

**RABBI SAMSON RAPHAEL HIRSCH:**  
**Trusting the Torah's Sages**

**1**

**The Limitations  
of Agadah**

*In 1876, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch expressed his views, his da'as-Torah, on a number of topics that were then the subjects of serious concern and debate among Torah Jews. The two letters in which he expressed these views were written in Hebrew to Rabbi Pinchos M.E. Wechsler, and were published in 1976 by Mordechai Breuer in the Jerusalem journal Hama'yan. Today these issues are still controversial, so that we are pleased to publish both letters in a slightly-condensed translation by Yehoshua Leiman that first appeared in Light Magazine, Numbers 191-195 (Volume XIV:1-5) in 1978. The first letter is here divided into four chapters.*

**Incalculably Great Wisdom**

Beyond any doubt, the wisdom and the *mussor* that Chazal — our Sages of the Mishnah and the Talmud — presented us in their agadic statements and in their *midroshim* are incalculably great and lofty. They definitely planted in their orchards of wisdom all the understanding and knowledge that their pure spirits derived from the wellsprings of Torah and *mitzvos*. This is why Chazal praised the agadic statements for attracting a person's heart<sup>1</sup> and leading him to love his Father in heaven.<sup>2</sup> If even the ordinary conversation of a Torah scholar needs to

<sup>1</sup> Talmud Bauli, Shabbos 87a; Chagigah 14a.

<sup>2</sup> Compare Sifrey on Eikev §49 (Deuteronomy 11:22).

**A Word About  
Light Magazine**

Light, the magazine in which these two essays and the article about their authors' meeting originally appeared, was published throughout the 1970's till 1982. Relatively few complete sets are still available. Single numbers are more readily available from the publisher, Yehoshua Leiman.

To order a complete set of all 204 numbers, send a check for \$200 to Y. Leiman, care of the Neve Yerushalayim New York office, 25 Broadway, New York, NY 10004. To order individual issues or to order a set at discount for a Jewish school or communal library, call (718) 376-3715.

be studied,<sup>3</sup> how much more so all the statements Chazal made with the intent of teaching and reproving? There are no meaningless statements there, and if there seem to be any — that is our failure, for our intelligence has fallen short of understanding them.

Nevertheless Chazal put up a wall between these statements and halachic ones when they transmitted a major principle to us: One does not derive Halachah from agadic statements,<sup>4</sup> nor does one cite them as refutations, or seek to refute them.

### **Agadah Is Not Rooted in Transmission**

I think this stands to reason, first of all, because all agadic statements are not rooted in the transmission from Sinai that forms the basis of the “*Na’aseh venishma*” covenant; they are rather the personal ideas of the maker of the individual statement. Even though any intelligent person with a mind happy, willing, and able to reason and comprehend will surely yield to the opinion of any sage of Chazal even when the latter is not explaining the Mesorah but is making a statement based on his own perception, because every one of them was greater than all of us put together — who are no more than grasshoppers in our own eyes compared to them — nevertheless this is not part of our obligation as Jews. A person whose reason leads him to differ with the reasoning of one of Chazal on any agadic topic is not considered an apostate or a heretic, especially since their opinions vary on many statements, and since there is no rule, “The Halachah is like So-and-so” in matters of Agadah as there is in Halachah.

Besides, it is absolutely impossible to derive Halachah from agadic statements. The wisest of all men said, “to analyze analogies and parables, the statements of Sages and their riddles.”<sup>5</sup> Accordingly the statements of Chazal are not uniformly

<sup>3</sup> Talmud Bavli, Sukah 21b; Avodah Zorah 19b.

<sup>4</sup> Talmud Yerushalmi, Pei’ah 2:4.

<sup>5</sup> Mishley 1:6.

phrased. Some are phrased as “statements” — declarations that are to be taken literally. This category includes all the halachic and transmitted statements whose intent is to show us the road we must travel and the deeds we must perform. This intent requires that the statements be clarified, so that whoever clarifies more is more praiseworthy, which is why the talmudic Sages explain everything at length.

On the other hand, some were expressed solely in the form of analogies, parables, or riddles. This category includes many agadic statements whose intent is not conveyed by their apparent meaning. They are analogies or parables or riddles phrased in order to make something obscure. In any such statement, whoever takes the speaker literally is misleading himself and others by attributing to the speaker ideas that never occurred to him.

