

A Mysterious Guest for Dinner

EXPLORING TALMUDIC NARRATIVES



TOURO
UNIVERSITY



Moshe Sokol

A
MYSTERIOUS
GUEST
FOR
DINNER

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NARRATIVES

Touro University
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A Mysterious Guest for Dinner
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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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*In memory of my beloved parents
Albert and Shirley Sokol*

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This volume is dedicated to the memory of my parents Albert and Shirley Sokol, both of whom passed away during this year, four months apart. They were deeply bonded in life and retrieved that bond in death. My mother, who loved, nurtured, and supported all her children, was also a gifted, magical teacher, who transformed the lives of countless students over the many decades she taught, redeeming many from the pits of failure. The remarkably moving testimonials we heard from so many of her students, and the magazine articles published about her before and after her death, bore the most eloquent testimony to the impact she had. Numerous students came to pay a *shiva* call, some more than fifty years after she had taught them as very young children in elementary school. Her impact on them, and on her own family, was indelible.

My father was a person of exceptional spirituality. He modeled the prayerful life, and movingly sang music he composed himself, or

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music composed by others, which all listeners could hear reverberated from the very depths of his soul. A gifted artist by profession, he was at the same time a remarkably diligent student of Torah. He overflowed with generosity of spirit, would invariably pull his car over at bus stops to offer rides to those waiting, and among many other acts of kindness put tefillin on a severely impaired person every week for over twenty-five years, often taking public transportation to do so. He was a man of good humor, joy, and equanimity, and despite the severity of his physical condition during the last years of his life, he never complained. Even at the very end of his life, when he couldn't move a finger due to severe Parkinson's disease, when we asked him how he was feeling his answer, invariably, was "Thank God, okay." He loved his family deeply, and was an inspiration to all with whom he came into contact.

May their memories be a blessing to their family, whom they loved so deeply and who amply returned their love, and to all whose lives they touched.

Finally, I wish to thank God for the many gifts He has bestowed upon me and my family. Each of us in our own distinctive ways endeavors to make the world a better place, and my prayer is that God continue to help us do so, with success, in good health, and in good cheer.

Introduction

This volume is my second one analyzing talmudic narratives, following upon *The Snake at the Mouth of the Cave: Exploring Talmudic Narratives*. The publication of that volume was widely reviewed and it generated many responses, thereby demonstrating to me that there exists a heretofore relatively untapped interest on the part of the English-reading public in the dramatic and profound narratives which abound in the Talmud.

Those unschooled in talmudic literature had rarely if ever encountered most of the narratives analyzed in that book, and those schooled in talmudic literature may have encountered them, but had rarely subjected them to rigorous analysis. Such is the way with most traditional students of the Talmud. They encounter an aggadic text during the course of their studies, may remark upon its mystery, and then quickly move on with their studies. Until I began to study aggada with great care, I confess that I personally was more or less amongst them. Yet I, and probably many others, felt a nagging sense that we were thereby missing something important, that the Talmud had something to teach us, but that our primary focus needed to be placed elsewhere, or that we lacked the tools to decipher these often mysterious texts.

No doubt some traditional students of the Talmud, upon encountering these texts and others like them, chose to consult one or more of the classical commentaries on the aggada, if they were especially

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interested, or if they possessed the time to do so. Yet as impressive as these commentaries might have been, at least this reader, and perhaps others as well, may still have experienced a lingering feeling that there was more to the aggada than met the eyes of even the greatest of its classic interpreters. First of all, these classical commentaries often disagreed amongst themselves. Second, many of the standard commentaries specializing in aggada were written hundreds of years ago, and as deeply informed and insightful as they may have been, they did not always speak to me as a student of the Talmud in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. To take an example from the contemporary yeshiva world, those trained in the methods of what is called the “Brisker” approach to the analysis of rabbinic texts might not find the pilpulistic interpretations offered by many great sixteenth-century Polish Torah scholars very helpful to them. So too, contemporary students of talmudic narratives, with their own training and methods of analysis, might not find every classical interpretation to be as helpful to them as they would like. Of course, all such classical interpretations should be consulted and respected for the insight and knowledge they demonstrate, but each generation finds its own path into the intricacies and depths of the Talmud.

This seems especially true for talmudic narratives, for their subjects are human beings, not abstract principles of Jewish law. All human beings, as distinguished as they might be, possess a unique personal history, live in a particular period, in a particular geographic location, within a particular culture, and with the inner life that all human beings possess. Examining the context within which these figures lived provides extra insight into the narratives, and not every classical source made the fullest use of these contexts in interpreting the texts. Moreover, contemporary academic scholarship in the field of Talmud, as well as highly developed techniques of literary, psychological, and philosophical analysis available in modern scholarship, help provide fresh new perspectives as well, which have immeasurably enriched my own understanding of these narratives.

