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## INTRODUCTION

In this book I retell stories from the Talmud and midrash that are close to my heart, to introduce them to those who, like me, did not grow up with them. I do not cast these tales in an educational, religious, or academic light but, rather, present them as texts that have the power to move people. That is, I present them as literature.

The Talmud contains hundreds of stories about rabbinic sages and other historical figures who lived during the late Second Temple and rabbinic periods, which spanned the first few centuries of the Common Era. The stories were recorded long after the events they recount, and thus they are literary rather than historical accounts. For generations these stories were neglected by literary audiences and were considered the province of rabbis and academics alone. But this is no longer the case. In the past decades readers of diverse backgrounds have developed an openness and a willingness to engage this literature on their own terms. The question that confronts us today is not whether to study Talmud and midrash but, rather, how to read these texts, what they hold in store for us, and what stands to be gained from the encounter between ancient texts and modern readers. Rabbinic literature includes hundreds of tales. In the chapters that follow I deal primarily with short stories and, among them, miniature vignettes of just a few lines, intricately crafted like poetry.

The orders and tractates into which the Talmud is divided touch upon every aspect of life. A source on marriage, for instance, does not necessarily appear in the tractate that nominally treats that subject because life is a tapestry of interwoven strands, and ideas are not constrained by disciplinary boundaries. A single talmudic page is likely to include well-crafted stories, informal anecdotes, folk sayings, legends, riddles, humor, satire, political critique, reworkings of biblical stories, as well as



particular story is read conventionally, it is understood as describing an incident that accords with the accepted values that ostensibly governed the rabbinic world. When read against the grain, it criticizes those accepted norms and values, such as the institution of marriage, the social hierarchy, or the way in which charity is given. It was important to me to engage in a “barefoot reading” of the stories of the Aggadah, that is, to shed the various layers of understanding that typically guide our steps: traditional exegesis, ideology, prejudices, moral considerations.<sup>3</sup> A barefoot reading allows for unmediated access to the text. It also furnishes us with the sense that we are standing in the presence of something lofty—not just because the Talmud is a holy book but also because it allows us access to a culture with a complex imaginative life.

Aggadic stories are not merely historical depictions, and the tools of conventional historical analysis will not suffice to plumb their literary depths.<sup>4</sup> The lives of the creators of this text—their births, rites of passage, arguments, revelations, heartbreaks, weddings, deaths—are incorporated into the tractates of the Talmud and preserved like fossils within a more theoretical context. As readers of the Talmud, we encounter this very human dimension of the text over the course of our own lives. When we are able to tell a story well, we breathe new life into it.

Over the years the sages, caves, rainmakers, and Roman matrons have made their way into my thinking and into my being. The world of the talmudic Aggadah has become a sort of internal language, and I hope that with time I will have more and more people with whom to converse in it.

When I retell a talmudic story in my own words and comment on it, I am engaging in an act of exegesis. This is a way of assuming ownership of a story I love or coming to terms with a text that unsettles me. In so doing, I may achieve any of several goals, among them acquiring a new heroine for myself, redeeming a literary figure from her tragic fate and creating a better life for her, crafting role models for my own children to replace images of oppression, and coming to terms with the complex cultural legacy that I have no choice but to understand because it is a part of me and I am a part of it. It is a sort of psychological family therapy. Allowing myself the interpretive freedom to tell these stories anew is also a form of *tikkun olam*, that is, of repairing the world.

The aggadic landscape at first seems very different from the world we know. It is wild and topsy-turvy, frightening and funny. It is a world in which the impossible happens: God asks to be blessed by a human being; the head of a talmudic academy marries a woman for one night in a strange city; a mortal steals the knife of the Angel of Death; the wife of a Torah scholar dresses up as the most famous prostitute in Babylonia; and a kindergarten teacher causes rain to fall. These stories are the Arabian Nights of the Jewish people. The reader is drawn from story to story by the promise of pleasure and the lure of longing. From image to image and from vista to vista, the view becomes increasingly familiar. It soon becomes apparent that for many of us this wonderland is in fact the homeland we never knew.

