

Yonatan Feintuch teaches Talmud, Aggada and Hasidut at Migdal Oz Beit Midrash for Women and Bar-Ilan University, and is the author of two books on halakha and *aggada* in the Talmud.

SOURCES & RESOURCES

REASSEMBLING THE PIECES: ON THE LITERARY UNITY OF HALAKHA AND AGGADA

The past few decades have seen significant development in the field of analysis and interpretation of rabbinic *aggada*. One intriguing aspect of recent work in this field is the focus on the relationship between aggadic materials in rabbinic halakhic compositions, such as the Mishna and the Gemara, and their wider halakhic contexts. While some prominent twentieth-century scholars, most notably Yonah Fraenkel, viewed most *aggadot* as abiding by the rules of “literary closure” and read them as closed units in disregard of their literary/halakhic contexts, more contemporary scholars, such as Ofra Meir and Jeffrey Rubenstein, argue for mutual influence between the genres—the influence of the halakhic discussions on the content and interpretation of proximate *aggadot*, as well as the contribution of the aggadic content to proximate legal material.¹

I wish to present briefly an interesting example of interaction between different, seemingly unconnected, parts of the same Bavli *sugya*—two separate stories and their halakhic context. The “communication” between *aggada* and halakha in the *sugya*, which is exposed by close readings of

¹ See, e.g., Ofra Meir, *Sugyot be-Poetica shel Sifrut Hazal* (Sifriat Poalim, 1993); Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Rubenstein, *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010). On stories in the Bavli, see also my recent books: *Panim el Panim: Shezirat ha-Halakha veba-Aggada ba-Talmud ha-Bavli* (Maggid Books, 2018); *Ki be-Anan Eira'v: Aggada ve-Halakha be-Massekhet Yoma ba-Talmud ha-Bavli* (Michelet Herzog, 2021). See also Moshe Simon-Shoshan, *Stories of the Law: Narrative Discourse and the Construction of Authority in the Mishnah* (Oxford University Press, 2012), and Yehudah Brandes, *Aggada le-Ma'ase* (Beit Morasha, 2005).

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the various aggadic and halakhic texts, enriches the interpretation of the Talmudic stories with new insights, and adds meaning and spiritual depth to mishnaic halakha.

The Talmud cites a story in which the blind *amora* R. Sheshet goes out to greet a king, and a heretic (*min*) mocks him:

R. Sheshet was blind. Once, all the people went out to greet the king, and R. Sheshet arose and went along with them. A certain *min* came across him and said to him: The whole pitchers go to the river, but where do the broken ones go to? He replied: I will show you that I know more than you. A first troop passed by. When a shout arose the *min* said: The king is coming. He is not coming, replied R. Sheshet. A second troop passed by and when a shout arose, the *min* said: Now the king is coming. R. Sheshet replied: The king is not coming. A third troop passed by. When there was silence. R. Sheshet said to him: Now indeed the king is coming. The *min* said to him: How do you know this? He replied: Because royalty in this world is like the heavenly royalty. For it is written (I Kings 19:11–12): “Go forth and stand upon the mount before the Lord. And behold, the Lord passed by and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice.” When the king came, R. Sheshet recited the blessing over him. The *min* said to him: You say a blessing for one whom you do not see? What happened to that *min*? Some say that his companions put his eyes out; others say that R. Sheshet cast his eyes upon him and he became a heap of bones (*Berakhot* 58a).

The mocking heretic mistakes the arrival of companies of Roman soldiers for the king himself, whereas R. Sheshet accurately predicts when the king is about to arrive and blesses him.

What is the theme of this story and what is its message? At first glance, it is a simple tale of justice—crime and punishment. The *min* repeatedly mocks the rabbi and his physical disability and is eventually, and ironically, punished by either losing his own eyesight or being hit by a force emanating from R. Sheshet’s blind eyes that he had previously mocked.

However, looking more closely at the details, we will see that there are a few other themes at play here. Firstly, two essential senses—eyesight and hearing—appear to be at the center of the story. R. Sheshet lacks vision, but by using his intact sense of hearing, he manages to best the *min* at predicting when the king will pass by. Thus, the story telegraphs that a physical disability, or, specifically, lack of one of the senses, does

not necessarily make one inferior. In this sense it may be playing on the age-old motif that a blind person's perception of reality is often superior to sighted people, contrary to the *min*'s mocking of R. Sheshet as a "broken vessel" at the starting point of the story.