That said, I now wish to stress once again a point I made frequently in *The Snake at the Mouth of the Cave*. It is presumptuous for someone living in twenty-first-century New York to make any claims about some of the greatest religious figures in Jewish history. Who can

even begin to penetrate the minds and spirits of such ancient rabbis as R. Yehuda HaNasi or Hillel, who lived in such different times and places, and whose lives as recounted in rabbinic sources epitomized extraordinary spiritual achievement and Torah knowledge? I wish to make this very clear: I make no assertions whatsoever about any of the talmudic figures featured in this volume, or its predecessor. Rather, my sole goal is to interpret the talmudic *text* which relates the narrative. The author or editor of the text possessed a message that he wished to convey, like the author or editor of any passage in the Talmud. Every rabbinic text calls for its interpretation, whether that text is halakhic or aggadic. What I seek to do in these volumes is to interpret these aggadic texts, to do my best to get at the messages they might convey. If the subject of the narrative is a talmudic great, then I seek to explore what that particular text might teach us about that individual, but that is altogether different from exploring what the talmudic Sage was truly like. The authors and editors of the Talmud often lived centuries after the protagonists of the narratives, and may have had their own personal point of view, or even axe to grind, about the issues at hand. We cannot know. All we can do is read the text as carefully and honestly as we can, and rigorously confront the many questions to which these narratives give rise, then struggle to the very best of our abilities to answer them. That is what I seek to do in this volume, no more, but no less.

Several reviewers of *The Snake at the Mouth of the Cave* noted that I frequently provide generous interpretations of the motives or behavior of the rabbinic protagonists in the narratives I analyze. Now I certainly do not seek to whitewash the sometimes-negative portrayals of rabbinic greats as they appear in the narratives, for to do so would be intellectually dishonest. However, these reviewers are correct in that where possible I often do provide generous readings. The stature of such figures as R. Akiva or R. Yoḥanan is amply attested to in their voluminous, inspirational teachings recorded in the Talmud, their vast knowledge of Torah, and in the many stories about them which appear in both Talmuds.

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It was Maimonides who wrote in his *Commentary to the Mishna*,¹ on R. Yehoshua ben Peraḥya's teaching, that one should judge all people with the scale weighted in his favor. "If the person is known to be famously righteous and of good deeds, and an action of his is seen that all of its aspects indicate that it is a bad deed and a person can only determine it to be good with great stretching and distant possibility, it is fit that you take it that it is good, since there is some aspect of a possibility that it is good." This is quite a strong reading of the mishna, and I for one do not mean to maintain that all talmudic greats are perfect or never err, for that is true of no human being. However, I do maintain that generous readings of the narratives are indeed appropriate, but of course only where the context warrants this. The readers of that volume and this one will judge whether the readings I offer are indeed warranted.

Likewise, several reviewers noted that I analyze the texts as they appear in the classical edition of the Talmud, without examining their origins in time and space and how they took the form they did. This is correct; I noted this explicitly in the introduction to that volume, and I repeat it here. While such an endeavor can be very fruitful indeed, I leave it to those scholars who specialize in this undertaking, and like other scholars, I take the narratives as literary units in their own right, edited and placed as they were in the editions of the Talmud most widely read, referring occasionally to variant readings only where it seems especially warranted.

The Snake at the Mouth of the Cave was in many ways primarily biographical, in that over three chapters each, it traced the evolving lives of two leading figures from the rabbinic period, R. Eliezer and R. Yoḥanan. The remaining two chapters were biographical as well, focusing on narratives about two other Sages, Akavya ben Mahalalel and Ḥoni. This volume is more thematically than biographically focused, although since the narratives are about rabbinic Sages, they necessarily involve biographical elements as well.

The first theme of the book is entitled "Confronting the Other." In the first chapter, Rav Sheshet, who is blind, meets up with a heretic who sharply criticizes Rav Sheshet's behavior. The heretic, probably one

1. *Pirkei Avot* 1:5.

who denied the authority of the Oral Law, is surely outside the rabbinic mainstream, and is therefore an “other” to the Rabbis of the Talmud. Interestingly, Rav Sheshet’s own blindness renders him, in his own way, outside the mainstream as well, and so each mirrors his interlocuter’s otherness. The narrative suggests that their puzzling encounter reveals much about the true nature of sight and blindness, as it reveals much about the deeper significance of the Oral Law in Judaism.

In the second chapter, the great Sage Hillel confronts a man who does his very best to harass, annoy, and anger him. Hillel demonstrates his own remarkable approach to confronting those who seek to make our lives miserable, while at the same time revealing the limits of that approach as well.

