Hassidim and Academics Unite: The Significance of Aggadic Placement

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What guided our sages' decisions when they placed aggadic (non-legalistic) passages in the Talmud? Perhaps they came armed with a treasure trove of quality material, such as the account of R. Shimon bar Yohai in the cave and the final moments of R. Hanina ben Teradyon's life, and they simply looked for associations enabling the insertion of this material into the Talmud. If so, analyzing the placement will not contribute to meaning. Alternatively, the sages built upon thematic connections in arranging the *aggadot*. Talmudic stories can connect to themes of the tractate, the chapter, or a preceding *sugya* (talmudic passage), be it halakhic or aggadic. If so, study of placement enhances understanding.

As far as I know, the major traditional commentaries on aggadic material, Maharsha (R. Shemuel Eidels, 1555–1631) and Maharal (R. Yehudah Loeb of Prague, 1520–1609), did not raise questions of placement. However, in the nineteenth century, R. Zadok Hakohen from Lublin made a programmatic statement that all *aggadot* relate conceptually to their talmudic location. Stories about the Temple's destruction are found on pages 55b–58a of *Gittin*, a tractate about marriage and divorce, since the destruction represents a breach in the marital relationship between God and the Jewish people.[1] *Aggadot* about the manna can be read on pages 74b–76a of *Yoma*, a tractate about the laws of Yom Kippur, because eating this heavenly food reflects a less corporeal consumption that reminds us of the angelic transcendence of the physical on Yom Kippur.[2]

R. Zadok also notes how placement at the beginning of tractate can set the tone for the entire tractate. *Pesahim* (mainly concerned with the laws of Pesah) begins with a long discussion about what the word "*ohr*" means in the opening Mishnah. It then proceeds to a discussion of different values involved in speaking well, including refined speech, clear discourse, and brevity. For R. Zadok, this fits the topic of the exodus since he connects refined speech with *yihus*, lineage or pedigree, and sees the exodus as emphasizing Jewish uniqueness.[3] I would like to suggest an alternative connection. Dialogue plays a

bigger role on Pesah than on any other holiday. The Torah commands us to relate the exodus story over to our children, and the Seder attempts to facilitate this momentous conversation. Therefore, the tractate begins with a study of proper discourse.

R. Zadok assumes purposeful placement regarding every aggada. Such an assumption expresses his belief in omnisignificance, an apt term coined by Dr. James Kugel describing the eschewal of technical explanations in the search for a maximum of religious meaning.[4] R. Zadok goes so far as to suggest a deeper explanation for why the mitzvah to write a Sefer Torah appears specifically in *siman* 270 of the *Shulhan Arukh*. This commandment corrects the sin of Judah's son Er (see Genesis 38), whose *gematriya* (the numerical value of the Hebrew letters) is 270.[5] Many of us will find this degree of omnisignificance too extreme, but we can still accept a more moderate version of R. Zadok. Perhaps some placement is meaningful while others are more arbitrary.

Let us move from the Batei Midrash of nineteenth-century Poland to the libraries of contemporary academia. Yonah Fraenkel deserves a lot of credit for initiating literary academic study of talmudic stories. He showed that these tales are not merely historical accounts but finely crafted literary creations. Fraenkel also insisted in the principle of "closure," which reads each story as an independent unit. His approach resembles the literary theory called New Criticism, which champions focusing on the poem itself, with an indifference to the biography of the author or historical context. Along similar lines, Fraenkel contends that we should analyze an individual story about a given sage without bringing in information from other stories. A sage can be poor in one tale and quite wealthy in another. [6]

Fraenkel notes a contrast between biblical and talmudic writing, in that only the former operates within a historical framework. *Megillat Rut* begins with a historical context, the time of the judges, and ends with a clear historical direction, heading toward the Davidic dynasty. Talmudic stories do not function that way. Even when a string of stories on roughly the same theme appear together, such as the aforementioned *aggadot* about the Temple's destruction, they are not seriously connected to each other in a chronological or thematic fashion.

More recent scholars disagree with Fraenkel arguing that context does matter. Ofra Meir utilizes different versions of stories in rabbinic literature to show how they are shaped by context. The story of R. Shimon bar Yohai hiding in the cave appears in the Jerusalem Talmud without the Babylonian Talmud's theme of the tension between Torah study and mundane work. In the Babylonian Talmud's immediately preceding Gemara (*Shabbat* 33b), R. Shimon bar Yohai states that the illness called *askara* is a punishment for *bittul Torah* (wasting time on activities unrelated to Torah). Thus, R. Shimon's call for intense dedication to Torah study was already lurking in the background of this passage and helped focus the ensuing presentation. Furthermore, R. Elazar son of R. Yossi attributes *askara* to the sin of *lashon hara* (gossip), which also appears in the story when Yehuda ben Gerim relates the rabbinic conversation to the Roman authorities.[7]