Sometimes I come across talmudic stories that irritate or provoke me. The cultural milieu in which the rabbis lived and wrote relates to women, non-Jews, children, and slaves in a way that I consider immoral. As a modern woman, many of these attitudes are not foreign to me, but when I confront them in learning, as in life, I opt not to stay angry and frustrated. Rather, I try to find evidence of other voices that challenge the mainstream and catch glimpses of rebelliousness and feminine empowerment. Allowing space for these other voices is a more fruitful political act than dismissing the Talmud as sexist.<sup>5</sup>

When I sit riveted to the page of Talmud I am learning or when I find myself thinking about my studies while driving or washing dishes, I am generally not preoccupied with an aspect of Halacha. I am not lost in the laws of testimony, the details of how to bake matzah, or the instructions for delivering a divorce document; I am focused, rather, on the personal experience of the heroes and heroines of the stories: their daily lives, their family structure, the power dynamic in their relationships, the sights they glimpse from the window, their table manners, their style of dress, the structure of their days. How did they spend their time? How did they express emotions, and how did they understand their feelings? Did love, as we understand it today, play an important role in their lives? What were the contours of their religious landscape—how did they understand God, what was the nature of their ritual observance, how did they express spiritual fervor?

Some comments on my methodology. Each of the seventeen stories included in this book is treated in a chapter that is composed of three sections: the talmudic story in translation; a midrash, or creative retelling that springs from my own imagination; and my reflections on the story. I chose which version of each story to include from among the various versions available in manuscript and in print editions of the Talmud (in the citations after each story *B* refers to a tractate in the Babylonian Talmud, and *J* refers to a tractate in the Jerusalem Talmud). This choice was based on literary considerations. My translation is often loose, with the primary goal of conveying the story with the utmost clarity to the contemporary reader.

My readings of these stories developed over the course of years of study from books, teachers, and study partners, to the extent that it would be impossible to retrace exactly where I drew particular images and ideas. I am grateful to all the shapers of this creative process: Yuval Nadav-Chaimovitz, Judge Chaim H. Cohen, Tami Elor, Rivka Finedreich, Professor Moshe Halbertal, Dr. Menachem Hirshman, Assaf Inbari, Ariana Melamed, Rivkaleh Mondalek, Sharon Murro, Professor Shlomo Naeh, Tami Nir, Moshe Paloch, Bina Pe'er, Chaim Pessah, Elchanan Reiner, Professor David Rosental, Tova Sarel, Yossef Schwartz, Avraham Shapira, Shira Shehemi, and Efrat Tannenbaum. Thanks, too, to Iddo Winter for his assistance with the translation. A special warm thank you to the gifted translator Ilana Kurshan, who has been at the same time a study partner and a friend. And above all, my gratitude to my family.

## THE IMAGINATIVE MAP

The stories in this book take place in a variety of settings: the market, the home, the bathhouse, the fishpond, the study house in Tiberias, the courtroom in Mahoza, a southern desert, a cave in the Galilee, the Temple in Jerusalem. Even if my selection of these stories out of the entire corpus of aggadic literature in the Talmud and midrash was a matter of personal choice, the stories nonetheless constitute a complete landscape—an imaginary expanse that can be depicted on a map.

I never saw a map in any of the midrashic collections or talmudic volumes I studied. Yet I contend that in the minds and consciousness of Torah scholars throughout the generations, there existed an imaginary map representing the literary landscape in which the aggadic stories of the rabbis took place. The map is not real, given that its borders defy nearly every accepted principle of modern Western cartography. Furthermore, it has its own rules regarding time and place, fiction and reality. As such, it resembles the maps depicted on the endpapers of popular children’s books such as *The Hobbit* or *Winnie the Pooh*, in which the meaningful landscape is subjective, taking its shape from the events depicted in the story rather than from particular geographic features.

At the center and heart of the imaginary aggadic map lies the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple occupies this central place even during periods in which the “real” Jerusalem was destroyed and all of its inhabitants were exiled. Thus, in the Aggadah, Rabbi Yishmael can enter the Holy of Holies of a Temple that was destroyed before his time.

The talmudic village is also described throughout these stories, albeit indirectly, so that the reader can feel as if he or she is walking through it. There is the home, which consists of the warm stove at its heart, the steps up to the parents’ bedroom, and the roof where fruit is laid out to

dry in the sun. There are the alleys that lead to the market, which is bustling on Mondays and Thursdays, filled with wagons that come from afar. There is the study house, the synagogue, and the courtroom, sometimes all in one building. There is a central public square where the old men and the idle bums while away the morning and where women spin flax and gossip by moonlight. There are the cultivated fields that surround the town, which give forth fruit and grain. And there are the pathways between the fields, which lead to the outskirts of the town with its outhouses and cemeteries.