### **No System for Determining Literalness**

So, before anything else, one must have great perception and vast erudition to know which agadic statement was intended to be understood literally and which as an analogy or a riddle. We possess no system for determining this. And, as a result, we cannot derive any halachic matter from the Agadah. It is impossible to cite an agadic statement as incontrovertible evidence, because what one person understands to be the literal meaning his opponent may declare to be an analogy or a parable, and vice versa. Even if both opponents should agree that the statement is definitely a parable or a riddle, who dares declare, “I have gotten to the bottom of the parable or the riddle; I hold the key to the lock; and whoever argues against me is almost, G-d forbid, arguing against the *Shechinah*.” The closest we can come to the meaning of such statements is no more than the possibility that we may be right. This is why we are not to derive from agadic statements anything whose truth is not already established firmly for us by a source outside this agadic statement, or by reason, or by an unimpeachable tradition. How true then the words of Chazal that you do not derive Halachah from Agadah, and that you offer no refutation from it!

## 2

### **The Miracles of Chazal**

#### **Imagination or Wisdom?**

This leads us to understand why, despite all the greatness that Chazal attributed to agadic statements, they frowned upon putting them in writing and sharply censured those who did put them in writing, even though they had — albeit reluctantly — permitted the writing of *halachos*. For the writing of *agados* is a potential hazard to the Jewish people. A person who hears an agadic statement from a sage's mouth can gather from the context of the statement or from the inflection of his voice whether he is making a literal statement or is posing a riddle. The speaker's words when written, however, are exposed to the public without anyone to explain whether the statement is to be taken literally or understood as a parable or a riddle. One person will take it literally while a second will interpret it one way and a third person a different way. People have differing perspectives and every person, according to his perception and analytic ability, comes to the conclusion closest to his way of thinking, maintaining that that is the opinion of a sage of Chazal. It may well be a stupid or harmful opinion, but he claims a major source for it, for he thinks it is the wisdom of our Chazal, whereas it is merely the product of his imagination.

Now the Agadah has been put in writing — against the wishes of Chazal — and its statements are accessible to every fool and ignoramus. It may even be that it was written down at last with the approval of Chazal in order that no statement of our genuine sages be forgotten, after they determined that the benefit would be greater than the inevitable risk entailed, relying on the teachers of G-d's people to minimize the danger as much as possible through their wisdom.

### **Confirm Agadah with Reason**

Consequently, it seems to me that we need not be wiser or more pious than the greatest of our early scholars. Let us follow in their footsteps, for whoever forgoes their words forgoes life. I refer to the G'onim Rav Sherira, Rav Hai, and Rabeinu Nissim. Following in their footsteps is Rabeinu Chananel, and, after them, Ritvo. Their statements are cited a number of times throughout *Ein Ya'akov* by the *Koseiv*<sup>6</sup>. All of them teach Jewry the principle that agadic statements are only opinions or estimations and we are to derive from them only whatever is confirmed by reason. Rabbi Shemuel HaNagid, in the *Introduction to the Talmud* printed in the first volume of every set of the Talmud, formulated this principle, "Agadah is every commentary on any topic in the Talmud which is not a mitzvah. This is Agadah. And you are to learn from it only things that make sense."

All the above [statements] protect G-d's community from the danger of errors by preventing every individual's interpreting of Chazal's *agados* according to his own imagination, and then regarding his own interpretations as if they had been given at Sinai and bore the signature of Chazal — whereas they are as far from Chazal's intent as east is from west. [This is so serious a threat] that Rabeinu Chananel<sup>7</sup> cites the bold opinion about the miracles that took place in the house of study regarding the oven of *achna'i* — that one of the Sages of the Midrash fell asleep and dreamed that the Sages were arguing with Rabbi Eliezer and the rest of the sequence as told in the Talmud. Ritvo writes that the incidents reported by Raba bar Bar-Chona<sup>8</sup> were not visual observations but visions he had while dreaming. Who do we have greater in wisdom and fear of G-d than Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi, author of *HaKuzori*? Yet he, writing about the wisdom of Chazal and having expressed himself raptur-

<sup>6</sup> *Talmud Bavli, Berochos 59; Bava Basra 73, 74.*

<sup>7</sup> *Shitah Mekubetzess to Bava Metzi'a 59b.*

<sup>8</sup> *Talmud Bavli, Bava Basra 73.*

ously about the great praiseworthiness of the Agadah, declares that they nevertheless contain statements that he cannot explain rationally. He says that they may have been inserted among the statements of Chazal by disciples acting without their masters' knowledge and against their will.<sup>9</sup> See also what Rabbi Yesha'ya the Latter wrote about *agados* and *midroshim*; he is quoted in *Shiltey HaGiborim* to the first chapter of *Avoda Zorah* 20a.<sup>10</sup>

### **Tell Pupils These Facts**

Since this is so, I think these facts should not be withheld from pupils. On the contrary, it is our mitzvah-duty to tell them all this so that they should not think it is a major principle of our faith to believe every exaggeration in the Agadah literally and consequently maintain that whoever thinks otherwise is to be considered a heretic, G-d forbid.