In the third chapter, Rav Yannai meets up with a distinguished-looking man on the road and invites him to dinner. Rav Yannai then becomes so distraught at the man’s apparent abject ignorance that he actually calls him a dog, only to regret doing so after he learns more about his guest, whose true identity nevertheless remains shrouded in enigma through the very end of the tale. This aggada teaches the reader much about the eternal mysteries of the human condition, as well as the moral implications of those mysteries.

The second section of the book is entitled “Piety, Poverty, and Wealth.” The first chapter in this section presents the question of who deserves charity during a famine. The great R. Yehuda HaNasi, a wealthy man, opened his storehouses of food to the poor, but initially excluded those who were Jewishly ignorant from receiving his largesse. R. Yehuda HaNasi then struggled with that choice after a poor man, who was an apparent ignoramus, pushed his way into the storehouse, begging for food. “Feed me like a dog or a raven,” he begged. After changing his mind multiple times, R. Yehuda HaNasi eventually opened his storehouses to all. Why did R. Yehuda HaNasi repeatedly change his mind? What motivated his decisions? Can we trace the sinuous passage of his thinking and feelings about this critical issue? And what does R. Yehuda HaNasi’s journey teach the reader about the very nature of morality?

The next two chapters in this section focus on the experiences of the wives of two holy men who choose a life of divine service over a life of material well-being. What were their feelings about their husband’s

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choices? What roles did they play in making crucial decisions for the household? Should one make extreme sacrifices for the sake of a life of extreme holiness? Miraculous events occur in each narrative, which serve to illuminate the dilemmas, the choices made, and the very different roles each wife played in the pious aspirations of their husbands, and in their own pious aspirations as well. These two narratives are uncommon in talmudic literature, in that they focus on the personal experiences of women rather than men, and therefore take on extra significance for students of talmudic literature.

The third and final section of the book is titled “Confronting the Past and Future.” The first chapter in this section tells of a deathbed encounter between the great R. Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, the man most responsible for the survival of Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple, and his students. He cries upon seeing them, expresses fears that he will not merit the World to Come, offers them altogether enigmatic advice before his death, and dies after uttering several very puzzling words. Why did a man who accomplished so much cry and fear for his own future in the afterlife, and what is the meaning of his enigmatic deathbed advice and mysterious final words? I shall argue that this dramatic scene makes most sense as a confrontation with a deeply troubling scene from R. Yoḥanan’s past.

The second chapter in this section examines the breakdown of a marriage, the great R. Meir’s role in that failure, and his attempt to repair the marriage through personal atonement. Here too, R. Meir must confront his own past in order to make healing possible in the future.

The third chapter in this section likewise involves confronting the past, in this case that of King David. King David goes on a hunt, encounters a giant who wishes to kill him, and is miraculously saved by his nephew and colleague, Avishai. The story abounds in fantastical events. One element of this chapter is methodological: How should the reader interpret talmudic narratives that at first glance seem to be fantastical? I examine various approaches taken by Jewish scholars throughout the ages, consider briefly their strengths and weaknesses, then propose an alternative method, according to which the narratives should be seen as dreams, or as dream-like sequences. This approach, likewise based upon classical, but far less well-known, sources, provides an exceptionally

rich and revealing framework for analyzing these narratives, and I use that method to interpret the strange tale told in this aggada. This is a method I also employed in *The Snake at the Mouth of the Cave*, but here I give it more systematic treatment and a fuller methodological context.

The final chapter in this section, and the last one in the book, appropriately looks forward to the future rather than backward to the past, the future here being the Messianic Era. In this deeply puzzling narrative, R. Yehoshua ben Levi meets up with Elijah and asks him, *inter alia*, where he can find the Messiah and how he will identify him. Told that the Messiah awaits at the gates of Rome, R. Yehoshua finds him and asks him when he will come to redeem the Jews, but is deeply chagrined and puzzled by the answer he receives. When after all will the Messiah come? The narrative both answers and fails to answer that very crucial question.

The title of this volume is drawn from the aggada about Rav Yannai and his mysterious guest. This particular aggada is a resonant metaphor for the role of aggadic narratives in the lives of those who study them. Many of these narratives, upon both superficial and then careful reading, seem enigmatic, intricate, and difficult to penetrate. They are mysterious guests at the dinner table of all students of the Talmud, as they should be mysterious guests at the dinner tables of all human beings who wish to penetrate the hidden recesses of the life, times, moral and religious dilemmas, and teachings of some of the greatest Rabbis of the talmudic era. The mysterious guest at Rav Yannai's table taught him a set of complex moral and religious lessons about the human condition and about Judaism. It is my hope that this volume too will offer its readers insight into the complex moral and religious dimensions of the human condition, and of Judaism, that are encoded in these riveting texts.