

A NEW APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF AGGADIC NARRATIVES

by AVIGDOR SHINAN

יונה פרנקל, עיונים בעולמו הרוחני של סיפור האגדה, תל אביב, הוצאת הקיבוץ המאוחד. תשמ"א. 176 ע'.
Jonah Fraenkel, *Studies in the Spiritual World of Aggadic Narrative*. Tel Aviv, 1981.

Rabbinic literature — the two Talmuds and Aggadic literature — abounds in hundreds of short narratives about the character, history and relationships of the sages. Jewish tradition has regarded these narratives as a faithful reflection of reality, making them the corner-stones of biographies of the sages. Jewish scholarship (Der Wissenschaft des Judentums) has inherited a good deal of this conservative approach¹ and to this day there are scholars who accept quite a large proportion of these narratives at their face value. This approach reflects a justified sense of helplessness in the face of the sources in our possession. Anyone wishing to study Rabbinic literature, which in effect molded Judaism as we know it, cannot help but wonder about the men who created this literature and, as stated above, all (or almost all) we know about these men is derived from these narratives, without there being any verification or support from archaeological findings, historical documents, etc.

Thus, the question of the historical information which can be obtained from these narratives is problematic and depends to a great extent on the basic presuppositions of the scholar dealing with them. Our attitude to the content of the narrative and the conclusions to be drawn from it will also change with our presupposi-

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1. See, for example, W. Bacher, *Die Agada der Palästinenischen Amoräer*, Strassburg 1892; *Die Aggada der Tannaïter*, Strassburg, 1903.

tions. Scholarship cannot, however, depend on presuppositions which cannot be proven, and a need was felt to find a different and more fruitful point-of departure from which to tackle the narratives. An answer to this problem has been proffered by Professor Jonah Fraenkel of the Department of Hebrew Literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, in a comprehensive series of articles in both Hebrew and English, as well as in the book under discussion here. Fraenkel's approach combines the literary with the idea-oriented; it relates to literary form thereby allowing for a discussion on the level of ideology and ideas, while simultaneously pushing the biographical aspect very much to the side. He listens to the narrative and to the fine points of its wording, reveals its structure and the interaction between its parts and stresses alternative readings as well as its use of irony and emphasis. Two of his articles² should be mentioned here since, as their titles indicate, they focus on problems of form and rhetoric. The book under discussion should therefore be seen as part of an overall approach, and in part it is indeed based on profound, reasoned analyses of narratives, such as those found in the author's articles. Moreover, the book deals solely with the ideational aspect of the narratives, and contains an apology for the fact that the literary-artistic side — which is its real basis — is neglected. The book was written for the general reader, not for the scholar, and hence its popular character, with few footnotes, a restricted bibliography and the avoidance of lengthy and detailed discussions of every aspect and item of information.

The book contains analyses of slightly more than fifty narratives in three categories, moving from the individual to the group: the *individual* vis-à-vis his God; *Sages* and the House of Study; the *Jewish people* and its history. In each case, we are first given the narrative (translated into Hebrew, if the source is in Aramaic) accompanied by a brief, factual but sufficient explanation, and then the analysis of the ideas. The narratives and topics form a natural chain, the discussion flows smoothly and the reader is presented with an ever-widening picture. At the end of the book (pp. 165–173) there is a list of the narratives discussed, their parallels in Rabbinic literature and a few remarks about the text (*nusah*) of the narrative and other scholarly points. At the very end there is a brief bibliographical list of the main books and articles in the field, which also includes most of Fraenkel's articles on this subject.

Let us take, for example, the section "The Gentiles — Condemnation and Praise," in Chapter 3 (pp. 138–148). Three narratives dealing with the Gentiles' attitude to and pursuit of money are discussed. It would appear that, despite the enmity between the Jews and the Gentiles and the quantities of blood shed in early Jewish history, the sages were capable of admiring the positive features of

2. "Bible Verses Quoted in Tales of the Sages," *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 22 (1971), pp. 80 ff.; "Paranomasia in Aggadic Narrative," *ibid.*, 27 (1978), pp. 27 ff.

their neighbors, even if this meant condemning the Jews! The degree of self-criticism implied by the narratives is considerable, and the fact that it is revealed so clearly is one of Fraenkel's most impressive achievements. This is evinced by the following, apparently innocuous, narrative:

Once a Jasper stone (one of the precious stones in the Urim and Tummim) belonging to (the tribe of) Benjamin was lost.

They said: "Who has (a stone) as good?"

They said: "Damah the son of Netinah,"

They went to him and settled with him for one hundred dinars. He rose up, wanting to bring it to them, and found his father sleeping (some say the key to the box was on his father's finger, others that his leg was stretched out on the box). He (Damah) went down to them, and said to them: "I cannot bring it to you."

They said: "Perhaps he wants more money?"

They raised the price to two hundred, they raised it to a thousand. When his father woke up, he went up and brought it to them. They wanted to give him the sum they had last agreed on, but he would not take it. He said: "Do sell my father's honor to you for money? I will not derive any gain from honoring my father".