Let me give an example. I tend to think it not at all farfetched that even in talmudic times, the Holy One performed miracles — in special circumstances — for the greatest and most pious of Chazal; that Eliyohu HaNovi revealed himself to them frequently; and similar matters. Consequently I understand the miracles in the house of study about the oven of *achna'i* to have taken place literally. But if one of our contemporary rabbinical scholars should say to me,

Brother, I believe as you do wholeheartedly that the Holy One has the power and the ability to change nature at His will. He indeed performed miracles and wonders for our forefathers when they left Egypt as He told us in His Torah. Later he performed them through His prophets, the emissaries of His word, as related in *Nevi'im* and *Kesuvim* —

<sup>9</sup> Part Three, §73.

<sup>10</sup> 6a in *Alfasi* (Re: 20a of the Talmud). Cf. *Ma'amar al Hahagodos* by Rav Moshe Chayim Luzzato (English translation by M.B. Yanowitz in *Light Magazine*, Numbers 15-16 (Volume II:2,3)).

after having told us in His Torah that he would perform miracles through the prophets He would set up among us. Whoever does not believe in the miracles related in Tanach is a denier (*kofeir*) and so separates himself from G-d's community. But my feeling is that the Holy One changes nature only for some great need or to publicize some lofty matter, for the order of nature is His will, which was ordained and is maintained by Him. So if I know for sure that Chazal intended the miracle stories related in their *agados* to be taken literally, G-d forbid that I should doubt their veracity, and I would believe as you do that these incidents really took place. But I wonder: Are we to understand these stories as having really taken place or are they analogies or parables? I personally tend to accept the opinion of those who say that agadic miracle stories are not to be taken literally.

— may I push this man away? May I grow angry at him? May I consider myself a greater believer than he? Both of us are equally firmly rooted in the principles of Jewish faith. Am I better than our great sages Rabeinu Chananel, Ritvo, and others whose support he has?

### 3

## On Magic and Astrology

### Choose Either Opinion

A related topic is the question of what is meant by magic, astrology, demons (*sheidim*), and related matters. Who dares to choose between Rambam<sup>11</sup> and Ramban,<sup>12</sup> following whom the entire Jewish camp is split in two on these matters? Study Rambam's words at the end of *Hilchos Avodah Zorah*:<sup>13</sup>

All these matters are lies and falsehood. They were the means used by the original idol worshipers to mislead the nations of the world... It is not fitting for the Jews who are the wisest of the wise to be attracted by these stupidities, nor to consider that there is any benefit in them, for it is said, "There is no magic in Ya'akov nor sorcery in Yisroel,"<sup>14</sup> and it is said, "For these nations whom you are inheriting heed wizards and sorcerers whereas you — that is not what HaShem, your G-d, provided you."<sup>15</sup> Whoever believes in these and similar matters and thinks them genuine and part of wisdom, except that the Torah forbade them, can only be a fool.... The masters of wisdom and the wholly intelligent can demonstrate that all these matters that the Torah forbade

<sup>11</sup> Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, Maimonides; born 1138, died 1205.

<sup>12</sup> Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, Nachmanides; born 1195, died 1270. See his commentary to *Vayikra* 18:25, for example.

<sup>13</sup> Section 11, paragraph 16.

<sup>14</sup> *Bemidbar* 23:23.

<sup>15</sup> *Devorim* 18:14.

are not considered wisdom but waste and nonsense to which the unintelligent were attracted and for which they deserted all the ways of truth.

How can you maintain that he wrote this only for people with limited comprehension of the teachings of Chazal, but that he really agrees with Ramban? Even you must admit that that is impossible, for he explicitly considers it folly and extremely de-meaning for anyone to think that magic, etc. is anything other than waste and nonsense. Even if he is exaggerating, it is clear beyond any doubt that this is his true opinion of these matters. Consequently every intelligent person may choose either opinion in these matters without being considered wrong. Alternatively — and in my opinion this is the truer way — he can admit that he has no clarity in these matters.

