell.” And when he finished telling the third story, R. Yaakov Yosef said to the Ba’al Shem Tov, “Now I can swear that you are the Ba’al Shem Tov, and I am hereby ready to travel with you right away, and to join myself to you with all my heart.” […] And from then he became a close disciple of the Ba’al Shem Tov.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Here we see clearly the dual role of stories for the Ba’al Shem Tov: on one hand, the story serves as a means of drawing the simple people towards his Torah. On the other hand, it is also his way of communicating with a learned scholar – the rabbi of the town. This means of communication is regarded in the story as being so powerful that the narrator does not even bother to convey to the reader what the story was about; he suffices with a description of its impact on the listener – R. Yaakov Yosef – who undergoes a radical transformation after hearing it from the Ba’al Shem Tov.

**Merging Genres**

There is another interesting point, common to Rabbinical teachings and *Chassidut* with regard to the stories that they contain, and it too makes for enlightening encounters between the two genres. During both of the literary periods in question, the story is not treated by the rabbis disseminating Torah as a genre that stands on its own; rather, it is part of a broad collection of different materials and genres that are woven together in the spiritual literature of the period in question and are passed on to disciples or to the public.

In Rabbinical literature, we find many composites of *halakha* and *aggada*. Theoretically, we might separate them and view each genre on its own. This was indeed the approach that was followed for many years, even with regard to Talmudic discussions where *halakha* and *aggada* are interwoven. However, scholars and teachers have been pointing out new ways of reading the Talmud for some time now, revealing the vibrant and fruitful discourse between the different genres – between halakhic, legal discussion and aggadic narrative, of which stories form a major part.

In *Chassidut*, we encounter a different sort of combination: the combination of stories with Chassidic teachings. This combination is most prominent in the teachings of R. Nachman of Braslav, who conveys his messages in the form of abstract teachings – as in *Likutei Moharan* – as well as in stories. Various commentators on R. Nachman’s works have noted links and connections between his stories and specific teachings in *Likutei Moharan* and other writings, and how each enriches the other. Other Chassidic masters, too, combined religious teachings with stories.

**What is the advantage of combining genres?**

*Chazal’s* interweaving of *halakha* and *aggada* represents an encounter between two different languages. *Halakha* speaks “legalese,” which often sounds sharp, measured, and decisive: permissible or forbidden; pure or impure. Even when it includes more dialectic discussion, as in *sugyot* in the Gemara, it deals concretely with the practical aspects of life. *Aggada* speaks the language of ideas and thoughts, feelings and emotions, and even sensory experiences. The result of this encounter is that the narrative sometimes succeeds in breaking the boundaries and limitations of legal writing, the normative genre (nomos). This complements and enriches the halakhic writing from a religious/spiritual/values perspective that does not always find explicit expression in the halakhic discussion, because halakhic language – the language of law, with its concise, brief, regulation-oriented literary tools, is not suited to express these perspectives. The language of *aggada* can express religious and spiritual experiences of elevation or lowliness, and feelings such as joy, love, sadness, anger, excitement, or frustration.

The encounter between *halakha* and *aggada* also often challenges halakhic discourse. A story presents the full complexity of life – the domain within which *halakha* is meant to be implemented. The transition from the world of theory and the *beit midrash* to the world of life as it is lived can often shed new light on the *halakha*; it can also indicate areas or points requiring further thought or refinement within the halakhic system.

For example, one of the ways in which a story operates within halakhic discourse is known as defamiliarization (or de-automatization), defined as the artistic technique of presenting common things to the audience in an unfamiliar or strange way so they can gain new perspectives and see the world differently.[[4]](#footnote-4) A story that is juxtaposed to the presentation of a *halakha* or a halakhic discussion opens up a new and interesting perspective on the *halakha* that would not have occurred to us otherwise. This defamiliarization allows us to take another look at the *halakha*, or halakhic discourse, from the point of view of other worlds, realities, or values. For example, in *Massekhet Berakhot* in the Bavli we find a halakhic *beraita* stating that upon seeing a king (whether Jewish or non-Jewish), one should recite a special *berakha* (“… Who has given of His glory to those who fear Him / to flesh and blood,” respectively). Further on, the *sugya* recounts the story of Rav Sheshet and the heretic. Rav Sheshet, who was an *Amora* and was blind, went out to meet the king in order to recite the blessing. A few *shiurim* later on will be devoted to this story. In the meantime, without getting involved in the details, suffice it to note that the very placement of a blind sage at the center of a story meant to illustrate the proper response to an experience of seeing creates defamiliarization of this *halakha* and raises a question about its connection specifically to the sense of sight. We might be prompted to ask: Why is the *berakha* to be recited upon *seeing* a king formulated this way? What happens if one experiences the presence of a king through some other sense than sight? Can someone who is sightless be included in the fulfillment of this *halakha*? Or, in a different direction, we might ask: What is it that we are looking for/at in a king? What sort of encounter with him are we interested in experiencing? The continuation of the story, in which the blind Rav Sheshet has a more accurate reading of the situation than the seeing heretic, also raises interesting questions as to the reliability of our sense of sight in general.