However, this *aggada* is more complex than its surface reading. Both characters hear the same sounds (or lack thereof), but only R. Sheshet interprets those sounds accurately. As Yonah Fraenkel remarks, R. Sheshet combines another source of information with his senses—his knowledge of Torah: He explains to the heretic that he knew the procession would be silent when the king ultimately arrives, based on the description of the heavenly royal procession in I Kings, revealed to Elijah the Prophet.² Thus, the story actually deviates from the abovementioned motif of blind wise men or prophets. R. Sheshet's blindness is compensated for not merely by wit, other senses, or talent, but by the combination of sensual alertness with Torah knowledge.

We now broaden our perspective by turning to the story's wider halakhic context. The Mishna (at the beginning of *Berakhot*, chapter nine) lists a series of blessings that are uttered upon encountering certain extraordinary phenomena, mostly in nature, such as thunder, lightning, or impressive rivers or mountains. The Gemara (58a) cites a *baraita* that refers to another type of sight that requires a blessing: encountering a king, whether Israelite or Gentile. The *baraita* does not provide explicit reasoning behind this obligation.

Following a brief amoraic statement which follows the *baraita*, the Talmud cites our story of R. Sheshet. In the context of this *sugya*, the story is conventionally read as merely exemplifying the law of uttering a blessing for a king, perhaps with a little dramatic twist. By reading the *aggada* more closely, as I suggested above, we deepen our understanding of the halakhic material to which it is connected.

As noted above, the physical senses of sight and sound play central roles in the story. Its occupation with these senses, even before we consider its evaluation of them, reflects back to the reading of the Mishna and contributes insight to it. When reading this chapter in the Mishna, one usually focuses on the various blessings and their role in acknowledging and appreciating God's role as creator of the natural world. But there may be a more elementary message in this mishnaic chapter that goes overlooked. Rereading the Mishna after pondering the story of R. Sheshet drew my attention to the centrality and importance of the

² Yonah Fraenkel, "Bible Verses Quoted in Tales of the Sages," *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 22 (1971), 80–99.

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senses in the various *halakhot* throughout the chapter, which I had previously neglected. This reading emphasizes that prior to the obligation to recite a blessing, we are first called upon to pay attention to our senses, to hold them wide open, to perceive with them and absorb through them the wonders of God's world, which we easily overlook or are indifferent to, especially in modern times.

Returning to the story with this message in mind, a twist occurs: If our reading in the Mishna empowers the senses as our instrument for perceiving the world, the story creates a degree of tension with this by questioning their reliability when they serve us without the addition of Torah. As we have seen, both R. Sheshet and the *min* hear the same thing, but only the former correctly interprets what he hears. Thus, the story tells us, the world itself, as perceived by the senses, can be misleading. Only the combination of the data that one receives from the world with knowledge of Torah creates the correct picture. The senses may be important, but the world, in itself, is ambiguous, almost impermeable, and requires interpretation.

Finally, R. Sheshet's deduction, based on the biblical description of the divine procession implies that when seeing an earthly king it is not merely the extraordinary sight that invokes the halakhic obligation. Rather, a human king is a terrestrial manifestation of God Himself. This adds spiritual depth to the specific halakhic requirement of reciting a special blessing upon seeing him. Thus, the story of R. Sheshet and the *halakhot* of "the blessings of *re'iyā*" complement each other.

The story of R. Sheshet is followed by another *aggada* concerning the correlation of terrestrial and celestial royalty:

R. Sheila administered lashes to a man who had engaged in intercourse with a Gentile woman. The man went and informed against him to the king. He said, "There is a man among the Jews who passes judgment without the permission of the king." [R. Sheila] was sent for. When he came they asked him, "Why did you flog this man?" He answered them, "He engaged in intercourse with a she-ass." They said to him, "Do you have witnesses?" He answered, "Yes." [The prophet] Elijah appeared in the form of a man, and testified. They said to him, "If so, then he is deserving of death!" He told them, "Since the day that we were exiled from our land, we have no authority to pass a death sentence, but you—you may do to him as you wish." While they were considering his case, R. Sheila declared: "Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power" (I Chronicles 29:11). They asked him, "What did you say?" He said, "What I said was: Blessed is the Lord who has cast an earthly monarchy in the model of the heavenly Kingship, and has invested you with

