



The Ziegler School
of Rabbinic Studies

Walking with History

Edited By
Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson
and Rabbi Patricia Fenton

דרכיה דרכי נעם

In Memory of Harold Held and Louise Held,
of blessed memory

The Held Foundation

Melissa Held Bordy
Joseph and Lacine Held
Robert and Lisa Held



Published in partnership with the
United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism,
the Rabbinical Assembly,
the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs
and the Women's League for Conservative Judaism.



UNIT 8: ZIONISM AND ISRAEL

DR. ADAM RUBIN

HISTORY, MEMORY, AND MIDRASH: BIALIK'S *SEFER HA-AGGADAH*¹

Can the study of Jewish history play a role in our relationship to God and Torah? According to one scholar, modern historical scholarship and collective Jewish memory are diametrically opposed to one other; the latter requires emotional engagement, particularist commitment and mythic coherence, while the former demands critical distance along with devotion to universal notions of reason and truth, and tends to break grand narratives into fragmented, disconnected details.² For example, either one believes in the mythic account of the Exodus from Egypt, or uses the tools of ancient history and archaeology to answer the question “did it really happen”? The first option leads to meditations on the meaning of freedom and the origins of our people, while the second can only lead to tentative, highly speculative “best guesses” about the meaning of a few obscure lines of Egyptian hieroglyphs (the only evidence outside of the Hebrew Bible for ancient Israelite presence in Egypt). The former builds identification with Jews and Judaism while the latter is at best neutral, or may even corrode such identification.

Notwithstanding this dichotomy between critical history and collective memory, in some cases the academic study of the Jewish past may help bolster our relationship to God and Torah by helping us untangle the deeply entwined connection between the sacred and profane, religious and secular, in the Jewish experience of modernity. The Zionist movement was one of the most important components of the modern Jewish experience, and the relationship between Jewish religious tradition and secular Zionism is complex.

One place to turn in search of a clearer understanding of this relationship is to the work of Hayyim Nahman Bialik (1873-1934), one of the greatest Hebrew writers of the modern era, who was recognized during his life as the “National Poet”. Although his reputation was built on his artistry as a poet, he also achieved fame as a cultural activist, essayist, and publisher in the Zionist movement. Bialik was convinced that the primary problem confronting Jews was spiritual - modern trends and ideas had undermined their commitment to and knowledge of their own heritage, a consequence of which was a weakening of their national consciousness.³ He was keenly aware of a decline in Jewish learning. For many Jews, texts had become, in the words of his poem “like a necklace of black pearls whose string has snapped”.⁴ This recognition led Bialik to conclude that the contemporary crisis of Judaism could only be overcome by providing direct, unmediated access to classical Hebrew sources.

Bialik's was a broad, ambitious agenda — to redefine the form and content of Jewish culture in its entirety — and he played a crucial role in the Zionist movement's effort to fashion a critical mass of Jews into a national collectivity. Scattered throughout the world, speaking a variety of languages, comprising an integral part of many different cultures, Jews presented a daunting challenge to nationalists intent on transforming them into a unified nation. One means of achieving this metamorphosis was through the mobilization of the texts and traditions of Judaism, which Gershon Shaked described as “the nationalization of the religious tradition”. Bialik was an outstanding representative of this tendency.⁵ During the first decades of the 20th century, he, along with other Zionist activists and intellectuals, recognized that the nation's “bookcase” of classical Hebrew texts, its Torah, could be mobilized to construct a unified Hebrew nation from diverse Jewish communities dispersed throughout the world. Bialik believed that gathering and organizing the scattered and neglected texts of the

¹ Hayyim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky, editors, *The Book of Legends = Sefer Ha-Aggadah : Legends from the Talmud and Midrash*, translated into English by William G. Braude. New York: Schocken Books, 1992.

² Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005.

³ Adam Rubin, “Jewish Nationalism and the Encyclopaedic Imagination: The Failure (and Success) of Ahad Ha'am's *Otsar Hayahadut*,” in *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 3 (2004): p.254-55.