What, then, is the process that takes place in this encounter between *aggada* and *halakha*? The interesting point is that the redactors of the halakhic discourse and of the aggadic material are the same people – *Chazal* – and therefore even when the *aggada* challenges or poses a question to the halakhic discussion, it would not be accurate to say that the *aggada* undermines the *halakha*. Rather, the same scholars use both of these different languages, which are mutually complementary – although the way they mold the encounter between them sometimes seems, on the surface, to create a degree of conflict, which gives rise to new questions about each of the genres.

In *Chassidut*, the encounter appears more gentle and less antithetical. Here we are not speaking of *halakha* and *aggada*, but of an encounter between more abstract, conceptual, spiritual writing and the conveying of the message through a narrative genre. Here too, there are points of contact between the genres, and they can be very interesting. Here again, we find the abstract, theoretical realm meeting with more concrete life situations. One might perhaps compare the difference between the two genres that meet in *Chassidut* to the difference between words and pictures. (Stories are also told in words, but the words create pictures in the minds of readers or listeners.) When the genres are combined, the story enriches the theoretical text in many ways. It adds vitality and color and can access areas in the psyche of readers or listeners that direct, abstract writing cannot touch, as the message is conveyed in an indirect way, not explicitly, and is directed to the imagination and emotion. Transitions between the more abstract “philosophical” Chassidic teachings and their stories might be compared to the transition from *Chazal*’s “*ta shema*” (“Come and hear”, a common introduction to a teaching in the Gemara) to the Zohar’s “*ta chazi*” (“Come and see”), the latter bringing the visual world to us in all its vigor and zest. An interesting example of an encounter of this sort is found in the following excerpt by the scholar of Kabbala, Gershom Scholem, discussing his meetings with author Shai Agnon:[[5]](#footnote-5)

He was incapable and unwilling to discuss any topic that entailed abstract concepts; only stories, parables. If you started talking to Agnon about conceptual matters – and I belong to those who talk or think in concepts – he would immediately bring the topic from the abstract realm around to “Let me tell you a story.” He thought in pictures. He didn’t think in concepts. [...] In even his most wonderful and important works, you’ll find nothing but the narrative garb of what he had to say.” (Myron, *Dan Myron interviews Gershom Scholem*, p. 362 – 363, Heb.)

In addition, the narrative genre, as we have seen, gives vibrant and unmediated expression to central principles of *Chassidut* (which also emerge from Chassidic teachings): the meaning inherent in the material world, nature, and the body, and Divine immanence in all of it.

**The Present Series of *Shiurim***

So far, I have noted some points of similarity between Rabbinical narratives and Chassidic stories, both of which award physical life and the material world a powerful presence, and speak to their many layers and levels, while addressing diverse audiences. I have also mentioned the integration of genres in both periods.

In this series, I wish to trace these encounters between stories and the other genres, in *Chazal* and in *Chassidut*. I also intend to bring the Chassidic story, or the Torah of *Chassidut*, into an encounter with Rabbinical narratives. As I wrote previously, someone who tells a story speaks about the world and life in the language of the soul. And someone who tells a story as part of Torah speaks about these realities in religious language. This is certainly the internal language that is spoken by Chassidic sources. But *Chazal*, too, when telling stories, gave their attention to the world and life in it, from a religious perspective, and therefore the language of *Chassidut* can sometimes illuminate Rabbinical narratives from a new, fresh, and profound point of view. *Chazal’s* stories are generally brief and concise. Sometimes there is a sense that their attention to man and to life, to the psyche and the emotions, needs further deciphering and in-depth exploration, with the help of language that *Chazal* never provided. *Chassidut*, in contrast, usually speaks the language of the psyche and the spirit, giving voice to the inner workings and tribulations of the soul, and also to religious feelings and experiences. From this perspective, it would seem, Rabbinical narratives could benefit from the encounter with Chassidic teachings and stories, which provide the reader with additional keys and another language for thinking about the stories and images that Chazal convey.

Sometimes the connection between the Rabbinical and Chassidic materials is fairly clear and explicit: there are Chassidic sources that respond to Rabbinical narratives, or that follow in their footsteps. At other times, the connection is less clear: the stories are different, but deal with similar motifs, such that the Chassidic mindset opens a window onto a new way of thinking about Rabbinical sources. This in itself is an important contribution, even where there is no basis for assuming any deliberate or even conscious connection between the sources. Many Chassidic sources show clearly that Rabbinical narratives were a significant source of inspiration for the Chassidic masters and their disciples who produced stories. It would be interesting to see whether a reading of Chassidic materials can shed new light on the Rabbinical narrative and sometimes imbue it with new meaning – even if there is no way to be sure that the resulting interpretation is what *Chazal* had in mind when they originally wrote the *aggada* in question.

In discussing Rabbinical narratives, I will first – as in past series – examine the story itself and its integration within the general context (Mishna or *sugya* in the Gemara). The next step will be to “converse” with the narrative via Chassidic teachings and stories.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

1. Y. Frankel, *Darkhei ha-Aggadah ve-ha-Midrash*, Givatayim 5751, Introduction, p. ii; pp. 27-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Y. Heineman, *Aggadot ve-Toldoteihen*, Jerusalem 1974, p. 12; Ch.N. Bialik, *Mavo le-Sefer ha-Aggadah*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cited in Yishayah Wolf Zikernick, *Ma’asiyot u-Ma’amarim Yekarim*, p. 44. See the detailed analysis of this story in Har-Shefi, *Ha-Sippur ha-Chassidi*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Wikipedia [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Cited by Har-Shefi, ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)