dominion, and made you lovers of justice.” They said, “Is the honor of the monarchy so beloved to you?” They gave him a staff and said to him, “You may serve as judge.” When he left, that man said to him, “Does God then perform miracles for liars?” He replied, “Wicked one! Are they [Gentile women] not called asses? For it is written, ‘whose flesh is [as] the flesh of asses’ (Ezekiel 23:20).” When he saw that the man was about to inform on him for calling them asses, he said, “This man is a persecutor, and the Torah states, ‘If someone comes to kill you, arise and kill him first.’” So he struck him with the staff and killed him.

I cannot provide a comprehensive analysis of this story here, but I will point out several details or themes that stand in dialogue with the previous story, although at first glance these texts are very different and seemingly unconnected. One of the most conspicuous literary devices in this story is the double entendre, as Fraenkel has observed.³ The main character, R. Sheila, makes use of it in his interaction with other characters. R. Sheila’s answers, which appear, seemingly, as half-truths, actually carry two different meanings that are aimed at two separate audiences. Contrary to the sinner’s accusation, R. Sheila wasn’t lying, but rather expressing himself in a way that transmits on two separate frequencies. One meaning is superficial, easily understood (or misunderstood) by the Gentiles. But a familiarity with the biblical phrases cited by R. Sheila allows us to perceive the deeper meaning, just as R. Sheshet, with the knowledge of the passage from Kings, arrives at the deeper meaning of the sounds of the procession heard by both himself and the heretic.

For example, R. Sheila cannot say to the king that he flogged the man for intercourse with a Gentile woman, so he reports instead that the man engaged in relations with an ass (or donkey). When the accused man later claims that this was a lie, R. Sheila paraphrases Ezekiel’s reference to the lust of a lewd Gentile woman “whose flesh is the flesh of asses.” At first, this answer may not appear to be very convincing, since obviously the verse does not mean to draw a total parallel between Gentiles and asses. However, if we look at the Biblical context of the quote, we will see the truth in R. Sheila’s comparison in the context of this man whose deed is bound up with animalistic desire and the physical contact of flesh with a Babylonian woman:

And the children of Babylonia came to her into the bed of love, and they defiled her with their lust, and she was polluted with them, and her mind

³ Yonah Fraenkel, “*Ma’ase be-Rabbi Sheila*,” *Tarbiz* 40 (1971), 33–40; reprinted in his *Sippur ha-Aggada – Abdut shel Tokhen ve-Tzura* (HaKibbutz HaMeuhad, 2001), 261–272.

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was alienated from them.... For she doted upon her paramours there, whose flesh was like the flesh of asses (Ezekiel 23:17, 20).

Thus, in the context of sexual promiscuity with Gentiles (specifically, even though this is not explicit in our text, a Babylonian harlot) the comparison to relations with an ass is in place. R. Sheila's statement is valid because it may also be read and interpreted as a spiritual evaluation and critique, not only as a physical or biological statement. R. Sheila, fearful of being punished by the Persian authorities, potentially with death, for sitting in judgment without license, allowed the king and his men to understand the case at hand as actual sexual relations with a she-ass, even though R. Sheila was only speaking metaphorically.⁴

Toward the center of the story R. Sheila prays, murmuring to himself the verses, "Yours, O Lord, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty, for all that is in heaven and on earth is Yours." In doing so, he expresses his inner faith that every event in this world happens by the will of God. Whatever the human king decides will ultimately reflect the will of the true King. Thus, R. Sheila entrusts his fate to God, and asks for His salvation.

But to the Gentiles he explains that he was blessing God, who "has cast an earthly monarchy on the model of the heavenly Kingship, and has invested you with dominion, and made you lovers of justice." Again, is R. Sheila acting duplicitously? Here, we turn to the Aramaic Targum of the verse from Chronicles, which is not literal but rather an interpretative translation:

And You are Ruler over them, and bear all that is in heaven and all that is on earth... [You are above] the angels that are in heaven and above those who are appointed as heads on earth. And the wealth of the wealthy and the honor of kings and rulers is given to them from before You, and You rule over all, and You have the power to give greatness and strength to all (Targum I Chronicles 29:11-12).⁵

On the basis of the Targum, we may certainly say that R. Sheila is blessing God, who has placed kingship in the world in the image of heavenly Kingship. Again, this statement contains dual meaning. From the

⁴ That is, by allowing the Persian authorities to misinterpret his speech, R. Sheila causes them to presume the sinner has copulated with an actual ass. To such an offence they not only heartily assent to the administration of lashes at the hand of the Jewish court, but give license to the death penalty, as this was a particularly odious offence in their society. R. Sheila feels justified in allowing them to think this because his actual statement is true in a spiritual sense when filtered through the meaning of the verses in Ezekiel.

