

The Snake at the Mouth of the Cave  
EXPLORING TALMUDIC NARRATIVES



**TOURO COLLEGE &  
UNIVERSITY SYSTEM**

*Where Knowledge and Values Meet*





Moshe Sokol

THE SNAKE  
AT THE MOUTH  
OF THE CAVE

EXPLORING  
TALMUDIC  
NARRATIVES

Touro College and University System  
Maggid Books

*The Snake at the Mouth of the Cave*  
*Exploring Talmudic Narratives*

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*Touro College and University System  
pays tribute to*

# **RABBI DR. MOSHE SOKOL**

**DEAN, LANDER COLLEGE FOR MEN**

Dean Sokol is an outstanding Rav, scholar and academician who is respected by his peers and beloved by his students.

This volume is yet another of his contributions to the corpus of Rabbinic scholarship. His insights will undoubtedly enhance understanding of the Talmud and advance Torah knowledge.

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## *Introduction*

When reading the Talmud, one is often struck by the great amount of aggada, the non-halakhic teachings about theology, ethics, spirituality, psychology, health, and many other topics, interspersed throughout the text. Countless works have been written about the Talmud over the ages, but the majority of these works are about the halakhic portions of the Talmud; this is to be expected, given the overwhelming importance of halakha and halakhic discourse to traditional Judaism. Classic yeshiva curricula likewise, and perhaps for good reason, focus almost exclusively on the halakhic portion of the Talmud. Yet if the talmudic rabbis devoted so much attention to aggada, it was clearly important to them as well. In fact, if one includes all the non-halakhic midrashim, which extensively cite the rabbis of the Talmud, it becomes apparent that these rabbis treasured aggada a great deal indeed. Despite this, there remains a relative paucity of commentary and scholarship on aggada, especially in the English language, and especially about that portion of aggada in which the rabbis tell stories. While in Israel there has been a recent spurt of interest in, and publications about, aggadic narrative, this has not been matched in the United States or England. This volume seeks to contribute to that literature.

Why write about aggadic narratives? The talmudic rabbis often told stories because stories are a compelling form of human communication, dating back almost to the origins of humankind. Let us remember that the Torah itself contains more narrative than law. Well-told stories

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grab our interest, for we identify with the characters whose stories are told, and grow by entering their world. The stories I have elected to analyze in this volume are gripping. They include tales of sin, redemption, success and failure, interpersonal conflict, alienation, human pain and triumph, love, fear, anger, and spiritual yearning. I hope the narrative energy of these stories captures the readers of this volume as it has captured me, and that I can successfully convey through my interpretations the wisdom the talmudic rabbis themselves sought to convey.

The first set of three chapters constitutes a trilogy, all devoted to R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus, perhaps the greatest student of the leader who re-established Jewish religious life after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, R. Yoḥanan b. Zakkai. The first chapter tells of R. Eliezer's youth, longing for Torah study and growth as a scholar. The second tells of his excommunication at the hands of his friends and colleagues, all over a debate about the halakhic status of a particular oven. The last chapter tells of the pathos-filled attempt on the part of R. Eliezer's students and colleagues to reconcile with him on his deathbed. During this encounter, R. Eliezer compares his own unquenchable yearning for Torah knowledge to that of a thirsty dog lapping at the sea, driven to acquire ever more knowledge, but who only barely touches the infinite surface of the Talmud's sea. I have been tempted to name this book *Lapping at the Sea: Studies in Talmudic Stories* for as much as we readers yearn to uncover the true depths of talmudic stories, we sometimes feel as if we are merely lapping at the surface of the sea.

The fourth chapter continues with the theme of excommunicated scholars, and analyzes the story of Akavya b. Mahalalel, who refused to retract four of his halakhic positions despite pressure from the majority of the Sages, and examines in some depth his personality, his approach to halakha, and his fate.

The second set of three stories are another trilogy, about the great master R. Yoḥanan bar Nappaha, who lived in *Eretz Yisrael* and is traditionally thought to be the main compiler of the Talmud Yerushalmi. The fifth chapter depicts a crucial decision point in R. Yoḥanan's early life, when he, unlike his closest friend and colleague, chose to remain in the study hall and not enter the world of business despite his grinding poverty. The sixth chapter, which catches him mid-career, revolves

around his complex and evolving relationship with his close student-turned-colleague and brother-in-law, Reish Lakish, and ends with the death of both. The seventh and last chapter in this trilogy focuses on R. Yoḥanan in his old age, and in a disastrous encounter with another great Sage, R. Kahana.

