

## Aggadah Versus Haggadah: Towards a More Precise Understanding of the Distinction

Berachyahu Lifshitz\*

There is a well-known saying by R. Zera in the name of Shemuel that “one does not make a decision on the basis of *Halakhot*,<sup>1</sup> *Haggadot*, and *Tosafot*,<sup>2</sup> but only on the basis of *Talmud*.”<sup>3</sup> The Geonim also quoted in the name of “our rabbis” that haggadah should neither be relied upon<sup>4</sup> nor questioned.<sup>5</sup> Are those rules identical? Is the first the source of the second? What is the extent of the rules’ application: do they apply to all the haggadot, or only to those included in the midrashic collections,

\* Originally published as “‘Aggadah’ and Its Role in the History of the Oral Law (*Torah She’Be’al Peh*)” (Hebrew), *Shenaton ha-Mishpat ha-Ivri* 22 (2003), 233-328. This article is an abridged translation of pages 233-75. My thanks to Mr. Mark Goldenberg for preparing the translation. [For purposes of this translation, we have omitted most of the footnotes from the original article. Please consult the Hebrew original for extensive documentation. –eds.]

1 It appears that the reference here is to *Mishnayot*, consistent with the Palestinian usage of this term; see the entry on *sh.n.h.* in Berachyahu Lifshitz, *Law and Action: Terminology of Obligation and Acquisition in Jewish Law* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Bialik, 2001), 245.

2 Similar to the *Tosafot* of the House of Rabbi and those of R. Natan, see *Lev. Rab.* 1:6 and *Ecc. Rab.* 8:8. According to the opinion of the author of *Seder Tanna'im va-Amora'im* (cited in *Mahzor Vitry*, 491), the intention behind these *Tosafot* was not to present the definitive and binding law; rather, some of their contents consist of halakhah and some do not.

3 yḤag 1:8, 76a; yPe'ah 2:4, 10a.

4 Hai Gaon in *Ṿtsar ha-Ge'onim*, *Berakhot* (B. M. Lewin, ed.; Haifa, 1928-1943), Responsa Section, # 357, p. 131; A. Harkavy, *Teshuvot ha-Ge'onim* (Berlin: Itzkowski, 1887), # 9, p. 4.

5 Harkavy, *Teshuvot ha-Ge'onim*, # 353, p. 179.

## Aggadah Versus Haggadah

and not those found in the Talmud? What is the meaning of the contradiction between the above-mentioned rules and other principles, as well as the different interpretations of this principle offered by halakhic decisors?<sup>6</sup> These questions have long fascinated scholars.<sup>7</sup> In order to be able to discuss the validity and the extent of the rules' application, however, we first have to examine closely the terms "haggadah" and "aggadah."

### I. Aggadah

Articles dealing with "aggadah" (and "haggadah") in various encyclopedias and dictionaries, as well as in academic and popular literature, suggest that the word "aggadah" derives from the root *n.g.d.*, meaning 'to speak.' Those definitions linking aggadah to speech are problematic, however, as Bacher already pointed out:<sup>8</sup>

There are few words of which the etymology is so clear, and the original signification nevertheless so enshrouded in obscurity, as the word *haggadah* (or in its Aramaised form, *aggadah*). In spite of the undoubted fact that this word is formed in the usual way as a *nomen actionis* from the verbal derivative *higgid* (of the root *n.g.d.*), and that

- 6 Zvi Hirsch Chajes, "Darkhe ha-Hora'ah," in *Kol Sifre Maharats Hayot* (Jerusalem: Divre Hakhmim, 1958), 1:244-53.
- 7 See sources cited in Nahum Rakover, *A Bibliography of Jewish Law* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: The Harry Fischel Institute for Research in Jewish Law, 1975), 1:36. See also R. Abraham Isaac ha-Kohen Kook, *Yggerot ha-Re'iyah* (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1984), 1:103; Yonah Frenkel, *Darkhe ha-'Aggadah ve'ha-Midrash* (Masada: Yad la-Talmud, 1991), 487. On the conflict between the obligation to issue halakhic rulings on the basis of the words of the Sages and the inability to accept as authoritative their aggadic sayings, see M. Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 1; Louis Jacobs, *A Tree of Life* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2000), 3-13.
- 8 W. Bacher, "The Original Meaning of the Word Haggada (Agada)," *JQR* 4 (1891/1892), 406-29, 406.

### Berachyahu Lifshitz

in its widest sense it signifies in Rabbinic literature all that does not belong to the sphere of Halacha – yet the manner in which the actual meaning of the words has been determined upon the basis of this etymology is by no means satisfactory.

