Book Review: Understanding Hazal

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Book Review

Rabbi Yitzhak Berdugo, *Understanding Hazal: A Translation and Annotation of Rabbenu Avraham ben HaRambam's Ma'amar Al HaDerashot Ve-al HaAggadot*

(Da'at Press, 2022), 169 pages

By Rabbi Hayyim Angel

Rabbi Yitzhak Berdugo recently has published an annotated translation and commentary on Rabbi Avraham ben HaRambam's seminal essay on rabbinic *aggadot* (non-legal texts).

The primary purpose of this volume is to make Rabbi Avraham ben HaRambam's important essay on midrashic methodology accessible to the English-speaking world. Rabbi Avraham (1186-1237, Egypt) was Rambam's only child, and was a towering rabbinic figure who succeeded his father as the leader of the Jewish community of Egypt. He mastered his illustrious father's teachings, and was a prolific author in his own right.

Rabbi Yitzhak Berdugo has written a fine translation of the excellent 2019 Hebrew edition of the essay by Rabbi Moshe Maimon. Rabbi Berdugo also provides learned footnotes with further references and clarifications.

Beyond that purpose, however, Rabbi Berdugo also demonstrates that Rabbi Avraham ben HaRambam's work is perfectly consistent with the teachings of leading Geonim such as Rabbi Hai, Sherira, Saadyah, Shemuel ben Hofni, and others. The great rabbinic interpreters from the Spanish Andalusian school who became the heirs to the Geonic tradition, such as Rabbi Avraham ibn Ezra and Rambam, adopted the interpretive position of the Geonim.

Briefly stated, *aggadot* (non-legal texts in the Talmud and other midrashic collections) are not generally to be viewed as binding received traditions, nor are they all intended as literal. We must examine each *aggadah* carefully to learn the lessons of our Sages, but *aggadot* must not replace a careful study of the biblical text.

Because Tanakh and *aggadah* are studied for their truth, we hear the truth from the one who says it, rather than being bound by an authority-based system. In the words of Rabbi Avraham ben HaRambam in chapter 2 of his article:

> Know, for it is your duty to know, that anyone who wishes to uphold a known theory and admire its author by [blindly] accepting it without proper analysis or verification of its truth, is [considered to possess] a deficient character trait. This [mode of conduct] is forbidden according to the way of the Torah, and is not an intelligent approach. It is intellectually dishonest because it entails deficiency and inadequacy in the contemplation of essential convictions, and it is forbidden according to the ways of the Torah because it deviates from the way of truth… (Berdugo translation, p. 68).

On one level, Rabbi Berdugo's thesis is so obvious that there should not be any need to demonstrate its cogency. However, there are always learned detractors within the Orthodox rabbinic world who falsely claim that Judaism universally embraces *aggadot* as more literal and as binding tradition.

In his footnotes, Rabbi Berdugo cites a recent book by Rabbi Moshe Meiselman (*Torah, Chazal, and Science*, 2013), who claims that this essay of Rabbi Avraham ben HaRambam is a forgery. Among other things, Rabbi Meiselman bases this determination on the (incorrect) assertion that if it were authentic, it would be at odds with the worldview of all the other classical commentators. As Rabbi Berdugo amply demonstrates, many classical commentators—including Rabbi Avraham's father Rambam—are fully in sync with

Rabbi Avraham's methodology.

Rabbi Yom Tov Lipmann Heller (1579-1654), the author of the celebrated *Tosafot Yom Tov* commentary on the Mishnah, understood the self-evident freedom of interpretation in non-legal matters in Jewish tradition:

> Regarding Scripture, permission is granted to interpret [differently from how the Gemara interprets] as our own eyes see in the commentaries written since the time of the Gemara. However, we must not make any halakhic ruling that contradicts the Gemara (commentary on Mishnah *Nazir* 5:5).

Despite the preponderance of evidence from our classical commentators, many religious educators continue to misrepresent their methodology. Rabbi Marc D. Angel needed to pen an article, "Reflections on Torah Education and Mis-Education" (*Tradition* 41:2, 2008, pp. 10-23), in which he criticized trends of rabbinic fundamentalism within the Yeshiva Day School system. When teachers explain Midrashim as literal and as binding traditions, they misinterpret the biblical text, the intent of the rabbis' statements, and the breathtaking diversity of rabbinic interpretations.

The voices of the Geonim, the classical commentators, and Rabbi Avraham ben HaRambam, among many others, need to be heard and taught. Rabbi Berdugo's translation and explanation of Rabbi Avraham's work contributes further to an understanding of the Geonic and Andalusian methodology of how to approach the eternal treasures of our rabbinic *aggadot*.