### Impossible to Know Them

I admit unashamedly that I never made an effort to get to the roots of these matters just as I never found myself curious to inquire about the nature of *olom ha-bo*, the world after the resurrection of the dead, and related matters. For the reality of these matters as of those is hidden from human vision and it is impossible to know them with absolute clarity. Whatever is said about them is no more than a guess — however close — at what may be the truth; and there is no obligation upon Jews to know these and related matters. Thank G-d they are totally unnecessary. There is nothing to be gained by knowing them in terms of fulfilling one's purpose on earth through observing Torah and *mitzvos* and performing them, just as one lacks nothing if he does not know these guesses and does not occupy himself with investigating them.

What difference does it make if on the topic of magical and related acts the truth is as Rambam says or as Ramban says? In either case — whether they are nonsense or real — we must stay away from these matters, for in either case G-d made them repugnant to us; he who guards his soul will keep his distance from them so as not to defile himself with what G-d considers repugnant.

Though we find in the statements of Chazal instances that appear to be examples of wizardry, sorcery, astrology, and magic, it is they with their breadth of understanding who knew how to make razor-sharp distinctions between the permitted and the forbidden which seem so similar. But we — blind as bats in sunlight and likely to err in matters as clear as day — for us it is far better to stay completely away from these murky matters, just as we are obligated regarding all other prohibitions to keep away from what is repugnant and from anything akin to it.

**“For me with my limited intelligence”**

About little people like ourselves it was said,<sup>16</sup> “He who walks in innocence walks securely,” and<sup>17</sup> “HaShem guards dullards.” Chazal declared about some of these matters,<sup>18</sup> “Whoever takes them seriously is treated as if they were serious.” Consequently it is better for us not to take them as real and to draw support from the verse,<sup>19</sup> “Be perfectly dependent on HaShem, your G-d,” and from<sup>20</sup> “There is no power other than Him.”

Similarly, regarding such lofty matters as *olom ha-bo*, the world after the resurrection of the dead, and similar topics, it is enough that we believe wholeheartedly in the words of Scripture,<sup>21</sup> “You will not leave my soul in purgatory” and<sup>22</sup> “Even my flesh will repose securely” without inquiring into the nature of matters hidden from us that no eye has seen. For me with my limited intelligence all these things are included by the principle,<sup>23</sup> “Do not inquire about what is beyond you; study what

<sup>16</sup> Mishley 10:9.

<sup>17</sup> Tehilim 116:6.

<sup>18</sup> Talmud Bauli, Pesochim 110a.

<sup>19</sup> Devorim 18:13.

<sup>20</sup> Devorim 4:35.

<sup>21</sup> Tehilim 16:10.

<sup>22</sup> Tehilim 16:9.

<sup>23</sup> Talmud Bauli, Chagigah 13a.

you are permitted to.” The Holy One did not make His covenant about hidden matters, but about what He revealed to us to heed and to perform. He assured us that fulfilling His Torah does not require knowledge of things in the heavens and in the seas that are beyond us, but solely that which is within the power of our minds and mouths.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Devorim 30:12-14.

## 4

### **What Chazal Knew and What We Know**

#### **Teach Contemporary Science**

What do we tell our pupils when they discover in the words of Chazal statements that do not agree with contemporary secular knowledge, particularly with the natural sciences which have made tremendous forward strides since ancient times?

Before us lies a paved road that protects our pupils from stumbling-blocks, and I think it is the true road.

First of all, we are not to keep the pupils from studying these subjects. On the contrary, we are to teach them the methodology of these subjects in a satisfactory and enlightening manner. For only the masses who neither know nor understand the methodology of these disciplines believe all the boasts of our contemporaries that this generation is the wisest of all and that all of nature — in the heavens and on earth — has been revealed to the contemporary sages who from the peaks of their wisdom look down upon all preceding generations.

But one who knows and understands how these disciplines function, knows and understands that while it is true that contemporary scholars deserve honor and glory in many matters that they have demonstrated — measured, weighed, or counted — that were unknown in earlier generations; nevertheless the theories built upon these observations are for the most part no more than very shaky guesses. New hypotheses are proposed daily. What is praised today as unalterable truth, is questioned tomorrow and then ignored. Each is different from the others, but they all have no solid foundation.