It should also be noted that the root *n.g.d.* is not commonly used in talmudic literature to describe speech or saying. Rather, the words commonly used to describe saying and speech are derived from the roots *ʾa.m.r.* and *s.p.r.* In trying to account for this exceptional usage of the root *n.g.d.*, E. E. Urbach explained that “the name reflects the unique nature of this literary genre, for its core consists of a story, saying, unique style, and formulation.”<sup>9</sup> Yet this explanation simply begs the question. By contrast, Joseph Heinemann offers a theory that links the word to its etymological root:<sup>10</sup>

A reasonable explanation of the term “aggadah” is probably the one based on its mode of communication, rather than its content. As opposed to the Bible, which was read to the public from a text, aggadot were not read during the sermons, but simply spoken.

But this explanation of aggadah as a counterpart to the Bible is problematic: the typical binary is not aggadah and the Bible, but aggadah and halakhah. Moreover, principles of halakhah were very often communicated orally.<sup>11</sup> According to Heinemann’s definition, “halakhah” should also be included in the definition of the term “aggadah.”

In addition to those wishing to define it on the basis of its etymology, “aggadah” is often defined negatively. For example, R. Shemuel ha-Nagid states, “Haggadah is interpretation presented in the

9 “Aggadah” in *Encyclopaedia Hebraica* (Hebrew), 1:354.

10 Joseph Heinemann, *Aggadah and Its Development* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Keter Yerushalayim, 1974), 7.

11 See bSan 38b.

## Aggadah Versus Haggadah

Talmud of any matter that is not *mitsvah*.”<sup>12</sup> However, this negative definition is equally problematic. As Heinemann writes:<sup>13</sup>

The scope of aggadah is as difficult to establish as the meaning of the word. Generally speaking, aggadah includes words of faith and wisdom, interpretation and explanation of the Bible, stories, etc. As a matter of form, it includes aphorisms and long stories, fables, short explanations of single words, etc. Ever since the days of Shemuel ha-Nagid the negative definition of aggadah was generally accepted ... but it does not describe the essence and meaning of aggadah.

Yet, how can we verify that everything Heinemann includes in his definition of aggadah really belongs there? It is true that according to the negative definition of aggadah, anything that is not halakhah will be considered aggadah, but this fails to explain whether this definition is a post-factum attempt to organize the sources or an essential definition. In any case, it is clear that this definition is incomplete, as it does not contribute to an understanding of the essence of aggadah.

Bacher, in turn, attempted to provide a more satisfying basis for R. Shemuel ha-Nagid's essential contrast between halakhah and aggadah. According to Bacher, the word “haggadah” comes from the technical term “*maggid ha-katuv*” that appears in a number of halakhic midrashim. Although this term is not unique to aggadic exegesis, the process it describes has come to denote the interpretation of non-legal biblical

- 12 Shemuel ha-Nagid, *Mevo ha-Talmud* (Bat-Yam: Sh. Kohen-Duras, 1991), s.v. “Haggadah.” This perspective has been accepted by many moderns; see, e.g., Nachman Krochmal, *Moreh Nevukhe ha-Zeman* (Berlin: L. Lamm, 1923), 238; “Aggadah” in *Talmudic Encyclopedia* (Hebrew); Leopold Zunz, *Ha-Derashot be-Yisra'el ve-Hishtalshelutan ha-Historit* (trans. M. Zak; Jerusalem: Bialik, 1954), 32; J. Goldin, “The Freedom and Restraint of Haggadah,” in G. H. Hartman and S. Budick (eds.), *Midrash and Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 57-76, 58; Heinemann, *Aggadah and Its Development*, 7; Yonah Frenkel, *Midrash and Aggadah* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Ha-Universitah ha-Petuḥah, 1996), 1:20; Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis*, 213 n. 1.
- 13 Heinemann, *Aggadah and Its Development*, 7. See also A. J. Heschel, *Theology of Ancient Judaism* (Hebrew) (New York: Shonitsin, 1962), 1:1.

### Berachyahu Lifshitz

passages. Thus, Bacher implies, the very term aggadah is essentially a reaction to halakhah; rather than being a post-factum method for organizing the sources, the opposition between halakhah and aggadah is an essential one. However, “Bacher himself could not explain why they chose the word ‘aggadah’ to describe that which is not halakhic”;<sup>14</sup> that is, it does not resolve the question of the relationship between the term “aggadah” and its non-halakhic content.

An alternative, robust definition for aggadah must first acknowledge that the actual definition of the term is much narrower than the traditional usage, and that this narrower definition is almost explicit in rabbinic sources. We find in *Sifre Deuteronomy*: “*Doreshe Haggadot* say: ‘If you wish to know Him who spoke, and the world came into being, study haggadah, for thereby you will come to know Him and to cling to His ways.’”<sup>15</sup> In this context, haggadah is defined as the collection of sayings through which one can encounter the Creator and know Him. Thus, R. Yehoshua b. Levi says: “The acts of God – these are the haggadot.”<sup>16</sup> Yet, if the aggadah’s central purpose is to describe God through His actions,<sup>17</sup> then the term excludes all of the stories, fables, aphorisms, and explanations of biblical verses which do not qualify under this definition of aggadah (as opposed to the negative definition, which includes all non-legal material). Some of the non-legal material describes the behavior that should be adopted by men in the world, rather than commenting directly on God’s ways. Even if one argues that

14 H. Albeck, in his notes to Zunz’s *Ha-Derashot*, 250.

15 *Sifre Deuteronomy* # 49. Translation taken from Reuven Hammer, *Sifre: A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 106. Some manuscripts of this passage read *Doreshe Reshumot* in place of *Doreshe (H)aggadot*; on the significance of this variant, see below, p. 17.

