

## INTRODUCTION

The rabbis teach that *Aggadah* attracts a person's heart.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the root of the word *Aggadah* (אגד) means "to connect."

Why are people attracted to *Aggadah*?

Since every Jew has a soul which is part of *Hashem*, each has a natural attraction to Him, and it is through study of *Aggadah* that a person connects to *Hashem*, as the sages state:

Is it your desire to know He Who Spoke and the World Came into Being? [Then] study *Aggadah*, for from it you will come to know the Holy One, Blessed be He, and attach yourself to His ways.<sup>2</sup>

The sages state that since the destruction of the Temple, the situation of the Jewish people has deteriorated so that all that keeps things going is the recital of *Uva LeTzion* (וּבֵּא לְצִיּוֹן) and the *Kaddish* which follows the study of *Aggadah*.<sup>3</sup> One reason the study of *Aggadah* has such power is that it contains material which everyone — not only great scholars — can understand and appreciate on his own level.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> B.T. *Chaggigah* 14A.

<sup>2</sup> *Sifrei* on *Parashath Eikev* 13.

<sup>3</sup> B.T. *Sotah* 49A.

<sup>4</sup> *Rashi* on B.T. *Sotah* 49A. *Tur Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 56 states that the *Aggadoth* were taught in Aramaic so that the masses of people who were unfamiliar with Hebrew could understand them.

Although more recent scholars have studied the Jerusalem *Talmud* less than the Babylonian *Talmud*, the editors of the Babylonian *Talmud* had the highest esteem for their colleagues living in the Land of Israel. Rabbi Zera, for example, valued the learning available in the Land of Israel to such a degree that before traveling there, he fasted one hundred times to forget what he had learned in Babylonia so that he could study the teachings of the Land of Israel without preconceived ideas.<sup>5</sup>

The Babylonian *Talmud* portrays the scholars of the Land of Israel as showing great respect for one another and working harmoniously to arrive at the true meaning of the *Torah*.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the *Midrash* asserts that the sages in the Land of Israel delved into the *Torah* at great length until they had a clear understanding of it.<sup>7</sup>

By contrast, the Babylonian sages viewed their own scholarship as the result of contentious debate.<sup>8</sup> This may explain why the *Halachah* follows the opinion of the Babylonian *Talmud*. Studying *Torah* in a spirit of cooperation is praiseworthy, but because the Babylonian scholars argued

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<sup>5</sup> B.T. *Baba Metziah* 85A. One might question how Rabbi Zera could do this since the *Mishnah* teaches that “whoever forgets one thing from his learning, Scripture views him as though he forfeits his soul.” (*Pirkei Avoth* 3:8). Evidently, Rabbi Zera only prayed to forget what he had learned to the extent that it not interfere with his studies in the Land of Israel. For proof that, in practice, he did not forget his prior learning, see B.T. *Shabbath* 114A-B.

<sup>6</sup> B.T. *Sanhedrin* 24A.

<sup>7</sup> *Breishith Rabbah* 70:8.

<sup>8</sup> B.T. *Sanhedrin* 24A.

strenuously among themselves, they could be sure that any *Halachic* conclusion they reached had been carefully tested and was correct.<sup>9</sup>

One scholar has suggested that the primacy of the Babylonian *Talmud* reflects the spiritual condition of the Jewish people. Just as, sadly, the Temple has remained in a state of destruction for many years and Jews have been scattered in exile, so the *Talmud* of the Land of Israel has been neglected.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps now that the end of the long exile is approaching, it is especially fitting to study the Jerusalem *Talmud*.

The *Aggadoth* which begin this selection focus on the importance passing the *Torah's* teachings from generation to generation and of citing sources because this process is vital to maintaining the accuracy and reliability of the Jewish faith.

The material in the present work then proceeds to discuss the importance of humility, another vital element in preserving *Torah* tradition because those who are arrogant are unwilling to accept the teaching of others.

These *Aggadoth* then go on to describe the great reverence such scholars as Rabbi Yehudah Hanassi and Rabbi

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<sup>9</sup> See *Maharal, Nethivoth Olam, Nethiv HaTorah*, chapter 13. Others suggest that the Jerusalem *Talmud* was compiled later than the Babylonian *Talmud*, and there is a rule that the *Halachah* follows the view of the most recent *Torah* scholars because they have had the opportunity to evaluate and accept or reject all earlier views (*Rif on Eruvin*, sub verba “*Umemakin Mibor Hagolah*” (וימלאין מבור הגולה)).

<sup>10</sup> Rabbi Moshe Shimon Sivitz of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, *Sefer Mashbiach* (Moshe Shimon ben Yechezkel) (published 1918), Vol. II, Introduction.

Elazar had for their teachers, again ensuring that the tradition would be passed on faithfully. Along these lines, the *Aggadoth* include such statements as, “whoever greets his master is [considered] as though he greets the Divine Presence.”<sup>11</sup>

The *Aggadoth* also discuss more generally the importance of *Torah* study. Thus, those who originally did not merit being the first to greet the *Nassi* earned that merit by becoming scholars.

Later, the *Aggadoth* describe how the leadership of the Jewish nation passed from the Batheira family to Hillel, making the important point that our sages never used the *Torah* for their own gain or prestige. Instead, when they realized that Hillel’s command of tradition was greater than their own, they ceded the leadership to him. This was not entirely unique. As the text goes on to explain, similar deference was shown by King Saul’s son, Jonathan, to David and by other great scholars. This attitude of acting only for the sake of Heaven also ensured the accuracy of Jewish tradition.

Unlike success in secular learning, success in *Torah* learning depends not on intellectual prowess but on sincere faith in *Hashem*. Accordingly, the *Aggadah* proceeds to tell how Rabbi Elazar (called ‘Lazar in the Jerusalem *Talmud*) realized that even a seemingly trivial matter such as a Roman soldier forcing him to give up his seat was Divinely ordained.

Although the Babylonian *Talmud* is more widely studied and quoted than the Jerusalem *Talmud*, the Jerusalem

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<sup>11</sup> J.T. *Eruvin* 5:1.

*Talmud* contains important material not found in the Babylonian *Talmud*. An important example in the present volume is the famous Four Questions found in the Passover *Haggadah*. Many people are surprised to learn that the source of the story of the four sons and the questions they ask is the Jerusalem *Talmud* whereas they are absent from the Babylonian *Talmud*.