Similarly, there are statements in the works of the ancient nations that only 50 to 100 years ago were laughed at or denounced as lies by the wise men of the generation, whereas today's scholars recognize that there is some truth in them.

There are matters of wisdom that were known to the ancients which have been lost and are unknown to the contemporaries. Consequently if we find statements in the works of the ancients that contradict the estimates of our contemporaries, we cannot decide instantly that the former are lies and that the latter are definitely right.

#### **Sages of Torah, not Masters of Science**

In my opinion, the first principle that every student of Chazal's statements must keep before his eyes is the following: Chazal were the sages of G-d's law — the receivers, transmitters, and teachers of His *toros*, His *mitzvos*, and His interpersonal laws. They did not especially master the natural sciences, geometry, astronomy, or medicine — except insofar as they needed them for knowing, observing, and fulfilling the Torah. We do not find that this knowledge was transmitted to them from Sinai.

Nowadays too it is enough for the non-specialist to know about any of these areas of knowledge whatever contemporary experts teach that is generally accepted as true. This applies to the lawyer *vis-à-vis* all other areas, to the mathematician and the astronomer regarding the natural sciences, and to the expert on flora regarding all other areas. We expect none of them to seek out the truth and satisfy his inclinations in any field other than his own specialty.

Moreover, even in the area where one is an expert, it is neither possible for him nor expected of him to know everything through personal investigation and experience. Most of his knowledge rests upon the investigations of others. If they have erred it is not his fault. It is sufficient and praiseworthy if his knowledge encompasses all that is accepted as true at his time and place and generation. The greatness of his wisdom is in no way belittled if in a later generation it is discovered that some of the things he maintained or accepted on the authority of others are unreliable. The same is true for Chazal in these areas. The greatest of them knew all the wisdom and science of all the great non-Jewish scholars whose wisdom and teachings became famous in their generations.

### **They Were Up-to-date**

Imagine if a scholar such as Humboldt<sup>25</sup> had lived in their times and had traveled to the ends of the world for his biological investigations. If upon his return he would report that in some distant land there is a humanoid creature growing from the ground<sup>26</sup> or that he found mice that had been generated from the soil and had in fact seen a mouse that was half earth and half flesh,<sup>27</sup> and his report had been accepted by the world as true, wouldn't we expect Chazal to discuss the Torah aspects that apply to these instances? What laws of defilement and decontamination apply to these creatures? Or would we expect them to go on long journeys to find out whether what the world has accepted is really true? And if, as we see things today, these instances are considered fiction, can Chazal be blamed for ideas that were accepted by the naturalists of their times? And this is what really happened. These statements are to be found in the works of Pliny, who lived in Rome at the time the Second Temple was destroyed, and who collected in his books on nature all that was well-known and accepted in his day.

The Talmud in *Bova Kama* declares,<sup>28</sup> "A human spine, after seven years, turns into a snake; this applies only if he did not kneel at *Modim*." Anyone who reads this finds it laughable, but Pliny says the same statement almost word for word,<sup>29</sup> "After a number of years the human spine turns into a snake." Chazal, however, used this to teach a *mussor* lesson. To any mind it is clear that every similarly surprising statement of Chazal, if we look into it, was accepted as true by the scholars of the time.

We find that Chazal themselves considered the wisdom of the gentile scholars equal to their own in the natural sciences.

<sup>25</sup> Alexander von Humboldt, German naturalist (1769-1859).

<sup>26</sup> *Talmud Yerushalmi, Kil'ayim* 8:4; see Rashi to *Mishnah, Kil'ayim* 8:5.

<sup>27</sup> *Talmud Bauli, Sanhedrin* 91a.

<sup>28</sup> *Talmud Bauli, Bova Kama* 16a.

<sup>29</sup> *Natural History* X, 188.

To determine who was right in areas where the gentile sages disagreed with their own knowledge, they did not rely on their tradition but on reason. Moreover they even respected the opinion of the gentile scholars, admitting when the opinion of the latter seemed more correct than their own. In the Talmud we learn:<sup>30</sup>

The Jewish sages said, "By day the sun passes beneath the firmament and at night above it." The sages of the nations maintained, "By day beneath the firmament and at night beneath the ground." And Rabi said, "Their opinion seems more correct than ours."

To my thinking, this clearly proves what I have been saying.

This is my approach to the study of these areas with my limited faculties. If I have erred, may HaShem forgive my errors.