16 *Midrash Tehillim* (Buber, ed.; Vilna: Rom, 1891), 28:5, p. 230. Translation taken from William G. Braude, *The Midrash on Psalms* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 378.

17 See Heschel, *Theology of Ancient Judaism*, 1: “Halakhah is the domain of man and action; aggadah is the domain of the hidden and thought.”

## Aggadah Versus Haggadah

these sources define the will of God regarding man's behavior, the material does not directly describe God, as our new definition of aggadah warrants. Other material merely offers an interpretation of a word or a passage, and says nothing about the Creator.

A similar definition of aggadah is found in bBK 60b, which further clarifies that aggadah is related to content explicitly connected to knowledge of God's ways:<sup>18</sup>

When Rav Ammi and Rav Assi were sitting before R. Isaac the Smith, one of them said to him: "Will the Master please tell us some legal points (*shema'tata'*)?" while the other said: "Will the Master please give us some homiletical (*aggadata'*) instruction?" When he commenced a homiletical discourse he was prevented by the one, and when he commenced a legal discourse he was prevented by the other. He therefore said to them: "If so, I will tell you a parable: To what is this like? To a man who has had two wives, one young and one old. The young one used to pluck out his white hair, whereas the old one used to pluck out his black hair. He thus finally remained bald on both sides." He further said to them: "I will accordingly tell you something which will be equally interesting to both of you: *If fire break out and catch in thorns* (Ex 22:5); *break out* implies 'of itself.' *He that kindled the fire shall surely make restitution.* The Holy One, blessed be He, said: 'It is incumbent upon me to make restitution for the fire which I kindled. It was I who kindled a fire in Zion as it says, *And He hath kindled a fire in Zion which hath devoured the foundations thereof* (Lam 4:11), and it is I who will one day build it anew by fire, as it says, *For I, [saith the Lord] will be unto her a wall of fire round about, and I will be the glory in the midst of her* (Zech 2:9).' On the legal side, the verse commences with damage done by chattel, and concludes with damage done by the person, [in order] to show that fire implies also human agency."<sup>19</sup>

18 All translations of the Babylonian Talmud are based on the Soncino edition.

19 See Goldin, "Freedom and Restraint of Haggadah," 69-70.

### Berachyahu Lifshitz

Therefore, aggadah describes the obligations and actions of God in His world, and halakhah describes human obligation in this world, yet both originate from the same passage.<sup>20</sup> The definition of aggadah thus hinges on the content of the material, not its literary form.

Our proposed scope of the term aggadah may provide an insight into its etymology. This point emerges from the above quote from *Sifre Deuteronomy*, which begins “*Doreshe Reshumot* say” in some manuscripts but “*Doreshe Aggadot* say” in other manuscripts.<sup>21</sup> What is the meaning of the term “*Doreshe Reshumot*”? Daniel Boyarin suggests that it refers to expositors of cryptic matters and solvers of riddles.<sup>22</sup> Extending this definition to its textual variant – *Doreshe Aggadot* – we may also define *Doreshe Aggadot* as “interpreters of the hidden and unclear.” The word “aggadah” is thus similar to the word *ʿaguddah*, from the root *ʿa.g.d.*, which refers to a tied knot, and “aggadah” means that which is tied up, or, in other words, hidden and mysterious.<sup>23</sup>

Since aggadah are the words of God’s actions, hidden words, and mysteries, it is ruled that they have to be whispered, thus concealing them from those who are not equipped to untangle these mysteries:<sup>24</sup>

R. Shimon b. Yehotsadak addressed the following query to R. Shemuel b. Nahman: “Seeing that I heard say of you that you are an expert haggadist, tell me: Whence comes light unto the world?” He answered him: “The Holy One, blessed be He, enveloped Himself

20 R. Isaac Aboab, *Menorat ha-Ma’or* (Jerusalem, 2001), 5

21 See *Sifre Deuteronomy* # 115. See also *Midrash ha-Gadol, Genesis* (Margulies, ed.; Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1967), 690, which reads “*Doreshe Aggadot* say...”

22 D. Boyarin, “On the Identification of the *Dorshei Reshumot*: A Lexicographical Study” (Hebrew), *Be’er Sheva* 3 (1988), 23-35, 23.

23 See J. Levy, *Wörterbuch über die Talmudim und Midraschim* (Berlin: B. Harz, 1963), s.v. אנרה, 1:19, who claims that the term “aggadah” is likewise derived from the root *g.d./ʿa.g.d.*

24 *Lev. Rab.* 31:7 (Margulies, ed.), 725. Translation based on Soncino translation (*The Midrash Rabbah* [New York: The Soncino Press, 1977], 402).