Meir notes the identical phenomena regarding two versions of R. Hananya ben Hakhinai spending over a decade away from home studying Torah and then shocking his wife upon returning home. In the Babylonian Talmud (*Ketubot* 62b), the story appears in a larger context discussing when husbands have the legal right to eschew domestic responsibilities in order to study Torah. In a midrash (*Vaiykra Rabba* 21:8), the story supports a theme of not suddenly entering one's abode, fitting the biblical context of Aaron's sons illegally entering the Holy of Holies. Meir shows how differences between the two accounts reflect the themes of each version.[8]

Jeffrey Rubenstein adds more arguments in favor of looking beyond the story itself. [9] He notes literary connections running through extended passages such as key words and thematic continuity. For example, the verb *tikun* comes up repeatedly in *Shabbat* 33b, first as something the Romans do, then as something R. Shimon bar Yohai does, and finally as something our patriarch Jacob does.[10] To use an example from Fraenkel himself, a series of stories about husbands spending significant time away from home to study Torah play off each other (*Ketubot* 62b). In one story, R. Hama bar Bisa tries to avoid the mistake of R. Hananya ben Hakhinai from the preceding tale. Furthermore, the entire picture balances stories critical of the rabbis for avoiding domestic responsibility with the successful model of R. Akiva spending many years away.[11]

Yonatan Feintuch's recent book, *Panim el Panim*, makes a major contribution to aggada study and brings more evidence showing the importance of context. He points to a series of stories about confronting the evil inclination (*Kiddushin* 82a). In the first few, rabbis struggle with sexual urges and the tales encourage great precaution to prevent sin. However, in the final story, we see R. Hiyya renouncing sexuality with his wife leads to martial tension, R. Hiyya consorting with someone he thinks is a prostitute, and R. Hiyya punishing himself by sitting in a burning oven. This balances the preceding message; we cannot address the challenges of temptation with complete abstinence. These examples indicate that reading each story in isolation will miss some of the force of the overarching message.[12]

Beyond literary context, Rubenstein also stresses the importance of cultural context. We can turn to other talmudic sources for help "when confronted by a symbol, such as a column of fire, or a motif, such as a sage forgetting his studies."[13] To use an example of my own, carob trees appear in the stories of Honi *haMe'agel* sleeping for 70 years (*Ta'anit* 23a), in the oven of Ahkhinai when R. Elazar utilizes miracles to support his halakhic position (*Baba Mezia* 59b), and when R. Shimon and his son live in the cave (*Shabbat* 33b). Consistent usage of the same tree does not seem to be coincidence. In the Honi story, carob trees produce fruit only after an extremely long duration. Maharsha suggests that the choice of carob trees adds to the miraculous quality of R. Shimon's survival in the cave since the tree that grows to feed him normally takes decades to bear fruit.[14]

To be fair, Fraenkel himself did not always adhere to his closure principle. He understands the significance of Moshe sitting in the Bet Midrash's eighteenth row (*Menahot* 29b) based on a different talmudic story (*Hulin* 137b).[15] In a chapter on future directions for aggadic scholarship, he mentions the idea of a topos, a commonplace theme in a given body of literature.[16] Thus, even the champion of "closure" occasionally saw the value of looking beyond the individual story.

Feintuch's work includes several models of how aggadic stories impact on adjacent halakhic *sugyot*. They can present another opinion. The halakhic discussion of the five afflictions of Yom Kippur ultimately decides that only not eating and drinking are included in the biblical command of afflicting oneself on Yom Kippur whereas the other prohibitions come from a different source. Feintuch shows how the subsequent *aggadot* (*Yoma* 74b–78a) relate to abstinence as a kind of *innuy* (affliction), differing from the preceding halakhic texts.[17] From this aggadic perspective, *innuy* is not only concrete discomfort or pain but even the absence of pleasure.

Secondly, the aggada can reveal some of the difficulties in applying the abstract halakha in the real world. One Gemara (*Bava Batra* 22a) grants special selling privileges to scholars who function as traveling salesmen. In a following story, R. Dimi comes to a town intending to sell dates. One of the

locals, R. Ada bar Ahava, asks R. Dimi an obscure halakhic question and stumps the latter. R. Dimi doesn't receive the privileges of a scholar and his dates therefore turn rotten. Feintuch suggests that applying this law proves difficult in practice since determining who qualifies as a *talmid hakham* (sage) can bring out scholarly competition and become a major source of social tension. The aggadic tale adds an important dimension to the legal ruling.[18]

Finally, a talmudic story can convey a level of extralegal piety. *Berakhot* 33a teaches that someone engaged in prayer interrupts his prayer if a life-threatening situation emerges. For example, a snake may not endanger the person praying but a scorpion will. Nevertheless, a preceding story tells of a pious fellow who does not interrupt his prayer to return the greeting of an important Roman official. In theory, ignoring the Roman is a very dangerous gambit. Feintuch explains that this story presents a level of super piety, which would allow for taking on risks in the pursuit of intense devotion to God. [19]

Yakov Blidstein offers a similar read of aggadic stories about not destroying trees. In one tale, the son of R. Hanina apparently perishes for cutting down a tree. In another, Rava bar R. Hana resists eliminating his own tree despite its negative impact on his neighbor, R. Yosef (*Baba Batra* 26a). Rava was willing to have R. Yosef remove the tree but refused to do the act himself.[20] Blidstein explains that while halakha actually allows for cutting down such trees, the aggadic material reflects a religious attitude extremely committed to the ideal of *bal tashhit* (not being destructive).