### **Learn to Say, "I do not know"**

I wish to add one more point — in my opinion an essential rule for every person who teaches our holy Torah, whether Tanach or Halachah or Agadah. That is: Get into the habit of saying, "I don't know."<sup>31</sup> It is not within a teacher's power — nor is it his obligation — to know everything and to resolve every difficulty. Even Chazal left a number of matters unresolved, all the more so lesser people like ourselves. Let us admit unashamedly before our pupils, "This is something we do not know."

We must be extremely cautious not to create a forced explanation for a verse or a statement in Agadah or a statement in the Talmud simply in order to cover our ignorance. When we admit that we do not know, our pupils learn to humble themselves before the wisdom of Chazal and all the more so before the statements of G-d and the expressions of His holy spirit.

<sup>30</sup> *Talmud Bauli, Pesochim* 94b.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. *Talmud Bauli, Berochos* 4a.



They will learn from us to regard Chazal upon a lofty pedestal and to sit in the dust at their feet.

Let them learn from us that there is nothing wrong with our faith if we fail to understand everything Chazal said. Let them learn from us to take great laborious pains to penetrate to the depths of their words and to draw wisdom and understanding, knowledge and *mussor* from their wellsprings using straight reasoning which may hopefully be true or at least close to their intent. That, however, which our intelligence can only understand by employing distortions — let us leave that for minds greater than ours and not lay nonsense on Chazal's doorstep. Every distorted explanation, which we instinctively recognize as impossible to be true, perverts the pupils' thinking and denigrates the glory of Chazal. It makes them arrogantly certain that there is nothing they are incapable of understanding, leads them away from the straightforward way of study, and teaches them our foolish opinions instead of the wisdom of Chazal.

## 5

### ***Is Agadah from Sinai?***

*In this second letter to his correspondent, Rabbi Hirsch examines Rabbi Wechsler's specific proofs from different statements by Chazal, and expresses his own lucid and illuminating understanding.*

#### ***A Dangerous Approach***

You are of the opinion that the *agados* were received [by Moshe from G-d] at Sinai, and that there is no distinction in this respect between them and the halachic statements that were transmitted. As far as my limited mind can grasp, this is a dangerous approach that poses a grave danger for the pupils who grow up believing this concept. For it very nearly opens the gates of heresy before them.

What should these wretches do if they hear from their teachers today, "Agadic statements were transmitted at Sinai just like the main body of Torah," and then they discover the declarations of the greatest of our early talmudic commentators (*rishonim*) upon whom all of Jewry relies — in which one of them says,<sup>32</sup> "Agadic statements are not articles of faith but reasonable assumptions," and another says, "They were stated as exaggerations," or "as one man speaks to another, making statements that are not intended to be true but to entertain their listener for a while," or "They narrated what they had dreamed," or<sup>33</sup> "Learn from [Agadah] only things that make sense," and so on? What are these wretches to do when they read these and similar declarations about statements they were taught by their teachers to believe came from Sinai with no difference between them and the main body of Torah?

<sup>32</sup> See footnote 6.

<sup>33</sup> Rabbi Shemuel HaNagid, *Introduction to the Talmud*.

## The Road to Life

They will find themselves in great spiritual danger, ready to reject both equally and to accept only what their little brains comprehend. It would be better for them not to study Torah and *mitzvos* in depth and simply to keep *mitzvos* by rote rather than tread this dangerous path! Which is why it is my humble opinion that we are not to budge from the road to life shown us by our *rishonim* when they made a major and intrinsic distinction between statements made as transmissions from G-d to Moshe and statements made as Agadah. Their very names speak for themselves. The former were transmitted from master to disciple, and their original source is a human ear hearing from the mouth of Moshe who heard at Sinai. The latter, though transmitted from master to disciple (for many agadic statements are introduced by a disciple in the name of his master and sometimes even in the name of the master's master), have their origin in what the originating scholar stated as his own opinion in accord with his broad understanding of Tanach and the ways of the world, or as statements of *mussor* and fear of G-d to attract his audience to Torah and *mitzvos*.

You cite statements in *Yalkut Shim'oni*,<sup>34</sup> *Talmud Yerushalmi*,<sup>35</sup> and *Maseches Soferim*,<sup>36</sup> all of which imply that agadic statements were told to Moshe at Sinai. You also point out that the Talmud<sup>37</sup> forbids men in a certain state of defilement to study Agadah as well as Halachah.