## Aggadah Versus Haggadah

therewith as in a garment and the whole world shone with the splendor of His majesty.” R. Shemuel told it him in a whisper, so the other said to him: “There is an explicit verse to prove it, for it says *Who coverest Thyself with light as with a garment, who stretchest out the heavens like a curtain* (Ps 104:2), and yet you tell it me in a whisper?” He replied: “As it was told to me in a whisper, so I tell it you in a whisper.” Said R. Berekhiah: “Had not R. Yitshak expounded this in public it would have been impossible to say it.”

The questions posed here concern “the secrets of creation that should not be discussed publicly.”<sup>25</sup> Similar questions are presented to aggadic masters elsewhere.<sup>26</sup>

As noted, aggadah can teach about the Creator and His acts of creation, and these questions can only be answered in whispers. Other questions, however, regarding God’s actions and His attributes, while also concerned with mysterious subjects, do not seem to fall under the same prohibition of public discourse. It seems that certain matters are

25 Margulies in his notes to *Lev. Rab.*, 125.

26 See, e.g., *Lam. Rab.* 3:44: “Rav Pappa asked R. Shemuel b. Naḥman: ‘Since I have heard you are a master of lore (*ba’al aggadah*), what is the meaning of the verse, *You have wrapped yourself with a cloud so that no prayer can pass through* (Lam 3:44)?’ He said to him... ‘The gates of prayer are sometimes closed and sometimes open’” (Jacob Neusner, *Lamentations Rabbah: An Analytical Translation* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989], 280); *Ibid.*, 1:13: “R. Ammi asked R. Shemuel b. Naḥman: ‘Since I have heard that you are a master of lore (*ba’al aggadah*), what is the meaning of this verse of Scripture, *Your righteousness also, O God, which reaches to the high heaven* (Ps 71:19)?’ He said to him, ‘Just as the beings of the lower world have to treat each other with righteousness, so the creatures of the upper world have to treat each other with righteousness’” (Neusner, *Lamentations Rabbah*, 163); *Gen. Rab.* 12:10 (Theodor-Albeck, eds.), p. 108: “R. Yudan, the patriarch, asked R. Shemuel b. Naḥman: ‘Since I have heard that you are a master of lore (*ba’al aggadah*), let me ask you: What is the meaning of the verse *Extol Him who rides on the skies* (Ps 88:5)?’ He said: ‘There is no place whatsoever in which there is no one designated to rule’” (Jacob Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985], 129-30).

### Berachyahu Lifshitz

more secretive than others, as R. Shelomo b. Aderet (Rashba) says in his commentary to *bBerakhot* 6a:

Some of the (*h*)*aggadot* can be explicated only by masters of secrets (*ba'ale ha-sodot*), since they contain the hints for the wise regarding the structure and foundations. When I reach these, I shall hint that they have great value, but I shall not interpret them, as we do not deal with hidden matters (*nistarot*) here. But in some of them, there is both a hidden dimension (*nistar*) and a revealed dimension (*nigleh*) ... And when I reach these, I shall hint at that which is hidden and explicate that which is revealed, clarify their language and expound on what I believe to be their plain meaning.

The “hints” to which Rashba alludes are likewise considered hidden, but to a lesser extent. While stressing that *aggadah* is not uniformly esoteric, however, Rashba makes clear that *aggadah* is the study of secrets and the hidden acts of God. Similar statements can be found in the talmudic corpus as well.<sup>27</sup>

In fact, the comments of the Geonim cited earlier strengthen the position that *aggadah* is concerned with secrets and the mysterious. In their writings we find several rationales provided to explain the interdiction, attributed to “our rabbis,” against ruling on the basis of *aggadah*:<sup>28</sup>

27 See, e.g., *yShab* 16:1, 15c: “Said R. Joshua b. Levi: ‘As to an *aggadic* passage (*aggadta*), one who writes it down has no share in the world to come; he who preaches it will be burned; and he who hears it will receive no reward.’ Said R. Joshua b. Levi, ‘In my entire life I never looked into a book of *aggadah* ...’ R. Hiyya b. Ba saw a book containing *aggadic* writings. He said, ‘If what is written in that book is correct, let the hand of the one who wrote it be cut off.’” Rather than reflecting a general prohibition against writing orally transmitted material, R. Joshua and R. Hiyya seem to oppose the wide-scale dissemination of *aggadah* because of its content: there is a strong desire to keep confidential the esoteric and secret subjects that comprise *aggadah*.

28 *’Otsar ha-Geonim, Hagigah*, Commentary Section, nos. 68-69, p. 60.