The eighth chapter picks up on the theme of loss in the sixth chapter, which described the intense pain R. Yoḥanan felt with the death of Reish Lakish. This chapter provides a fresh analysis of the famous and strange tale of Ḥoni, the magic worker, who slept for seventy years, only to awaken to a world that would not accept him. Both R. Yoḥanan and Ḥoni die bereft of the relationships that made life worth living for them.

Some of these texts are well-known, and others less so, but all provide remarkably rich and dramatic stories which revolve around a common theme: The costs of living a deeply principled life, and the complex ways in which human nature, past experiences, and future hopes and anxieties shape difficult, principled choices. All the protagonists in these stories were men with profound commitments to the Jewish people, as well as to Torah and halakhic truth as they saw it, and were willing to make the greatest personal sacrifices to realize or preserve their vision. Yet these choices were not made in a vacuum. The authors of these aggadot portray these great men as human beings with pasts and with concerns and needs all their own, as all human beings possess. These aggadot explore this nexus in various ways, between principle and past, between human nature and elevated aspiration.

I have been blessed over the years with many wonderful Talmud teachers, and they taught me to interrogate every word, phrase, line, and textual unit (*sugya*) of the Talmud. Why does the text use this word rather than that word? Why do the rabbis ask this question when they could have asked another, or why are they silent when they should have asked a question but did not? Why do they give one answer when they could have given another? Does the author of this teaching contradict himself with another teaching? The list of questions to be asked of the text could be very long indeed. My teachers taught me that each word, phrase, and line of the Talmud was crafted with the utmost care, bespeaks the religious heights of its authors, and is precious beyond

words. My aim in this volume is to apply exactly this same approach to the study of talmudic narratives. I might add that my years in graduate school studying classical philosophical texts reinforced a similarly rigorous interrogation of text, although of course without the reverence with which I was taught to hold the Talmud.

What methods do I use in analyzing these narratives? Essentially, I ask of the texts many questions, and propose answers based upon my understanding of the narrative itself, the intellectual history of the period in which the protagonists of the narrative lived, various Jewish sources, and insights from such diverse fields as psychology, literature, cultural studies, philosophy, and more. Of course, I draw regularly on the classical rabbinic commentaries to the Talmud, as well as upon contemporary scholarship. However, the overall readings of the texts offered in this volume are very much my own. I wish to stress that I offer no more than theories about what these narratives might mean, theories which are designed to be faithful to the language of the texts and to answer the questions I raise. I can never be confident that these readings are true – whatever that might even mean – nor do I wish to claim that they are. Rather, my aim is to explain these often-puzzling texts in ways that make sense to me. If other readers of these narratives find these explanations helpful to them too, I will be more than gratified. Of course, readers who seek alternative accounts of the text must themselves take up the challenge of answering the very questions which led me to the interpretations I offer.

Each chapter in this volume begins with a brief introduction, followed by the texts in the original language, along with their English translations in boldface type and brief commentary in lightface, based on the *Koren Talmud Bavli* (Jerusalem: Steinsaltz Center and Koren Publishers Jerusalem, 2012–2019), also available at [www.sefaria.org](http://www.sefaria.org). The overall exposition here is that of a retelling of the story with a running commentary full of observations, questions, and potential answers, and includes a very extended analysis and discussion. My goal is to provide an overarching account of the narrative and its aims through this method of exposition. Since the chapters tend to be long, they are divided into parts to make it easier for the reader.



In attempting to interpret these challenging narratives, I will offer many suggestions about the inner lives, thoughts, feelings, and attitudes of their protagonists. These men are the heroes of the Talmud, whose views on the Torah have shaped Judaism for millennia, and whose biographies are compelling. I cannot stress enough that the inner lives of such extraordinary men are outside the reach of a limited reader living in the twenty-first century, so far removed from talmudic culture, times, Torah knowledge, and religious heights. Some would argue that no contemporary reader can truly hope to understand what these exceptional persons were really like. I take this claim very seriously. What I seek to achieve in this volume is an understanding not of these men themselves, *but an understanding of what the texts might teach the reader about these men*. My working assumption is that the author of the story formed it the way he did because he believed that it had much to teach the reader about the protagonists in question, and thereby about human nature, Torah study, the service of God, ethical values, human relationships, the purposes of life, and so on. The redactors of the Talmud likewise chose to include these stories in the Talmud itself because they too believed that these stories had much to teach future generations. While there may be elements of humor or playfulness in these stories, I begin with the premise that they seek to convey messages of import, and my goal is to unpack what these lessons might have been. Of course, this too is a daunting task, but nevertheless a more modest one than entering into the hearts and minds of the talmudic greats.