The heroes of the aggadic stories cross over the boundary between this world and the next one, like Rabbi Yohanan, who enters the cave of Rav Kahana and restores him to life in order to reconcile with him. The heavenly study house, which also has a place within the borders of the imaginary map, looks out over the earthly study house. Sometimes a note falls from the heavens or a still, small voice calls out from above. Those who sit in the study house look and listen. The whole world is interconnected. The academies of Babylon are just a journey's distance from the academies of Israel, even before the Babylonian academies have been founded. The Jordan River flows near Tiberias and resembles the rushing rivers of Babylon. Beyond the sea lies Rome, the great metropolis, the New York City of ancient times. At the gates leading into Rome, among the leprosy-infected beggars, the Messiah leans against the wall, dressed like a beggar and tending to his wounds (B. Sanhedrin 98a).

Beyond the environs of Jerusalem and Babylon, where most of the Talmud's stories take place, the other nations of the world are spread out to form a distant background: Egypt, Arabia, Spain, Persia, Medea, India, Ethiopia. At the edge of the map the River Sambatyon casts out huge fragments of stone that vault like rebounding hail, and still beyond it lie the ten lost tribes. Throughout the aggadic stories that were chosen here, several dramatic events unfold, which cast light on important landmarks on the map. When more stories are told, other landscapes will be illuminated as well.

Modern talmudic scholars were often embarrassed by the unconventional depictions of time, space, and reality in these stories. They sometimes reacted paternalistically, viewing the authors of the Aggadah as

lacking in historical knowledge. They invoked the term *organic thinking* to refer to the style of aggadic literature, describing it as associative and primitive.<sup>1</sup> But it is not necessarily so. Anyone who breaks through the bonds of time must be conscious of its workings. The statement “There is no ‘early’ or ‘late’ in the Torah,” which is interpreted to mean that the Torah is not bound by chronology, reflects a conscious literary decision. The rabbis were not naive. They knew how to distinguish early from late. Perhaps the development of postmodern scholarship will enable contemporary readers to understand the logic of aggadic language as highly sophisticated rather than as primitive.

The imaginative map is characterized by a combination of wide-angle views and close-ups. The wide-angle lens encompasses the creation of the world, the Garden of Eden, the great sea, Babylon, Rome, and Israel. The close-up captures tiny details of daily life, such as a clay lamp in the hands of a bride on her wedding night, a fishpond in the yard of a school-teacher’s home, and a fox that scampers out of the demolished Holy of Holies. Each detail illuminates and animates the larger expanse.

The shift back and forth from the wide-angle view to the close-up is characteristic of the rabbinic aggadic story. A small detail from real life is what lends veracity to the entire story. In this way the storytellers of the Aggadah are similar to the masters of Halacha. The tractates of the Talmud are filled with rich detail. The tractate Pesahim, for instance, deals not just with Passover and freedom and with philosophical musings on the Paschal sacrifice; its pages are scattered with ovens, bowls of dough, baked bread, wafers, matzah, and sweets—to the extent that the student can feel the flour between his or her fingers and breathe in the aroma of baking dough. This style of writing ascribes great significance to mundane everyday details. There are no grand visions or biblical miracles. This is a literature that finds hidden treasures amid ordinary life. Even if the Holy One Blessed Be He occasionally appears, He does so without fanfare.<sup>2</sup>

The aggadic map has a human scale. Distances are measured by the steps taken by a horse or by the journey of a father back to his wife and son or by the distance from a Babylonian academy to one in Israel. This is not a military map like that of the conquering Roman army; that army is depicted through the eyes of children or farmers who meet soldiers

along their way. The masters of the Aggadah are familiar with Rome, the political center of the world in their time, but they choose to turn their gaze from the coliseum to the study house, to that which is local and near.

These stories are woven into a broad and colorful tapestry, a uniquely Jewish work of art. The imaginary map of the aggadic stories depicts the homeland of the homeless. It is the sweet dream of the wandering Jew.

## The Fishpond

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Rav visited a certain town.  
 He decreed a fast, but no rain fell.  
 A member of the congregation also tried to bring rain.  
 He said, “He Who causes the wind to blow”—and the wind blew.  
 He said, “He Who causes the rain to fall”—and the rain fell.  
 Rav said to him: “What do you do?”  
 He said to him, “I teach children.  
 I teach the poor as I teach the rich,  
 And if anyone cannot afford to pay,  
 I teach him free of charge.  
 And for any child who will not learn—  
 I have a pond with fish.<sup>1</sup>  
 I win the student over with a fish:  
 I call to him, and appeal to him, until he learns to read.”