## Aggadah Versus Haggadah

Rav Sherira Gaon wrote in *Megillat Setarim* concerning aggadot: “These words [i.e., the interdiction attributed to ‘our rabbis’] concern teachings which derive from scriptural verses and are called ‘midrash’ and ‘aggadah’ ... We will only accept the correct teachings, those which are supported by reason and Scripture. There is no end to aggadot.” Rav Hai was asked concerning the distinction between aggadot written in the Talmud, regarding which we are charged to remove their corruptions, and other written aggadot outside of the Talmud. He replied: “Everything included in the Talmud is more clear than that which was omitted. Nonetheless, with respect to the aggadot included therein, if it cannot be reconciled or it has been corrupted, one should not rely upon it, for we have a principle that ‘one does not rely upon aggadah.’ Yet, we are charged to correct the distortions in anything included in the Talmud, for if a teaching did not contain a midrash, it would not have been included in the Talmud. But if a text lies so corrupted, beyond anyone’s ability to edit it, then we must treat it as words which are not legally binding. But regarding other aggadot we are not obligated to pay so much attention: if they are true and correct, they should be studied and preached, if not, they should be ignored.”

Both Rav Sherira and Rav Hai seem to equate aggadah with midrash.<sup>29</sup> Yet, it is clear that many aggadot contain no midrash and are not built around scriptural exegesis. Thus a distinction must be drawn between the *content* of an aggadah and the *method* of scriptural derivation. In fact, midrashot are those aggadot which are derived from verses, yet there are other aggadot which have no scriptural basis at all.<sup>30</sup>

29 See also the statement of Rav Hai that “For they are all *midrashot* and aggadot, and we do not question them, as our rabbis taught: ‘We do not question haggadah.’” Harkavy, *Teshuvot ha-Geonim*, # 353, p. 179.

30 See, e.g., bBer 59a. Rav Hai, in his comments thereto (*Otsar ha-Geonim, Berakhot*, Responsa Section, # 357, p. 131) explicitly refers to that passage as aggadah despite the absence of scriptural exegesis.

## Berachyahu Lifshitz

The above-cited statements of the Geonim relate to passages in *bHagigah* which deal with creation, mystical visions of the heavenly chariot (*ma'aseh merkavah*), God's sorrow over the exile of His children, and witchcraft, all of which can be categorized as mysteries about God's activities. As the Geonim call such matters "aggadot," we can conclude that they, too, use the term to describe all things hidden.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, the Geonim view the nature of aggadah as contingent on its content.<sup>32</sup> Hence, we should similarly understand other sources that the Geonim label as "aggadah" which should neither be relied upon nor objected to, even when those sources touch on halakhic matters. Take, for example, the geonic responsum dealing with the conclusions of blessings:<sup>33</sup>

And concerning that which you asked: he who reads the *haftarah* on the Ninth of Av concludes with the same blessings as on any other day – with the blessings of 'builder of Jerusalem' and 'shield of David.' And that which our rabbis said (bPes 117b), "Rabbah b. Shila said: '[The formula] in Prayer is "who causest the horn of salvation to spring forth," while that of the *haftarah* is "the shield of David." And I will make thee a great man, like unto the name of the great ones (2 Sam 7:9). Rav Joseph taught: 'That alludes to the fact that we say "shield of David."'" Yet this is haggadah and should not be relied upon.

- 31 R. Isaac Aboab in the introduction to his *Menorat ha-Ma'or*, 8, writes concerning the position of Rav Sherira: "They said that this [i.e., that aggadah are mere guesses] is true of a minority of *midrashot* ... which are written as mere guesses ... but most are secrets, elevated wisdom, and morals."
- 32 For another geonic statement that defines aggadah using content-based criteria, consider the following: "When this matter is clarified, it will be known that any matter which our rabbis discuss is not to be understood literally, but rather as a parable ... and as spoken in colloquial language. And in this way come words of haggadah." *Teshuvot ha-Ge'onim* (Lik: Hēvrat Mekitse Nirdamim, 1864), # 98. Consistent with our thesis, this anonymous Gaon defines aggadah as comprised of esoteric content.
- 33 Harkavy, *Teshuvot ha-Ge'onim*, # 9, p. 4. See too yBer 4:5, 8c; yRH 4:6, 59c; *Midrash Shemuel* (Buber, ed.) 26:3, p. 126.

## Aggadah Versus Haggadah

Since the subject of the verse discussed in this passage concerns God's promise to make David's name as prominent as those of other great men, basing the blessing of the *haftarah* on this promise is classified as investigating hidden matters.

According to the Geonim, then, we should refrain from dealing with hidden matters because human comprehension is not capable of fully grasping such subjects.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, we may not make definitive statements about aggadot, making it impossible to derive legal conclusions from such material. Since the nature of hidden matters prevents us from saying anything clear or definitive about them, even the *de-rashot* on which they are based cannot clarify matters. Thus, we find the following attributed to Rav Hai Gaon:<sup>35</sup>

Know that aggadah is not rooted in tradition; rather, each person explicates according to his own inclinations [using formulations such as] "for example," "it is possible," and "one might say," and not something definitive. Therefore we cannot rely upon them ... and these *midrashot* are neither matters of tradition nor of halakhah, but rather are recited as mere possibilities.