## What Is Agadah?

Allow me to posit a general principle: agadic statements are surely not ordinary or irrelevant statements. They are extremely precious statements which are surely pertinent to the

<sup>34</sup> *Devorim* §830.

<sup>35</sup> *Megilah* 4:1.

<sup>36</sup> 16:2.

<sup>37</sup> *Talmud Bavli, Berochos* 22a.

intention of the Torah's Giver, blessed is He. For, beyond the study and transmission of the details of Jewish practice so that Jewry should know how to act, every scholar to whom G-d grants the ability to do so, draws wisdom and *mussor* from the well of Torah and *mitzvos* according to his time and place, and according to his understanding and talents, in order to draw Jewish hearts to love of G-d and of His Torah. These are the *darshonim* of every generation.<sup>38</sup> In his lectures, each of them develops his unique style in accord with his nature and spirit. There is no doubt that this form of expression is acceptable to G-d so long as it does not stray from the way of truth and uprightness. It is acceptable and part of His intention from the very giving of His Torah, when He informed Moshe of these aspects of Torah, too — but in a general way, without going into all the details that some scholar might at some time express publicly in a lecture. He transmitted it generally so that each scholar could develop his own ideas and produce fresh flowers in the garden of Torah and *mitzvos* to please G-d and man. It is no wonder that defiled men may not learn Agadah any more than Halachah, for agadic statements are as a whole considered part of Torah and most of them are based on verses in Tanach.

You cite from the Talmud<sup>39</sup> that agadic works are categorized as Oral Torah which it was forbidden to put in writing. But this does not mean that they originated at Sinai. Many statements were not made at Sinai, yet were forbidden to be put into writing. These include every new insight (*chidush*) the Sages discovered based on their own reasoning; laws they established for situations that arose in their times; commentaries, distinctions, and derivations that they arrived at in order to clarify *halachos*; as well as all their amendments and decrees. It is clear that the lesson of<sup>40</sup> “*kesov lecho ess hadevorim hoeileh* —

<sup>38</sup> Cf. *Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin* 38b.

<sup>39</sup> *Talmud Bavli, Gittin* 60a.

<sup>40</sup> *Shemos* 34:27

write these things for yourself," means that "these" you put in writing but you do not put into writing anything else related to Torah, including *agados*.

### **Traditions That Are Not from Sinai**

You write that there are [agadic] statements about which it is impossible to say that Chazal invented them, such as the statement by Rabbi Yochanon bar Chanina<sup>41</sup> that the earth for Adam HoRishon was piled up during the first hour of the morning, etc., particularly since [you say,] a major area of Halachah is based on this statement: the computation of the new moons. Similarly, many other *midroshim* have no basis or root in Tanach, nor are they logically inferable; they must surely be traditions transmitted from master to disciple.

You are surely right in saying that there are many statements which those who related them did not arrive at by their own reasoning, but had received from their masters. This is particularly true for historical incidents such as the stories of Avrohom in Ur Kasdim or the life of Moshe before he was chosen to be G-d's emissary, and similar stories. A clear proof of this is that we find agadic stories recounted by later talmudic sages (*amoro'im*) which are found almost word for word in the writings of Philo of Alexandria who lived several hundred years before them at the time of the Second Temple. Yet even these stories need not have been transmitted from Sinai, but could have been part of the national heritage from earlier generations. It seems reasonable to assume that historical details were transmitted from the earliest generations — those of Adam, Enosh, Noach, and Eiver to Avrohom and from him to his descendants.

Nevertheless, to my limited intelligence, it seems impossible to swear that all those stories are true and to compare them to those told by Moshe and the other prophets. Some of them

<sup>41</sup> Talmud Bauli, Sanhedrin 38b.

may have been stated as parables for some *mussor* or intellectual purpose. And even if someone were to say that the tales of Avrohom's early life with Terach and Nimrod in Ur Kasdim were parables inferred from Avrohom's having recognized his Creator at the age of three<sup>42</sup> and from HaShem's statement<sup>43</sup> "I am HaShem who took you out of Ur Kasdim," one could not invalidate his position. I can demonstrate that. According to the opinion in Chazal that Avrohom did not convert until he was 48<sup>44</sup> or older<sup>45</sup> there is no room for any of these stories; if they had been accepted by Jewry as Torah truth, there would be no way to set his conversion at so late a date.<sup>46</sup> Do not be surprised at this [contradiction], for even about the story of Iyov some of Chazal maintain<sup>47</sup> that it was only a parable to teach wisdom, *mussor*, and fear of G-d in the form of a lofty story that tugs at people's hearts.