⁴ “Lifnei Aron Ha-Sefarim” (1910).

⁵ Gershon Shaked, *The Shadows Within: Essays on Modern Jewish Writers*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1987, p.104.



ZIONISM AND ISRAEL

Jewish tradition into an orderly, cohesive literary canon could achieve this goal. His project of cultural ingathering (*kinus*) was, in the words of Hanan Hever, “integral to the establishment of the ideological consensus of modern Jewish nationalism.”⁶ Bialik drew freely upon Jewish symbols in formulating an ambitious agenda for Jewish cultural rescue and renewal. By exploring his efforts to instill a new enthusiasm for classical texts among Jews through publication of a collection of rabbinic stories and legends, I hope to demonstrate that a critical, “detached” approach does not necessarily undermine religious attachment, but can also restore the place of religion and the sacred to our understanding of the Jewish past.

Bialik’s best known project of ingathering was *Sefer Ha-Aggadah, The Book of Legends*, an arrangement of *aggadot*, that is, exegetical legends and imaginative interpretations taken from both midrashic literature and the Talmud. This text was one of the most successful Hebrew books of the first half of the 20th century. Issued in three volumes between 1908 and 1911, it was used as a textbook in the Yishuv (the Jewish population of pre-state Israel) and throughout the Diaspora. Eighteen editions appeared within the first twenty years of its publication, and by the early 1930s, more than 100,000 copies had been sold throughout the world. It is difficult to overstate the impact this anthology had on several generations of Jewish students, cultural activists, and Hebrew writers. According to a review published in 1935, “There is not one Hebrew reader in the entire world who is unfamiliar with *Sefer Ha-Aggadah*...its value is immeasurable. Its historic role regarding *aggadah* may be compared with the impact that Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah* had on Jewish law.”⁷ This was not the only comparison made between Bialik and Ravnitski’s anthology and Maimonides’ great legal code, and for good reason. Rambam was motivated to write the *Mishneh Torah* in part because he was convinced that the Jewish masses, threatened by persecutions from without and increasing fragmentation and dispersion from within, were unable to make their way through the complex world of Jewish law; he sought to remedy this by separating the wheat from the chaff of endless commentaries and precedents in order to provide them with a simple, accessible, all-encompassing code. Similarly, Bialik argued that the precious treasury of *aggadot* had been neglected by modern Jews who lacked the linguistic skills required to negotiate the vast labyrinth of traditional texts.

It was for this reason that *aggadot* had been relegated to scholars who had the skill and patience to find the “pearls” hidden beneath mountains of texts. Bialik sought to revive the status of *aggadah* as popular folk literature, beloved by the masses, by sifting through the tradition and gathering the best material into a coherent, accessible anthology that could impart national consciousness to a people increasingly estranged from the classical sources of its tradition. The book would preoccupy Bialik long after the first volume appeared; he continued to edit and refine *Sefer Ha-Aggadah* for over thirty years, making minor changes almost until the day he died.

How was the anthology intended to construct a new kind of religiosity, endowing the Zionist project with the sanctity of the Jewish religious tradition? Bialik’s well-known transformation of the rabbinic expression “If you wish to know him by whose word the world came into being, study *aggadah*; thus you will know the Holy One, Blessed be He, and cling to his ways” into “Whoever wishes to know the nation of Israel, let him ‘go to the *aggadah*’” appears to be a straightforward substitution of the nation for God; *aggadah* provides a pathway to the national origins and character of its author(s) rather than to the divine.⁸ However, this transfiguration might be understood another way, as an instance of what the great German philosopher Georg Hegel called *aufhebung*, the preservation of tradition at the same time that it is altered through its dialectical interaction

⁶ Hanan Hever, “The Struggle over the Canon of Early-Twentieth-Century Hebrew Literature: The Case of Galicia,” in Steven Kepnes, ed., *Interpreting Judaism in a Postmodern Age*. New York: New York University Press, 1996, p.256.