It is worth noting here that sometimes the texts themselves cast negative light on their protagonists, either directly or by implication. Let us first remember that these negative aspersions are cast by authors who themselves often lived long after the protagonists themselves, and so we, the readers of these texts, are not encountering the protagonist himself, but a later author's version of the protagonist. Moreover, the author often tells the story for his own purposes and with his own agenda, often to teach his readers an ethical or religious lesson important to him, and that may color his presentation. Thus, the true character of the talmudic heroes who are the subjects of these stories remains hidden from us even if the story appears in the Talmud itself. We must remember that our task is to analyze the protagonist's motives and behavior *as they appear*

*in the text*, not as he truly is. This entails confronting that text honestly, without flinching from its sometimes-negative implications, all the while recognizing that we are interpreting not the protagonist himself, but the Talmud's version of him.

That said, my tendency in this book is to offer a generous reading of the protagonists, even as presented in the text, when that is possible. This is not to say that I fail to confront these sometimes-negative implications, but only that I wish to give the men who are subjects of this volume the benefit of the doubt. While I recognize that not all scholars adopt this posture, I choose to do so for multiple reasons. First, these were men who devoted their lives to Torah study and service of God, as is evidenced throughout the Talmud. They were clearly God- and Torah-infatuated, for which reason their behavior and choices were likely less negative than might first appear. Second, the moral and religious lessons they taught, recorded in the Talmud, frequently reflect exemplary moral and spiritual aspirations and sensitivities. Moreover, the authors of the talmudic texts we examine in this volume were themselves Torah scholars who would likely appreciate the great religious achievements of their heroes, as can be seen in the talmudic tradition, "R. Zeira taught in the name of Rava bar Zimuna: If the earlier scholars were sons of angels, we are the sons of men, and if the earlier scholars were sons of men, we are like donkeys."<sup>1</sup> Therefore, where the stories these authors tell appear to cast aspersions on their protagonists, it seems fair to assume that they would do so in moderation, even if the authors wish to make (or score) an ethical or religious point. Some might suggest that the criticisms they make or imply are relative to the stature in which the author of the text held the subject of the criticism. The greater the stature, the more intense the criticism, even if the misbehavior alleged is, in reality, only slight. That may or may not be, but in any case, for all these reasons, where a reading of the text allows for a generous but plausible interpretation, I favor it. Of course, plausibility is, in some respects, in the eye of the beholder, and the reader will have to judge if my readings meet that bar. Note, however, that even a more generous interpretation must not be a whitewash, and that too I assiduously seek to avoid. The authors of

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1. Shabbat 112b. See also Eiruvim 53a.

these texts time and again force us to confront the shortcomings of all human beings, even what they perceive to be the shortcomings of truly great men as well. This is a crucial element in the texts' legacy.

While the majority of classic rabbinic literature on the Talmud focuses on its halakhic content, there is also a very long and distinguished history of rabbinic commentary to the aggada going back to the *Geonim*. Some of these are included in the compendium *Ein Yaakov*, by Rabbi Jacob ibn Ḥabib, the fifteenth-to-sixteenth-century Spanish scholar. A recent Hebrew edition of this work includes citations to additional, and also more recent, rabbinic commentary to aggadic passages.<sup>2</sup> There is, as well, a substantial and ever-growing body of academic literature of considerable merit which analyzes rabbinic narratives. Some rabbis in the classical tradition incline toward a plain reading of the text; others to rationalist readings of the narratives, interpreting them as naturalistically as possible, including those with apparently supernatural elements; others to a more mystical approach; and others to allegorical readings, Rabbi Judah Loew, the Maharal of Prague, being a distinguished example of the latter.<sup>3</sup> In this volume, I attempt to make sense of the narratives with categories of thought that are meaningful to me, a person living and educated in the twenty-first century, drawing upon both classical and academic sources. The interpretations I suggest do not assume a body of esoteric knowledge like the mystical, nor the allegorical approach of the Maharal, as valuable and illuminating as some might find them to be. I prefer the rationalist approach, but will use metaphor if the text itself seems to call for such a reading.

One example of my use of metaphor is when an aggadic narrative includes within it a halakhic dialogue or exposition. I have found upon reflection that such technical halakhic discourse often serves the deeper narrative purposes of the aggada itself, and will make this suggestion repeatedly throughout the book. This is not to say that the halakhic discourse was really not halakhic but aggadic, for that is not the case. The rabbis really were debating points of law. However, my contention is that

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2. *Ein Yaakov HaMefo'ar* (Jerusalem: Mekhon HaMefo'ar, 2008).