—B. Taanit 24a

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We were twenty-five students sitting before the teacher during that parched summer. He was young, still wet behind the ears, and he taught us by playing melodies. Sometimes he would play a tune slightly differently than we were accustomed to, adding pleasant trills. He was tall and thin as a reed, and his beard had still not filled out. I loved his school room, where we sat in groups of four, crowding around the parchment scroll. The teacher’s house became a home for me.

One after another my friends began reading the letters of the alphabet, and soon some could combine words to form sentences with sense and meaning. I sang the melodies we learned along with everyone else, but the names of the letters eluded me. No matter how hard I tried, I



there in the upside-down double world. The sun cast forth rays of gold and orange and pink that blended in the blue water. I saw a beauty that I had not known before; it was the complete opposite of the awful drought we were experiencing then. From time to time the fish would come up for air. The teacher extended a net that was tied to a long stick, skillfully drew out a fish, and placed it in my hand. “Take it,” he said. The fluttering of the smooth fins between my fingers shook my whole being. A moment later the teacher held out a jar filled with water, and the fish leapt into it. In looking again at the water that was now calm, I saw my own face in its surface, as if I were created anew.

When we returned to the class, the teacher did not say a word. I left the jar in the hallway, took my seat, squeezed my eyes shut for a moment, and opened them again. I read the letters effortlessly.

From that day on I was always at the teacher’s side. I became his shadow. Wherever he went, I went too. I immersed with him in the bathhouse on the eve of Shabbat, and I stood by the windows to eavesdrop on the lessons he taught between the afternoon and evening prayers. I woke up before dawn to honor the schoolroom with my promptness. And he, in turn, was kind to me—he would praise my work and would sometimes grant me the privilege of running an errand for him in the market.

The month of Adar came upon us, and still no rain had fallen. The members of the village lowered their heads as if they had been chastised by God. Business slowed, and people avoided each others’ eyes in the streets. Dust swirled in the alleyways. Passersby hovered close to the walls of the buildings, either seeking shade or hiding from an unknown terror. I woke up thirsty in the morning, and I went to bed thirsty at night.

One morning, when the drought was at its worst, I followed my teacher to the synagogue for the Torah reading, as was my wont. I overheard the older boys whispering that Rav, known as “Abba the tall,” was on his way. Rav’s visit to our small town was regarded as a portent. From house to house the rumor spread that Rav, the head of the great yeshiva and one of the leaders of the generation, would decree a fast and his merit would protect us, Amen.

Exhausted and parched, the community came en masse to the synagogue—women with their dresses hanging loosely over their bones,

men beset by worry, and children hoping for a miracle. Rav, dressed in a splendid cloak, looked down at the local population like a presiding elder. He came from the big city, whose news did not reach our small town. He found our rustic look charming—women in old-fashioned dresses, innocent children with dirty faces. Speaking with a strange accent, Rav decreed a one-day fast, and the entire community answered Amen in feverish devotion. Everyone headed home hungry but high in spirit.

The next day passed like a mini Yom Kippur. Fasting improves the way people feel about themselves, and when the townspeople gathered for the afternoon prayer in the synagogue, they appeared as a chorus of angels and not as ordinary merchants, workers, and idlers. As Rav chastened them, they stood at attention, holding their breaths and focusing their thoughts. Then Rav stopped pleading with the heavens. There was silence. Nothing happened.

Confounded, the people continued praying, hoping for a delayed miracle. The young teacher was asked to lead the congregation in prayer.

I looked at him, and then I closed my eyes with all my might, following with him letter by letter: “He Who causes the wind to blow and the rain to fall.”

The teacher read, “He Who causes the wind to blow,” and from the windows the branches of the trees began to rustle. A wind washed over the open synagogue and fluttered gowns and kerchiefs. He cried, “He Who causes the rain to fall,” and the unmistakable smell of the first rains of the season took hold in the synagogue, a smell so sweet it was almost painful.

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*Reflections on the Story*

What has the power to cause rain to fall? What can bring the abundance of the heavens down to the parched earth? What succeeds in piercing the hardened heart of a God who withholds rain?