⁷ “Bibliyografiyah,” in *Haolam* 8 (Feb. 21, 1935): p.127.

⁸ David Stern, “Introduction,” *The Book of Legends*, p.xxi.



ZIONISM AND ISRAEL

with modern secular nationalism. God is not in fact left behind in this formulation, since for Bialik the nation retains a measure of the divine within it. Eliezer Schweid echoes this notion by suggesting that for Bialik, presenting traditional rabbinic texts as secular literature did not imply a simple substitute for religion. Rather, “he was alert to the sacred dimension from the past, and tried to reflect this dimension...even within the realm of the mundane, he did not concede the sacred dimension”.⁹ Although Bialik makes a clear distinction between traditional religious and secular sanctity here, he does not reject the notion of *kedushah*, or holiness, altogether. His liminal notion of the holiness of the mundane was not restricted to the Tanakh, but could be found in rabbinic literature as well. Bialik’s anthology of *aggadot* was not merely an exercise in “repackaging” rabbinic texts in a new, secular form, but a conscious effort to fashion a new type of *kedushah*.

In order to explore how this fashioning occurred, it is instructive to compare the *aggadot* in *Sefer Ha-Aggadah* with the original versions in the Babylonian Talmud. Bialik gathered a good deal of his material from many different midrashic collections, and his severing of *aggadot* from particular biblical verses represented a radical break from traditional midrashic exegesis. Yet many other stories in the anthology were selected from the Babylonian (and to a lesser extent Palestinian) Talmud, and in talmudic discourse, this link to the biblical verse is not as crucial. The text moves from *halakhah*/law to *aggadah* and back again haphazardly; *aggadot* in the Talmud are rarely linked to Scripture. In some cases an *aggadah* begins at random in the middle of a thorny legal discussion; at other times it responds to or expands upon a particular idea, which in turn is developed in a series of *aggadot* that taken together constitute a thematic matrix. Often the context of a particular discussion in which an *aggadah* is located is crucial to understanding its meaning, and conversely, removing *aggadot* from their original contexts in the Talmud can alter their message, in some cases quite dramatically. As we shall see, by detaching legends and stories from the literary-legal matrix in which they were originally situated, Bialik did not drain them of holiness, but rather created a new type of national-secular sanctity that could mediate the relationship between Judaism and nationalism.

We find an example of this in the large section of the anthology devoted to “The Deeds of the Sages”. Several legends focus on the great 2nd century sage, Rabbi Akiva. The following two stories provide apt illustration of the impulse at work in the book:

Resh Lakish said: What is meant by “This is the book of the generations of Adam” (Gen. 5:1)? It intimates that the Holy One showed him each generation and its expounders of Scripture, each generation and its sages. When He reached the generation of R. Akiva, Adam rejoiced in R. Akiva’s Torah but grieved over his death and protested, “How precious to me Thy friends [each sage, each expounder of Scripture], O God” (Ps. 139:17) (BT Sanhedrin 38b, *The Book of Legends*, p.232:139).

We have been taught that, according to R. Judah, such was the practice of R. Akiva: when he prayed with a congregation, he used to make his prayer brief and conclude the service, in order not to inconvenience the congregation; but when he prayed by himself, a man would leave him praying in one corner and find him later [still praying] in another corner, because of his many genuflections and prostrations (BT Brakhot 31a, *The Book of Legends*, p.235:161).

Both stories illustrate Rabbi Akiva’s distinctive qualities: the first emphasizes his outstanding trait as an expounder of Torah and the especially tragic nature of his death (the subtext is his brutal death as a martyr at

⁹ Eliezer Schweid, *Hayahadut veva-tarbut ha-hilonit*. Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz Ha-Me’uhad, 1981, p.59. Stern also hints at this idea in claiming that for cultural Zionists like Bialik, the recovery of the national ethos had become “a kind of religious calling, a sacred vocation”. See David Stern, “Introduction”, *The Book of Legends*, p. xxi.