3. For a survey of medieval approaches to aggada, see Marc Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis* (Cambridge, 1980), ch. 1.

the author of the aggada appropriated this pre-existing discourse for his own narrative purposes. The reader will be the ultimate judge of its value.

Another point to make is that the method I use is not comparative or source-critical. By that I mean that I do not compare the sometimes-varying versions of the same narrative that appear in different rabbinic texts, nor do I examine how the narrative might have developed over time or changed across geography, as expressed in the different texts and their provenances. While this can be revealing, it is not my purpose. As do other scholars in the field, I take the text which appears in a classical source as a self-sufficient literary unit, and seek to understand what its particular author (or editor) might have meant to convey.<sup>4</sup> While I draw on sources external to the narrative being analyzed, the focus is always on the text itself in its traditional form.

The Talmud has endured for millennia, and is studied with unflagging commitment and energy across the world today by more people than ever in Jewish history, in widely varying contexts – primarily in yeshivas, but also in synagogues, study halls, and university classrooms. Despite many predictions to the contrary, the study of Talmud flourishes, a testament to the stature of its authors and editors, to its transcendent value, and to the enduring commitment of the Jewish people to its wisdom. The talmudic conversation will continue long into the future, and I pray that this volume will contribute its own small voice to that conversation.

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4. For an overview of contemporary methods used in the analysis of aggadic narratives, see Moshe Lavee, “Welfare and Education vs. Leadership and Redemption: The Stories about Rabbi and Rabbi Hiyya as an Example of the Image of the Tannaitic Past in the Babylonian Talmud,” *JSIJ* 8 (2009): 52–55 (Heb.).

## Chapter 1

# The Making of R. Eliezer

## *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer*, Chapters 1–2

### INTRODUCTION

R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus, who lived at the end of the first and beginning of the second centuries, was among the greatest of the *Tanna'im*, the rabbinic Sages who lived from 10 CE until approximately 220 CE, and one of the outstanding students of R. Yoḥanan b. Zakkai, the man most responsible for the survival of Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple. R. Yoḥanan b. Zakkai described his star student as a “sealed well which does not lose a drop placed in it”; such were the powers of R. Eliezer’s recall.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, R. Yoḥanan b. Zakkai is reported to have said: “If all the Sages of Israel were in one scale of a balance, and Eliezer ben Hyrcanus in the other, he would outweigh them all.”<sup>2</sup> R. Eliezer’s

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1. *Pirkei Avot* 2:11, translation from *The Koren Sacks Siddur* (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2010), 648. All translations of *Pirkei Avot* in this volume are from the *Koren Sacks Siddur*.

2. *Ibid.*, 2:12.

teachings are cited with great frequency in the Mishna and Talmud, and he played a pivotal role in carrying forward Torah teachings into the generation following the destruction of the Temple. One of his many students was the illustrious R. Akiva, himself among the most remarkable figures of the rabbinic era.

Yet, despite these towering achievements, R. Eliezer was excommunicated by his colleagues for insisting on the truth of one of his teachings regardless of being overruled by all of his colleagues, and he went to his death a solitary, tragic figure, alienated from his students and friends. This chapter is the first of three depicting the most important events in R. Eliezer's life, his early beginnings, the great conflict with his colleagues, and their final attempt at reconciliation on R. Eliezer's deathbed.

The lengthy selection we will focus on in this chapter is one of the most extensive and sustained ancient biographical accounts we possess of any of the great rabbinic Sages of the Mishna and Talmud. Several very similar versions of the story appear elsewhere in rabbinic literature, but this analysis will focus on the richest and most detailed, that which appears in *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer*. This late midrash collects many teachings attributed to R. Eliezer (hence the title of the collection), and begins with two biographical chapters about R. Eliezer himself.<sup>3</sup> Our discussion here will likewise be divided into two parts, corresponding to these two chapters. The story it tells is fascinating not only because of its inherent drama and the importance of its subject, but because it adumbrates the character traits of the man who would become one of the greatest and most controversial Sages of the rabbinic period. In other words, it permits us to begin to answer the question of how R. Eliezer became the man he did. The story also subtly but beautifully delineates the complex and evolving human relationship between R. Eliezer and R. Yoḥanan b. Zakkai, his great master. Finally, the story brings to brilliant light the intense spiritual yearning that can make a person great.

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3. A summary of other versions of the story appears in J. Eisenstein, *Otzar Midrashim* (New York, 1915), 27.