⁵ Cf. Fraenkel, "*Ma'ase be-Rabbi Sheila*," 266.

Gentiles he conceals the true and inner meaning of what he is saying—that all the power of the earthly king comes from God; the king of Babylonia has no independent power, and any power that he seems to have is mere illusion. The king would never understand or accept such an idea, and so R. Sheila reveals only part of the meaning: That he is blessing God who has empowered the rule of the Gentile king on earth. Ironically, the king understands this as recognition of his own power and sovereignty. Not only is R. Sheila saved, but his “recognition” of the regime renders him worthy of being awarded the authority to render judgment. From R. Sheila’s perspective this authority is actually given to him by God Himself, whose will at that moment is expressed in the decision of the Gentile king.

It is noteworthy that at the very center of the story we read that the king asks R. Sheila what he is saying. In fact, the question “What did you say?” is the central axis not only of the structure of the story, but also of the deeper meaning of the entire story, which revolves around R. Sheila’s words and the interplay of their different meanings.⁶ Thus, it is significant that the heart of the structure of the story is the question, “What did you say?” What is R. Sheila actually saying? The answer, of course, depends on interpretation. But the message’s meaning surpasses that of any specific answer, and resonates beyond the story of R. Sheila to the other parts of the *sugya* which we examined above. Taken as a whole, it highlights the multifaceted nature of reality, in a world in which the God who drives and directs creation is nevertheless concealed and silent.

R. Sheila’s telling only “part” of the truth is more than just a way of saving himself. This speech technique represents his view that there are multiple layers of reality. The Gentiles see only the outer layers; they are convinced of their own strength, and of the dependence of the Jews’ fate on Gentile decisions. Similarly, the *min* in R. Sheshet’s story only appreciates the outer layer, the king’s external earthly strength while remaining deaf to the “sound of silence.” He sees (and hears) only what he expects to see, and in that sense he is correct in asking R. Sheshet why he bothers to go if he cannot enjoy the sight. But that also leads him to interpret the processions with the louder, extroverted, noise to be the king. In contrast, R. Sheshet is not impressed by the outer appearance of the king’s procession; his senses are aimed at the deeper truth that they represent, God’s manifestation on earth.

R. Sheila, too, provides an awareness of the multifaceted nature of the world. The power that appears to lie in the hands of the Gentiles is

⁶ As Fraenkel showed, the story is a chiasmic construction, and the question “What did you say?” is at the very center of the structure; “*Ma’ase be-Rabbi Sheila*,” 270.

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actually an illusion, as the real power and control reside in the hands of God who is concealed and behind the scenes, just as R. Sheshet is aware that what he perceives with his senses is merely the outer packaging. He also understands, like R. Sheila, that the earthly king does not derive his power from himself, but from God, who allows him to rule. This understanding adds deeper meaning to the blessing uttered upon encountering such a king, who is, in a way, a manifestation of the supreme King. In a certain sense, R. Sheila's recitation of the verses from Chronicles (as understood through the Targum) is very similar to the blessing that R. Sheshet uttered over the Gentile king.

This understating reflects back to the halakhic context of the chapter in which these *aggadot* are situated. Reciting blessings upon encountering various phenomena in the world acknowledges that although we see and perceive nature as earthly physical phenomena, where God's creation is not openly revealed, He operates "behind the scenes," sometimes even via the will and decisions of the Gentiles, or through seemingly arbitrary events in nature. Nevertheless, true sovereignty is His, and even the actions of the Gentiles are by His will—although the connection remains invisible. According to this understanding, derived from the *aggadot* in the *sugya*, the halakhic obligation to utter blessings over various natural phenomena may be viewed as reshaping our encounter with the world, sharpening our physical and spiritual senses to listen for the occult, hidden presence of God within every detail and event.