

BOOK REVIEW

Fresh Fruit and Vintage Wine: The Ethics and Wisdom of the Aggada

by YITZCHAK BLAU

(Ktav Publishing House, In Association with OU Press and Yeshivat Har Etzion, 2009)

Reviewed by
Simi Peters

The question of how best to understand *aggadot Hazal* goes back as far as the Geonic period. While centuries of traditional Jewish scholarship resulted in a large body of halakhic literature and the development of well honed methodologies for halakha study, there is a relative paucity of sources on aggadic texts. Approaches to aggada also tend to be less systematic than approaches to halakha and not as completely articulated. This has led to the unfortunate neglect of serious aggada study in the traditional *bet midrash*. R. Yitzchak Blau's book, *Fresh Fruit and Vintage Wine*, is an attempt to promote the study of *aggadot Hazal* by making them more accessible to a wide range of readers.

R. Blau makes a compelling case for the importance of incorporating aggada study into the contemporary Talmud classroom. One thought-provoking insight he offers is that the Sages themselves saw fit to integrate halakha and aggada in the body of the Talmud, an indication that they meant these texts to reflect on each other. He also argues convincingly that these ancient sources are particularly valuable in helping educators address present-day educational problems. Because aggadic material has a timeless quality, it is well suited to addressing contemporary issues, making it a boon for those teachers whose students find the halakhic portions of Gemara religiously uninspiring. R. Blau suggests that exposure to aggada "will enhance [students'] respect for Gemara and have a helpful trickle-down impact on their study of halakhic material."

Fresh Fruit and Vintage Wine is an ambitious undertaking, containing over eighty readings of *aggadot* drawn from the Babylonian Talmud, organized topically in fifteen chapters under categories such as Prayer, Education, Interpersonal Obligations, The Goal of Life, Modernity, and the like. The essays in the book are generally very brief; the author does not seem to be trying for comprehensive readings of the texts he has chosen. Instead, drawing on interpretations from a broad range of commentaries, he typically chooses to discuss selected aspects of a given *aggada*.

This is in keeping with his goal of exposing readers to the significant body of rich aggadic interpretation which can aid them in understanding these texts. The breadth and variety of R. Blau's source material amply demonstrate the value of familiarity with this literature, and may help explain why very few of his readings contain original commentary. The relatively uniform structure of his essays may be attributable to his reliance on these sources as well. Having cited one or several commentaries on an aggadic text, R. Blau will then either harmonize or contrast their views. The essays always conclude with an explicitly edifying message which has a contemporary application.

Even a cursory perusal of this work reveals that R. Blau has impressive breadth of knowledge in *aggadot Hazal* and Jewish thought, as well as the kind of sane, balanced outlook on life one hopes to see in an educator. It is not surprising, then, that *Fresh Fruit and Vintage Wine* succeeds in providing a comprehensive, wide-ranging survey of aggada-related commentary. The book also works as an engaging exposition of Modern Orthodox philosophy at its best, a tribute to the author's success as a teacher. One illustration of how these elements come together successfully is R. Blau's essay on an aggada from *Mo'ed Katan* (pp. 80-82). This is a satisfying example of how an unexpected source (R. Soloveitchik's *hesped* for R. Hayim Ozer Grodzinski) can be used to arrive at a sophisticated reading with refreshing relevance.

R. Blau has admirably accomplished his main goals in this book, and readers have much to gain from it. A book review, though, is an opportunity to envision broader issues the author might have addressed. With all this valuable book has to offer, there are areas in which it feels incomplete. As a teacher concerned with skill-building, I would have liked to see more explicit discussion of methodology—tools and techniques that readers could use to arrive at coherent, meaningful interpretations of texts. The author's abundant selection and discussion of *aggadot* and commentary stimulate the readers' interest, but leave them without the ability to do what he himself does so productively. The essays in the book might easily be used in the classroom (or the pulpit or at the Shabbat table) to good effect, but the reader who wants to grapple with *aggadot* that do not appear in the book has not been given the tools to do so.

Methodologies for reading are primarily process oriented, and, if well articulated, can be replicated to a large extent by any intelligent reader. Some methodological systems set ground rules for the limits of interpretation or state criteria for gauging the validity of a reading, but even in these cases, a good methodology is of necessity open-ended in its results,

because it is aimed at discovering, rather than pre-determining, what the text is saying. In contrast, writing a good sermon uses the kind of rhetorical skills R. Blau exhibits in his book, rather than primarily analytical ones.