(Jerusalem Talmud, Pe'ah 1:1)

Although the hero of the narrative is a Gentile inhabitant of Ashkelon, Damah the son of Netinah, for whom honoring his father was worth foregoing a large sum of money, it would seem that even the Jews — or perhaps especially the Jews — are the object of the moral. The emissaries of the Temple have no doubt that the Gentile's refusal to bring the stone, on the pretext that he does not wish to wake up his father, is due to his avarice and constitutes an attempt to raise the price. Consequently they are prepared to pay more for the stone, hoping that the money will dazzle him. When he finally brings the stone and asks for the first price agreed upon, they can hardly believe their ears. Their view of the Gentile is such that they think they can understand his thoughts, while it is really they who misjudge what is important and what trivial. According to this analysis, it is irrelevant whether a stone from the breastplate was in fact lost or not and whether Damah the son of Netinah ever really existed. The narrative deals with an ideal *problem*, operating on two axes: Jew — Gentile; Avarice — Honoring one's parents; and it is not the Jew who emerges victorious from this critical and didactic narrative.

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Through this approach, Fraenkel reveals new and sometimes surprising aspects of narratives of this kind. His writing is clear and illuminates various features in the thinking of the sages, the authors of the narratives (the book is concerned more with the worlds of the authors than with the world of the narrative). The narratives analysed sometimes inadvertently reveal more than explicit statements, and hence their great importance. One narrative supplements another, adding up to build a general picture.

It would be neither right nor fair to discuss the book as it stands, as it is after all merely part of a system, and is also written on a popular level. Consequently, we shall make only three general comments about Fraenkel's pioneering undertaking, being confident that this is still far from complete and that the approach will yet be expanded and refined.

A thorny problem, which is barely touched upon in the book, is that of the choice of texts to be analysed. From the few notes at the end of the book we learn that the author has sometimes chosen the version of the narrative which seems to him to be the best (apparently on the basis of aesthetic criteria), and that even these are amended by him here and there by selections and interpolations from other texts. This, naturally, is of immense importance in literary analysis, which rests on fine distinctions and details of the text. While one must admit that the analysis (i.e. the result of this procedure) is successful and sometimes extremely convincing, and that this is a kind of justification of the selection of text for analysis, nevertheless, there is something of a vicious circle here, and there seems to be over-dependence on the modern scholar's literary taste, however good it may be.

In his foreword to the book, Fraenkel notes that the narratives he analyses were created in the House of Learning, and can consequently be regarded as the extremely stylized creations of a handful of men, the cultural elite of the period. Only occasionally does he remark that one narrative or another has the characteristics of a folk tale, and was in fact remembered and transmitted as such by the people. Even if Fraenkel is right in his assumption — and the writer agrees with him on this point — we still have before us a group of texts which could be understood and whose literary quality and complexity could be enjoyed only by a privileged few in every generation. Are we being told, then, that the narrative was created, recorded and transmitted by a handful of people, who alone were privy to its mysteries, while for the vast majority of the people the narratives remained totally or partially incomprehensible? What is the point of literature which can be understood in full only with the aid of the scalpel of a perceptive scholar? Were these narratives of any value to people who were not part of the circle of the sages? How and why? These questions, which concern the history of literature and the *Sitz im Leben* of the works, are still waiting to be answered.

The question of the historical-literary continuum also needs to be answered. No similar narratives have been found prior to the Rabbinic period, and it would be interesting to know what factors led to their rather sudden creation. Was there some external foreign influence? Were the narratives the outcome of internal Jewish processes which require further description and explanation? Were they the product of a single creative genius who aroused others to imitate him? Fraenkel has shown elsewhere how the narratives declined and become debased and destroyed after the eighth century approximately, but the question of their genesis still remains open.

I have no doubt that in Fraenkel's forthcoming publications he will continue to develop his approach and will answer most of the questions raised here. In any event, these questions do not detract from the pioneering contribution of his approach, which is unparalleled to this day in its extent and method, resting upon the literary artistic approach, which is definitely the best and most correct way of getting to the essence of these narratives.

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JEWISH THOUGHT AND SPIRITUALITY

ANNOUNCEMENT

Due to technical reasons, the main article intended for this section, Yehudah Liebes' study of "Christian Influences in the Zohar," was not yet available for publication as we went to press. Due to this reason and to the unusual length of several of the articles in the other sections of this issue, it was decided to suspend this department for the current issue and to publish it in augmented form in *Immanuel* 17. In addition to Liebes' article, that section will include:

Ze'ev Gries—Hassidic *Hanhagot*—A Study in the Literature of Pious Conduct

Tamar Ross—Two New Studies of Rabbi Israel Salanter and the Musar Movement (Book Review)

Among the major articles in the other sections of that issue will be:

Saul Abramski—On the Beginnings of the Israelite Monarchy

David Flusser—The Jewish-Christian Schism (Part II)

Julius Marovcsik—The Philosophical Foundations of Religious Tolerance

Eliezer Schweid—Two Neo-Orthodox Approaches to Secularism

Mordecai Beck—Contemporary Israeli Culture—Themes and Dissonances