In the stories of the talmudic tractate Taanit, which deals with prayers for rain, God is depicted as a punitive father whose face is concealed from his children. When God is distant, He withholds rain, and His thirsty children

must try to penetrate the sealed skies. The sages of the Talmud are on the lookout for a man who will be able to break the vicious cycle of drought and divine withdrawal, to teach the God of dryness to be gentle. They seek a man who can bring down rain by redeeming God. A competition for this role sets in between a simple kindergarten teacher and Rav, an esteemed member of the rabbinic elite.

The local scholars know Rav’s limitations all too well: His name and reputation stand in the way of any possibility for real efficacy. His mind is clouded by a preoccupation with such thoughts as “how do I compare to others” and “who could be greater than I am.” Only failure will release him once and for all from these honor wars. In contrast, the kindergarten teacher is humble and anonymous. The battlefield where he proves his strength is entirely internal. He raises fish in a small pond behind his house even in times of drought, against all odds. He is a hero because he does not dismiss an unruly little boy as a lost cause. Rather, he leads him to water.

This story sets the stage for a tête-à-tête between the elite rabbinic establishment of Babylonia and the modest miracle workers of the land of Israel. In the cycle of stories in the Babylonian tractate Taanit,<sup>2</sup> it is possible to sense a sharp criticism leveled at the great rabbinic authorities of Babylonia, who make grand proclamations about fast days but do not actually succeed in bringing rain. The skies are locked in their faces; their God is dissatisfied with their piety.

In Babylonia, where people made their living on the rivers and an excess of rain carried the risk of fatal flooding,<sup>3</sup> rain underwent a symbolic transformation, shifting from a basic need to a sign of plenitude and divine goodwill. Once again, the sages of Babylonia are depicted in the Talmud as impotent. The rain falls only in their moment of downfall, in their renunciation of honor, and in their despair. In contrast, the storytellers of the land of Israel create a gallery of alternative heroes who succeed in bringing rain: simple anonymous figures ranging from the kindhearted owner of a warehouse to a kindergarten teacher. They operate outside of the study house and outside of the academy, but it is they who merit an answer from heaven.

The tractate Taanit, whose subject is ostensibly rain, deals primarily with discussions of drought. The withholding of rain is seen as punishment. What did we do to deserve the closing of the gates of heaven? Sometimes drought symbolizes the existential state of the religious man whose face, and by extension the face of all Jews, is turned always toward heaven. Maybe a cloud

will come, a sign. Maybe the heavens will open. Rain falls out of love.<sup>4</sup> One who holds back rain is holding back his love out of fear or anger or despair. The story depicts a multiple mirroring effect: a boy with a learning disability and his sensitive teacher; a congregation and its rabbi; Israel and God; a parched land and the heavens above. The whole system is dammed, dried up, obstructed.

A kind hand on a child’s shoulder and the gift of a fish have the power to realign the universe in a sort of “butterfly effect.” A teacher opens his heart to an unruly child in a classroom somewhere, and a community leader assured of his own greatness is gradually disillusioned. The censured leader is brought down, as is the rain. The heavens look at their reflection in the waters of a small fishpond. God sees Himself, lines of justice furrowing His wizened face. He collects Himself, like a man who smiles at his reflection in a mirror. The regular order of the universe is subverted when hand touches fin. Suddenly it happens: Kindness overflows the bounds of justice. The storehouses of the heavens open, and the rain bursts forth. God, perhaps moved to tears, showers the land in plenitude.

The story of the fishpond is also a story about masculinity. A boy struggling with his letters and a parched land teach about the limits of male power. A rabbi who proclaims a fast is up against a God who withholds rain, and the two are locked in a cycle of dryness. In this story the Talmud presents an alternative form of masculinity that also knows how to caress, to cross bounds and go beyond the letter of the law to win over a child with the gift of a fish. The Talmud suggests a model of gentle masculinity that ministers to young children without violence, reacting with a gentle touch to a blow struck in the classroom, offering closeness in place of censure. This is an open form of masculinity, one that unlocks the heavens. This is the kind of man who is able to cause the wind to blow and the rain to fall.

FOR FURTHER READING

- Calderon, “Three Stories about Hasidim.”
- Hirshman, “Shifting Sacred Loci.”
- Levine, “Who Participated in the Fasting Ceremony in the City Road?”
- Tzarfati, “Hasidim, Sages, and the Early Prophets.”
- Urbach, *The Sages*.