### **Impossible?**

It seems to me that this applies as well to the statement you cited about the day of Adam's creation. You write that it is impossible for Chazal to have made this statement without a genuine tradition, particularly since a major area of Halachah — calculating lunar and solar cycles — is based on this statement.

It seems possible that this statement was made, not as the report of an incident that really took place, but was derived agadically from the verse,<sup>48</sup> "*V'odom biykor bal yolin.*" I can demonstrate that this is reasonable. The preceding statement of Rav Osha'ya quoting Rav<sup>49</sup> is no more than a reasonable

<sup>42</sup> Talmud Bauli, Nedorim 32a.

<sup>43</sup> Bereishis 15:7; Midrash Bereishis Rabbah, 44:16.

<sup>44</sup> Midrash Bereishis Rabbah 64:4.

<sup>45</sup> Talmud Bauli, Avodah Zorah 9a.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Hagohos Maimoniyos to Yad HaChazokah, Hilchos Avodah Zorah, Chapter 1.

<sup>47</sup> Talmud Bauli, Bava Basra 15a.

<sup>48</sup> Tehilim 49:13.

guess; see Rashi there. I recall having seen some sage wonder about Rabbi Yochanon ben Chanina's statement: "How can you say that the creation of Adam was begun immediately at the beginning of the sixth day? Didn't the creation of animals, beasts, and crawling creatures precede Adam on that very day?" He thus demonstrates that Rabbi Yochanon bar Chanina's statement was not made to teach history but is an Agadah that teaches a moral or intellectual lesson.

According to Rabbi Shelomo Ibn Aderes in his commentary to the Agados,<sup>50</sup> the *agadah* of the moon's protesting and being punished is only a parable to teach us wisdom and *mussor*.

Is this reason to, G-d forbid, undermine the basis for determining our months and our *yomim tovim*? This seems to be conclusive evidence of the truth of my position.

### **Further Proofs Are Not Convincing**

You point to the 32 principles by which Agadah is derived,<sup>51</sup> one of which is "parallel texts" (*gezeirah shovah*) which no person may originate, but for which he must have a transmitted tradition. You wish to demonstrate from this that agadic statements were transmitted from Sinai. Forgive me, but we have no evidence that the principle that no one may originate his own *gezeirah shovah* applies to agadic statements. If you will take the trouble to study the *borysa*-text listing the 32 principles, you will find that most of its statements speak of *midroshim* of *Nevi'im* and *Kesuvim*, and that the *midroshim* cited for the principle of *gezeirah shovah* are all either on *Nevi'im* or *Kesuvim* or to derive Torah laws from statements in Nach (which cannot be done with the 13 [halachic] principles

<sup>49</sup> **Talmud Bauli**, Sanhedrin 38b.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in *HaKoseiv* in *Ein Yaakov* to *Shevu'os* 9.

<sup>51</sup> See preface to the commentary of Rabbi Z'ev Wolf Einhorn in the Vilna edition of *Midrash Rabbah*. The earliest known listing of all 32 principles appears in *Seifer Kerisus* by Rabbi Shimshon of Kinon (Chinon), France.

of Rabbi Yishmo'el). It is absolutely impossible to say that these *midroshim* were transmitted at Sinai.

# RABBI SAMSON RAPHAEL HIRSCH

## Trusting the Torah's Sages

- The Limitations of Agadah
- The Miracles of Chazal
- On Magic and Astrology
- What Chazal Knew and  
What We Know
- Is Agadah From  
Sinai?

Two Giants Speak

# RABBI YISROEL SALANTER

## How to Earn Your Right to Life

- G-d Helps Those Who Help Himself
- Conscious and Subconscious Forces
- Three Systems for Successful Living
- Suffering and Atonement
- How You Can Live on G-d's Account

Two

# RABBI SAMSON RAPHAEL HIRSCH

## Trusting the Torah

- The Limitations of Agadah
- The Miracles of Chazal
- On Magic and Astrology
- What Chazal Knew and  
What We Know
- Is Agadah From  
Sinai?

Two Giants Speak

# RABBI YISROEL SALANTER

## How to Earn Your Right to Life

- G-d Helps Those Who Help Himself
- Conscious and Subconscious Forces
- Three Systems for Successful Living
- Suffering and Atonement
- How You Can Live on G-d's Account

Two