R. Zadok and university professors obviously do not approach Talmud from the same vantage point, yet the parallels between them are intriguing. Both think that placement and context matter, and both find religious meaning in their analysis of these literary issues. I would like to close with one further parallel. We noted earlier how R. Zadok thinks that placement of a *sugya* at the beginning of a tractate can be telling. Several academics have made the identical suggestion about an aggada at the beginning of *Avoda Zara* relating how the nations of the world complained that they were not given a chance to accept the Torah. This conversation appropriately sets the stage for a tractate about the relationship between Jews and gentiles.[21]

Perhaps this happens on a meta level at the beginning of the entire Talmud. The first line in the Talmud questions how the Mishnah could simply jump into the details of *keriat shema* without initially establishing the existence of a mitzvah to recite the Shema. The Gemara answers that the Mishnah works off biblical verses establishing the Shema requirement. R. Zadok and a contemporary Israeli scholar think that this opening question and answer begin the Talmud to establish an idea that the reader will carry through the entirety of the Talmud. R. Zadok explains that the rabbinical discussions found in all of the Talmud are rooted in the biblical world. This ancient legal dialogue is not just a conversation of intelligent humans but a discussion of the divine word.[22] Ruth Calderon says this opening conveys how each rabbinic text builds upon earlier texts. Unlike R. Zadok who speaks of God, Calderon writes about the nature of being part of an ongoing literary canon. Both think the placement here at the start of our talmudic journey was purposeful.[23]

Parallels between Hassidic r*ebbe*s and university professors should encourage us to realize that these two worlds need not always remain completely apart. The yeshiva world has much to gain from the keen insights of Fraenkel, Rubenstein, and others. Conversely, academics would benefit from utilizing the interpretations of traditional rabbinic commentary. We need not collapse methodological distinctions and theological assumptions to learn from each other.

[1] *Peri Zaddik, Beresihit Kedushat haShabbat ma'amar* 3. On this methodology in R. Zadok, see Sarah Friedland, "*Shekhenut veKorat Gag: al Shnei Ekronot Darshanut Zuraniyim biKitvei R. Zadok Hakohen miLublin*," *Akdamot* 8 (Kislev 5760) pp. 25–43.

[2]*Peri Zaddik Devarim le'Erev Yom Hakipurim* 5.

[3] *Ohr Zarua laZaddik* 7:2.

[4] Kugel utilizes the term in *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (New Haven, 1981) when writing about rabbinic interpretation of *Tanakh*. For the extension of this principle to rabbinic texts, see Yaakov Elman, "Progressive *Derash* and Retrospective *Peshat*: Nonhalakhic Considerations in Talmud Torah", Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah, ed. Shalom Carmy (Northvale, 1996), pp. 227–287.

[5] *Mahshavot Haruz* 15.

[6] Yonah Fraenkel, *Sippur haAggada-Ahdut shel Tokhen veTzura* (Tel Aviv, 2001) pp. 32–50.

[7] Ofra Meir, *Sugyot bePoetica shel Sifrut Hazal* (Tel Aviv, 1993).

[8] Ofra Meir, "*Hashpaat Ma'aseh haArikha*," *Tura* 3 (1994), pp. 67–84.

[9] Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture* (Baltimore, 1999) pp. 10–14. For Rubenstein, this is part of a larger thesis claiming that the *stammaim* (authors of anonymous passages in the Talmud) were quite creative and active in their redaction of the *aggadot*. For my purposes, the central point is that the placement was done purposely, irrespective of who did the placement and editing.

[10] Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, pp.105–38.

[11] Yonah Fraenkel, Iyumin beOlamo haRuhani shel Sippur haAggada (Tel Aviv, 1981), pp. 99–115.

[12] Yonatan Feintuch, *Panim el Panim: Shezirat haHalkha vehaAggada beTalmud haBavli* (Jerusalem, 2018) pp. 129–149.

[13] Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, p. 12.

[14] R. Shmuel Eidels, *Hiddushei Aggadot Shabbat* 33b s.v. *Itrahesh Nisa*.

[15] Fraenkel, *Sippur haAggada*, p. 44.

[16] *Ibid*., pp. 369–372.

[17] *Panim el Panim*, pp. 219–236.

[18] *Ibid*., pp. 161–183.

[19] *Ibid*., pp. 83–106.

[20] Yakov Blidstein, "*Ana lo Kayzna…Mar e Niha Lei Leikuz: leErkhei Halakha veAggada beSugya Talmudit Ahat Dialektika o Konflict*," *Safot veSifruyot beHinukh Yehudi: Mehkarim LIkhvodo shel Michael Rosenak* ed. Yonatan Cohen (Jerusalem, 5767), pp. 139–145.

[21] Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, pp. 235–238.

[22] *Zidkat haZadik* 10.

[23] Ruth Calderon, *Alpha Beita Talmudi: Osef Prati* (Israel, 2004), pp. 239–241.