ZIONISM AND ISRAEL

the hands of the Romans), and the second illustrates his great fervor during prayer, as well as his sensitivity to the needs of others. By compiling these and other legends about the sage into a list of his “deeds,” the anthology provides a heroic depiction of Rabbi Akiva that bears a similarity to the classical literary meaning of the word hero in Greek mythology, that is, a moral exemplar and guardian of sacred values who possesses the will and courage for self-sacrifice in the name of a greater good.¹⁰

However, the original versions of the stories convey distinctly different messages when viewed in their respective literary contexts, embedded in talmudic discourse. The first story comprises one small part of a discussion about the obligation of a witness to a capital crime to provide accurate testimony, given the terrible consequences of taking the life of an innocent person accused of a crime. To reinforce the point, the particular *mishnah* upon which the *gemara* (where our *aggadah* appears) is based emphasizes the singular nature of human beings created in God’s image. This singularity is illustrated through numerous stories about the creation and nature of the first human being, Adam, of which ours is one. Although it clearly presupposes the exalted status of Rabbi Akiva, Akiva-as-hero is clearly not the central concern of the *aggadah*; rather, at the most fundamental level, it addresses the significance of the sages and their project of expounding upon the Torah (“the Holy One showed him each generation and its expounders of Scripture, each generation and its sages”), in the context of a larger discussion on the precious singularity of human beings. Similarly, the second story is only tangentially “about” Rabbi Akiva; its Talmudic context is a broader discussion of the attitude, approach, and intention appropriate to prayer. For Bialik, the meaning that emerges out of the original textual setting is less consequential than that produced by the text’s new location in a long catalog of stories about Rabbi Akiva. The sage appears in both places; in the former he is a means to a larger end — an ethical or religious teaching — while in the latter he is the end itself, a religious sage transformed into a national hero. Put another way, the Rabbi Akiva of *Sefer Ha-Aggadah* is imbued with secular sanctity, *kedushah shel hol*, which emerges simultaneously out of the religious milieu of the Talmud on the one hand and the secularity engendered through excision from that milieu on the other.

Countless other examples could be cited to illustrate the same point, but a few will have to suffice. The anthology contains a section on the Land of Israel, with subheadings such as “Love of the Land,” “Sanctity of the Land,” and “A Land Flowing with Milk and Honey”. According to one *aggadah* in this section, “Synagogues and houses of study outside the Land are destined to be implanted in the Land of Israel” (Babylonian Talmud, Megilah 29a, *Legends* 364:50); another declares that “the Land of Israel is on higher ground than all other lands” (Babylonian Talmud, Zevakhim 54b, *Legends* 364:59); and a third that Moses longed to enter the Land because “many precepts given to Israel could not be fulfilled except in the Land of Israel” (Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 14a, *Legends* 360:16). These three examples, along with many others in the same section, are obviously intended to highlight the special qualities of the Land of Israel and the Jewish people’s inviolable connection to it. Yet an examination of the talmudic matrices in which they appear in their original forms demonstrates that they are only incidentally about the Land of Israel itself. In the first instance, the *sugya* (section of talmudic discourse) in which the story is located emphasizes the special sanctity of synagogues, and focuses on those in Babylonia; in the second, the *aggadah* appears in the context of an extended discussion on the measurements and location of the Temple Altar; and in the third, the context is a series of aggadic meditations on the location of Moses’ burial and its meaning. This is not to deny that the sages of the Talmud believed that the Land of Israel possessed a uniquely sacred status — such a conviction constituted a fundamental precept of rabbinic culture. But again, in the Talmud itself the stories are either asides or means to larger moral, didactic, or

¹⁰ Merriam-Webster’s *Encyclopedia of Literature* (1995). Online search of “hero” through Literature Resource Center > Encyclopedia of Literature. It is worth noting one important difference between the two — the physical skill and strength of heroic figures are emphasized in Greek mythology, while such an emphasis is absent in *Sefer Ha-Aggadah*’s depiction of Rabbi Akiva.