Because R. Blau is more concerned with deriving a clear, didactically useful message from each aggada than with explaining the process by which that message is arrived at, he does not bring the reader into the interpretive process. This probably explains why he rarely states his criteria for selecting commentary or helps us understand why one interpretation should be privileged over another. For the most part, he does not show us the textual basis of a commentator's reading, though he does on occasion discuss commentators' differing world views. R. Blau also almost never cites a reading with which he disagrees, a choice that would provide us with the opportunity to understand why some readings are less plausible than others.

The grouping of *aggadot* by topic in the chapter headings indicates that R. Blau's choice of material is naturally skewed in favor of the areas he wishes to address. This, in itself, is not a failing. What is disappointing, though, is that the actual readings of these sources appear to be driven by pre-determined categories as well, rather than by the nature of the texts themselves. It is telling, too, that none of his readings are controversial. This is not to suggest that controversy for the sake of controversy is intrinsically valuable, and it seems quite reasonable that the author would gravitate toward readings that fit within communal consensus in a work aimed at a broad audience. The absence of controversial readings is, though, another indication that a preset message—rather than the nature of the material—dictates the parameters of his discourse, especially given that many of the *aggadot* discussed raise complex issues that are not necessarily easily resolved. All this indicates that R. Blau's analyses are more firmly situated in the realm of homiletics than interpretation. While the interpretive goal is to derive the meaning (or meanings) embedded within a text, the point of a homily is to convey a pre-determined idea, using texts as rhetorical tools. Both homily and interpretation are legitimate styles of Torah study and each has much to offer the Torah student, but they differ significantly in their means and ends. Not surprisingly, an interpretive approach will yield more complex and open-ended readings than a homiletical one.

Instead of allowing the text to emerge in all its depth and complexity, as would be the inevitable result in a more interpretive reading, R. Blau extracts only a small, albeit important, element from it. Perhaps he is concerned that if he leaves the reader with unanswered questions or unresolved possibilities the authority of the aggadic sources will be undermined.

Unfortunately, though, a style that packages the text too neatly tends to flatten out the richness of the *aggadot*, rather than letting the reader experience it. Even the shortest *aggadot* presented here are dense, intricate texts. Many of the selections are much longer and even more complex. The brevity of the author's essays virtually determines that both scope and depth of analysis are incomplete. Had R. Blau limited himself to fewer texts explored more intensively, the results might have been more rewarding. The author's decision to focus only on some of the details in a given text fits with the interpretive limitations of his work, but given his impressive Torah knowledge and pedagogical talent, it would have been instructive to see what might have emerged had he engaged with the texts in their entirety.

The book would likely have benefited from some direct discussion of pedagogical questions as well. For example, while R. Blau recommends integrating *aggada* study with study of halakhic portions of the Gemara, he doesn't actually provide examples of how to do this. Educators would gain from a description of how the author uses *aggada* to promote classroom discussion of contemporary issues. A statement of the kinds of issues he discusses, though helpful, doesn't provide enough guidance for the inexperienced teacher. Another subject R. Blau might have addressed productively is when *not* to teach an aggadic source—and what to do when a source of this type shows up on the page. And, finally, it would have been valuable to see a more systematic discussion of how to prepare an aggadic text that one does not yet understand. The author might have explored what sort of questions the reader should ask about these texts and what analytical or literary skills the reader might employ in comprehending them.

R. Blau has obviously taken years to build up his repertoire of aggadic commentary and Western literature, and to develop his own teaching style. The essays in this book open a door to the hidden world of aggadic commentary and provide the reader with much food for thought. No doubt R. Blau has much more to share with us. When he does so, I'm hoping he will articulate a methodology that will show young teachers and lay readers how to approach *aggadot* in the absence of his own impressive erudition.

REVIEWER IN THIS ISSUE

SIMI PETERS teaches Tanach, Midrash, and Parshanut at Nishmat in Jerusalem. She is the author of *Learning to Read Midrash*, Urim Publications, 2004, and has served as an educational consultant and teacher educator in a variety of settings.