In other words, aggadah is not part of the Oral Law and is not based on tradition. Nonetheless, it could have been suggested that where aggadic statements are derived from Scripture, they should be considered reliable, but it is precisely this notion that Rav Hai wants to reject.<sup>36</sup>

34 Maimonides appears to have followed the Geonim in this assessment; see *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Kings 12:2, where he writes concerning the messianic era that "nor have the rabbis any tradition with regard to these matters. They are guided solely by what the scriptural texts seem to imply. Hence there is a divergence of opinion on the subject ... No one should ever occupy himself with the haggadot, or spend much time on midrashot bearing on this and like subjects." According to Maimonides, we lack a definitive tradition concerning the messianic period. These matters are thus "haggadot" and contain "midrashot," an almost identical formulation to that found among the Geonim.

35 *Ṿtsar ha-Ge'onim, Ḥagigah*, Commentary Section, # 67, pp. 59-60.

36 Rav Hai (*Ṿtsar ha-Ge'onim, Ḥagigah*, Commentary Section, # 69, p. 60)

## II. Haggadah

As Bacher noted,<sup>37</sup> Levy and Kohut maintain that the words “haggadah” and “aggadah” are derived from different roots. According to Levy, “aggadah” is derived from the root *g.d./ʾa.g.d.*, while “haggadah” is derived from *n.g.d.*<sup>38</sup> Kohut believes that “aggadah” comes from the Aramaic root *ʾa.g.d.* and “haggadah” from *n.g.d.*<sup>39</sup> Bacher himself contends that we simply have a shift in the noun formation of *haphʾalah* to an *ʾaphʾalah*, a typical linguistic shift in Palestinian sources, and this position has been accepted by scholars.<sup>40</sup>

While this kind of linguistic development is possible, and, indeed, is seemingly attested by the frequent textual variants of “aggadah” and “haggadah,” the matter is somewhat more complex. If “aggadah” comes from the root *ʾa.g.d.*, then what is the root of “haggadah”? Haggadah refers not just to a story, but to the disclosure of something not known before. Relying on numerous biblical quotations,<sup>41</sup> *BDB* includes the word under the root *n.g.d.*, meaning to “declare, make

nonetheless insists that “if a teaching did not contain a midrash, it would not have been included in the Talmud”; that is, there are derashot which have substance to them, and therefore should be corrected where possible.

37 Bacher, “Original Meaning of the Word Haggada,” 429.

38 Levy, *Wörterbuch*, s.v. הגדה.

39 Kohut, *Aruch Completum* (Jerusalem: Makor, 1969), 3:178a, s.v. הגדה.

40 Bacher, “Original Meaning of the Word Haggada,” 429.

41 “And He said: ‘Who told [*higgid*] you that you were naked” (Gen 3:11); “Let me now put a riddle unto you; if you can explain it (*hagged taggidu*) to me within the seven days of the feast ... But if you cannot explain [*le-haggid*] it to me ... and they could not explain [*le-haggid*] the riddle” (Judg 14:12-15); “Esther had not revealed [*maggedet*] her kindred” (Esth 2:20). One could likewise adduce similar examples from rabbinic literature, e.g., “Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you [*ve-ʾaggidah*]” (Gen 49:1) – Jacob wished to reveal to his sons the End of Days” (bPes 56a); “Why was she named Esther? Because she concealed the facts about herself, as it is written: Esther did not make known (*maggedet*) her kindred (bMeg 13a); etc.

## Aggadah Versus Haggadah

*known, expound*, esp. of something before not understood, concealed or mysterious.”<sup>42</sup> From this general sense of disclosure was derived the more particular sense of testimony, which discloses the important facts for judicial deliberations.<sup>43</sup> The term “haggadah” is also used to denote a special type of testimony, confession.<sup>44</sup>

It seems, then, that “haggadah” also means commentary, disclosure, and clarification of something that was previously vague and inscrutable. In this sense, “haggadah” is the opposite of “aggadah”: “haggadah” refers to the disclosure and deciphering of the “aggadah,” which is vague and inscrutable. Matters of haggadah, however, are not simply mysteries and hidden things; rather, anything which is ambiguous qualifies as “hidden,” requiring commentary and explication. Haggadah, in this sense of “interpretation,” is apparent from a variety of rabbinic sources. For example, we find in *bHullin* 60b:<sup>45</sup>

It is written, *The five lords of the Philistines: the Gazite and the Ashdodite, the Ashkelonite, the Gittite and the Ekronite; also the Avvim* (Josh

42 *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1979), 616.

43 See, e.g., Lev 5:1 (“And if any one sin, in that he hears the voice of adjuration, he being a witness, whether he has seen or known, if he does not utter it [*yaggid*], then he shall bear his iniquity”). See also 1 Sam 27:11; Jer 20:10. Similarly in rabbinic literature: “After he has once testified, he cannot again testify” [*kevan she-higgid, shuv 'eno hozer u-maggid*] (*bKetub* 18b).