ZIONISM AND ISRAEL

halakhic ends; as presented in *Sefer Ha-Aggadah*, they become ends in themselves, simultaneously detaching the Holy Land (*erets ha-kodesh*) from its traditional religious framework and investing the Zionist project with a new form of national sanctity (*kedushah le'umit*). For Bialik and his audience, the Land of Israel was not secularized but re-sacralized. Put another way, his publishing project illustrates two simultaneous impulses: the secularization of traditional Jewish texts through their transformation into literature, and the sacralization of (ostensibly) secular nationalism through its reappropriation of Jewish tradition.



UNIT 8: ZIONISM AND ISRAEL – TEXT 1

H. N. BIALIK, *LEKINUSO SHEL HA-AGGADAH*/THE GATHERING OF THE AGGADAH¹

In our day not everyone is accustomed to ancient books, nor is everyone willing and able to scratch about among the hills, piled up into mountains over the course of several generations, in order to find pearls underneath them; so much the more so that not everyone is able to stitch together rags and patches into a whole prayer shawl, or produce a building out of scattered pebbles.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Bialik uses a number of metaphors (hills, mountains, pearls, a prayer shawl, a building) to describe *aggadot* and justify the editing together of *Sefer Ha-aggadah*. What is his rationale for the project? Do you find it convincing?
- What was new about Bialik's time ("our day") that hadn't be true before? Does his statement apply to us in *our* day? If so, how?

¹ H. N. Bialik, "Lekinuso shel ha-aggadah," in *Kol Kitvei H.N. Bialik* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1953), p.205.



ZIONISM AND ISRAEL – TEXT 2

H. N. BIALIK, *LIMUD HA-AGGADAH B'VEIT HA-SEFER*/THE STUDY OF AGGADAH IN SCHOOL¹

In my view...even those who are the most secular were not able to rupture the relationship of holiness to the *Tanakh* [Bible], but rather this was a different kind of holiness, a holiness of the mundane (*kedushah shel hol*). There is also secular sanctity, (*kedushah hilonit*), national sanctity (*kedushah le'umit*), the sanctity of magnificent creation...[the sanctity] of numerous generations, a collective anonymous creation which indeed remains holy... even in a time of “desecration of sanctity” (*hilul ha-kodesh*) [secularization], the holiness of the *Tanakh* has not ceased...instead the concept of holiness now has a different coloration; its religious character has declined and has been almost completely negated, and in its place has come a different kind of holiness. We speak now of the creative power, the holy spirit (*ruakh ha-kodesh*) of the *Tanakh*, though the religious meaning of “holy spirit” does not apply to its secular usage. In this sense we still see the *Tanakh* as a sacred book (*sefer kadosh*). But even if we speak today of “*kitvei kodesh*” [sacred writings] it is no longer surrounded by a cloud of religious sanctity, as it once was. We view this as something with influence and value for the world, part of world culture. We now view the *Tanakh* in the same light as all cultural creations.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Bialik makes a clear distinction between the secular and religious sanctity, but what do they share in his view? What binds them together?
- What does he mean by a “holiness of the mundane”? Isn't that an oxymoron?
- Have you ever experienced something that was simultaneously secular and holy? Part of this world but also in some way other-worldly? What was it about that experience that blurred the boundaries between the two realms?

¹ H. N. Bialik, “Limud ha'aggadah b'veit hasefer,” in *Kneset* 10:19 (1946), p.13-14 (Hebrew pagination). In this piece, Bialik laments the fact that rabbinic literature does not attract the same measure of devotion as the *Tanakh*/Bible among secular Jews, and makes the case for such devotion.



ZIONISM AND ISRAEL – TEXT 3

תלמוד בבלי מסכת נדרים דף מ עמוד א
תלמיד אחד מתלמידי ר' עקיבא שחלה, לא נכנסו חכמים לבקרו, ונכנס
ר' עקיבא לבקרו, ובשביל שכיבדו וריבצו לפניו חיה, א"ל: רבי, החייתני! יצא
ר' עקיבא ודרש: כל מי שאין מבקר חולים - כאילו שופך דמים.

THE BOOK OF LEGENDS (*SEFER HA-AGGADAH*), "THE DEEDS OF THE SAGES", p.236:168¹

One of R. Akiva's disciples fell ill, and the sages did not come to visit him. So R. Akiva went to visit the disciple, and because he saw to it that the ground was swept and sprinkled for him, he recovered and said, "My master, you have brought me back to life"! R. Akiva went out and expounded, "He who does not visit the sick is as though he sheds blood".

STUDY QUESTIONS

- This story appears in the 7 page "Rabbi Akiva" section of "The Deeds of the Sages" chapter in *The Book of Legends*, the English-language version of *Sefer Ha-Aggadah*. Why are there so many stories about Rabbi Akiva, and about the sages in general?
- Looking at this story on its own, what would you say is its point? What does it come to teach us? Think about what Dr. Rubin said in his essay about Bialik's goals, and then look at the story again.
- Why do you think Rabbi Akiva compares neglecting the ill to shedding blood?

¹ *The Book of Legends: Sefer Ha-Aggadah*, edited by Hayim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky, translated by William G. Braude. New York: Schocken Books, 1992, p.236.



ZIONISM AND ISRAEL – TEXT 4

H. N. BIALIK, *LIMUD HA-AGGADAH B'VEIT HA-SEFER*/THE STUDY OF AGGADAH IN SCHOOL¹

...[*Aggadah*] still is a bit wretched to us, a bit embarrassing, relegated to a distant corner...It is up to us and our generation to redeem the *aggadah* from the religious atmosphere of the *beit midrash*/study hall...

STUDY QUESTIONS

- What does Bialik mean when he says that the *Aggadah* has to be “redeemed” from the religious surroundings of the house of study? Are these texts religious?
- Why do you think that *aggadot* were a source of embarrassment to Bialik’s readers? Why would they be thought of as “wretched”? Do you find them embarrassing or wretched? Why or why not?
- Bialik urged his generation to rescue aggadic texts. Can you think of a parallel cultural “rescue mission” that one might undertake in our day? Is there something in our religious or even in our secular culture that you see slipping away from public consciousness and that you would like to save for future generations?

¹ H. N. Bialik, “Limud ha’aggadah b’veit hasefer,” in *Kneset* 10:19 (1946), p.19 (Hebrew pagination).



ZIONISM AND ISRAEL – TEXT 5

H. N. BIALIK, QUOTED BY EPHRAIM URBACH IN “BIALIK AND RABBINIC AGGADAH”¹

You have no idea what this work means to me...only this work revives my soul and heals my anguish. I almost know it by heart. All of its sayings are engraven on my heart. Every time I go over them it's as if I see them anew...they are pure marble, upon which all the teaching of the world is engraved.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Shortly before he died in 1934, Bialik expressed these sentiments to the writer Mordekhai ben Yehezkel, who suggested that the former temporarily stop working on revising *Sefer Ha-Aggadah*. Why do you think that the poet was so adamant in continuing his work? What explains his passion for the book?
- Is it really possible for the talmudic and midrashic stories contained in *Sefer Ha-Aggadah* to “revive the soul” and “heal anguish”? Are religious texts really capable of this? Why or why not?
- What do you think Bialik means when he writes that “all the teachings of the world are engraved” in *aggadot*?
- Has a story or poem (secular or religious) ever affected you like this? If so, what is it and why is it so powerful for you?

¹ Ephraim Urbach, “Bialik v’aggadat hazal” in *Molad* 17 (July 1959), p.268.





Published in partnership with the
 United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism,
 the Rabbinical Assembly,
 the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs
 and the Women's League for Conservative Judaism.



ZIEGLER SCHOOL OF
 RABBINIC STUDIES
 AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

15600 MULHOLLAND DRIVE • BEL AIR, CA 90077