44 See, e.g., “Then Joshua said to Achan: ‘My son, give glory to the Lord God of Israel, and make confession [*hagged na*] to Him” (Josh 7:19). “Then Saul said to Jonathan: ‘Tell me [*haggidah*] what you have done” (1 Sam 14:43); “...they proclaim [*higgidu*] their sin like Sodom, they do not hide it” (Is 3:9); “I confess [*aggid*] my iniquity; I am sorry for my sin” (Ps 38:19). Likewise in rabbinic literature; see, e.g., *bSot* 7b.

45 See also *bNid* 69b-70b, where the Alexandrians ask R. Joshua b. Hananiah three “matters of haggadah,” all of which relate to biblical interpretation; *yYev* 12:6, 13a, where the residents of Simoniah ask R. Levi to interpret Daniel 10:21 and refer to it as a matter of “aggadah” (=“haggadah”); *Gen. Rab.* 94:5 (Theodor-Albeck, eds.), 1174, where R. Joshua b. Levi asked of all the “masters of haggadah” in the south a particular point of biblical interpretation.

### Berachyahu Lifshitz

13:3). The verse says *five* but enumerates six! R. Jonathan said, “Their overlords were five in number.” Rav Hisda said to Rav Taḥlifa b. Abina, “Write down the word for ‘overlord’ in your notebook of interpretations (*aggadtakh*) and explain it so.”

“Haggadah,” then, refers to biblical interpretation. The exoteric character of these traditions is apparent from the following passage:<sup>46</sup>

R. Jeremiah said to R. Zera: “Master, come and teach.” The latter replied: “I do not feel well enough and am not able to do so.” [Then said R. Jeremiah:] “Master, expound something of an aggadic character (*milleta’ de-aggadta*),” and he replied, “Thus said R. Yoḥanan: ‘What is the meaning of the verse, *For is the tree of the field man* (Deut 20:19)? Is then man the tree of the field? [This can only be explained if we connect the verse with the words immediately before it] where it is written, *For you may eat of them, but you shall not cut them down*; but then again it is written, *It you shall destroy and cut down* (Deut 20:20)? How is this to be explained? If the scholar is a worthy person, *you may eat of them*, and do not shun (lit. “cut”) him, but if he is not, *it you shall destroy and cut down*.

This is the sort of haggadah that can even be recited by a weak person. These are not the dangerous teachings that R. Joshua b. Levi cautioned against committing to writing,<sup>47</sup> but rather those “excellent *aggadot* which are to be listened to by all men.”<sup>48</sup> Rather than endangering the one who studies them, they attract the student, even when he is ill. For the same reason, they are even to be taught publicly.<sup>49</sup>

In the Palestinian Talmud, haggadic experts are referred to as “our masters of aggadah,” and various texts report on their scriptural interpretations.<sup>50</sup> Even distinguished halakhic masters were considered

46 bTa’an7a.

47 See yShab 16:1, 15c.

48 *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* (trans. Jacob Z. Lauterbach, 2nd ed.; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), Tractate *Vayassa*, 1:228-29.

49 bBB 145b.

50 yMa’as 1:2, 48d; yYev 4:2, 5c.

## Aggadah Versus Haggadah

masters of haggadah, such as R. Yishmael<sup>51</sup> and R. Eliezer b. R. Yossi ha-Gelili.<sup>52</sup> Yet, not all rabbis respected mastery of haggadah:<sup>53</sup>

R. Zera would taunt those who study aggadah ... R. Ba b. Kahana asked him: "Why do you taunt us? Ask us a question and we will respond!" He said to them: what does it mean: *Surely the wrath of man shall praise Thee; the residue of wrath shalt Thou gird upon Thee*" (Ps 76:11). He said: "*The wrath of man shall praise Thee* in this world; *the residue of wrath shalt Thou gird upon Thee* in the next world. Or we can say: *The wrath of man shall praise Thee* in the next world; *the residue of wrath shalt Thou gird upon Thee* in this world." R. Levi said: "When you rise against the wicked, the righteous will see that and they will glorify your name." R. Zera said: "This interpretation exhibits nothing but confusion; it contributes nothing."

It seems that R. Zera opposed the freedom of interpretation employed by haggadic masters,<sup>54</sup> an attitude that we see reflected elsewhere as well.<sup>55</sup>

There were specific rules of interpretation for haggadah. Rules of this sort were fixed in the so-called "baraita of the thirty-two hermeneutic principles,"<sup>56</sup> and we see these types of rules deployed in various texts.<sup>57</sup> Thus, despite R. Zera's objections above, there seem to have

51 bMK 28b.

52 bHul 89a.

53 yMa'as 3:9, 51a.

54 R. Zera voices similar objections elsewhere; see, e.g., ySan 2:3, 20b.

55 See *Sifre Numbers* # 112; bSan 99b.

56 See H. G. Analau, *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer*, Introduction (New York, 1934). See also Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1950), 68-78; Stephen J. Lieberman, "A Mesopotamian Background for the So-Called *Aggadic* 'Measures' of Biblical Hermeneutics?" *HUCA* 58 (1987), 157-225; David Daube, "Rabbinic Methods of Interpretation and Hellenistic Rhetoric," *HUCA* 22 (1949), 239-64; W. Sibley Towner, "Hermeneutical Systems of Hillel and the Tannaim: A Fresh Look," *HUCA* 53 (1982), 101-35.

57 See, e.g., *Gen. Rab.* 44:2 (Theodor-Albeck, eds.), 2:431.

### Berachyahu Lifshitz

been standards for haggadic interpretation, not all of which are clear to us. We do not know, for instance, why R. Elazar b. Azariah said to R. Akiva, “Akiva, what have you to do with haggadah? Cease your talk, and go to the [laws concerning defilement through] leprosy-signs and tent-covering.”<sup>58</sup> But implicit in R. Elazar b. Azariah’s rebuke is the assumption that there are boundaries to valid haggadic interpretation. We thus find that it was the High Court in Jerusalem that determined the validity of haggadic interpretation,<sup>59</sup> and a sage could even be ruled a “rebellious elder” for issuing a ruling that was contrary to the haggadic interpretation decided upon by the High Court.<sup>60</sup> It is this mode of haggadah that the rabbis deemed to be part of the Sinaitic revelation.<sup>61</sup> The definitive version of the haggadah decided upon by the High Court is thus desirable because it originates in revelation. All of this should be contrasted with the esoteric secrets of aggadah.

Haggadah of scriptural passages was reserved for interpretations that lack halakhic implications. Yet, the distinction between haggadah and halakhah is not in the result but in the interpretive process. That is, in contrast to the position of R. Shemuel ha-Nagid (above), haggadic interpretation can relate to a halakhic topic. That much is clear from the following passage:<sup>62</sup>

Rav asked before R. Hiyya the Elder: “In the view of Rabbi, how on the basis of Scripture do we know that the act of slaughter is to be carried out with an object that is movable?” He said to him: “From the verse at hand: *Then Abraham put forth his hand and took the knife*” (Gen 22:10). He responded: “Did he report this to you as a matter of haggadah, in which case he may change his mind, or was it on the basis of learning, in which case he will not change his mind?”

58 bHag 14a.

59 tSan 7:7.

60 ySan 11:4, 30a.

61 yMeg 4:1, 74d, and parallels.

62 *Gen. Rab.* 56:6 (Theodor-Albeck, eds.), 601.

## Aggadah Versus Haggadah

The distinction between haggadah and “learning” (*ulpan*) is found elsewhere as well.<sup>63</sup> In order to highlight this distinction, it was said of R. Akiva that he “used to derive five matters in the manner of haggadah.”<sup>64</sup>

Numerous sources suggest that the term “haggadah” is also related to the explication of scriptural passages.<sup>65</sup> These interpretations were then collected into books organized by biblical book,<sup>66</sup> and the evidence seems to suggest that these books were in writing.<sup>67</sup> In fact, we find many references to sages studying books of haggadah.<sup>68</sup>

The proposed difference between haggadah and halakhah based on interpretive method suggests a different explanation of R. Zera’s ruling that “one does not make a decision on the basis of ... *haggadot*.”<sup>69</sup> The haggadot utilize methods of interpretation which are inappropriate for halakhah. This is a different understanding from that of the Geonim, whose disdain for aggadah hinges on its content. Nonetheless, we should not obliterate the distinction between haggadah as a method of interpretation and aggadah as a set of hidden mysteries. Indeed, many passages that speak of aggadah lack scriptural prooftexts, though the distinction between the two was effaced somewhat by the tendency to cite Scripture in support of these mysteries.

In light of what we have seen, we may conclude that aggadah deals with mysteries and that haggadah is a form of biblical interpretation. But these two categories are specific, and may not simply be expanded to include all non-legal literature. Thus, aggadah does not encompass all of “ethics, sound advice on etiquette, food, medicine, commerce and the like ... stories of nature, etc.”<sup>70</sup>

63 See, e.g., yYev 12:6, 13a.

64 t’Ed 1:14.

65 See, e.g., bHul 92a; bSan 100a; bHag 3a (compare yHag 1:1, 75d); ySan 2:3, 20b.

66 We thus find a reference to a book of aggadah associated with Psalms; see *Gen. Rab.* 33:3 (307).

67 Ibid.

68 See, e.g., bShab 89a; bSukkah 52a; bGit 60b; bTem 14b; yBer 5:1, 9a.

69 yHag 1:8, 76a; yPe’ah 2:4, 10a.

70 Shlomo Rappaport, *Erekh Millin* (Jerusalem: Makor, 1970), s.v. אגדה, 1:21.