

33 The Problem of Polarity

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HALACHA AND AGADA

There is a general assumption that the Rabbis were naive, simple-minded, and unreflective people. How such an assumption can be generalized in regard to such a galaxy of men whose subtle and profound judgments in halacha have remained an intellectual challenge to all future students is difficult to see. It is refuted by any unbiased analysis of their agadic sayings, which clearly indicate that their inner life was neither simple nor idyllic. Their thinking can only be adequately understood in terms of a contest between receptivity and spontaneity, between halacha and agada.

Halacha represents the strength to shape one's life according to a fixed pattern; it is a form-giving force. Agada is the expression of man's ceaseless striving which often defies all limitations. Halacha is the rationalization and schematization of living; it defines, specifies, sets measure and limit, placing life into an exact system. Agada deals with man's ineffable relations to God, to other men, and to the world. Halacha deals with details, with each commandment separately; agada with the whole of life, with the totality of religious life. Halacha deals with the law; agada with the meaning of the law. Halacha deals with subjects that can be expressed literally; agada introduces us to a realm which lies beyond the range of expression. Halacha teaches us how to perform common acts; agada tells us how to participate in the eternal drama. Halacha gives us knowledge; agada gives us aspiration.

God in search of man

Halacha gives us the norms for action; agada, the vision of the ends of living. Halacha prescribes, agada suggests; halacha decrees, agada inspires; halacha is definite; agada is allusive.

When Isaac blessed Jacob he said: "God give thee the dew of heaven, the fat of the earth, and plenty of corn and wine." Remark the Midrash: "Dew of heaven is Scripture, the fat of the earth is mishnah, corn is halacha, wine is agada."¹

Halacha, by necessity, treats with the laws in the abstract, regardless of the totality of the person. It is agada that keeps on reminding that the purpose of performance is to transform the performer, that the purpose of observance is to train us in achieving spiritual ends. "It is well known that the purpose of all mitsvot is to purify the heart, for the heart is the essence."² The chief aim and purpose of the mitsvot performed with our body is to arouse our attention to the mitsvot that are fulfilled with the mind and heart, for these are the pillars on which the service of God rests.³

To maintain that the essence of Judaism consists exclusively of halacha is as erroneous as to maintain that the essence of Judaism consists exclusively of agada. The interrelationship of halacha and agada is the very heart of Judaism.⁴ Halacha without agada is dead, agada without halacha is wild.

QUANTITY AND QUALITY

Halacha thinks in the category of quantity; agada is the category of quality. Agada maintains that he who saves one human life is as if he had saved all mankind. In the eyes of him whose first category is the category of quantity, one man is less than two men, but in the eyes of God one life is worth as much as all of life. Halacha speaks of the estimable and measurable dimensions of our deeds, informing us how much we must perform in order to fulfill our duty, about the size, capacity, or content of the doer and the deed. Agada deals with the immeasurable, inward aspect of living, telling us how we must think and feel; how rather than how much we must do to fulfill our duty; the manner, not only the content, is

important. To halacha the quantity decides; agada, for which quality is the ultimate standard, is not dazzled by either the number or the magnitude of good deeds but stresses the spirit, *kavanah*, dedication, purity. Agada therefore looks for inwardness rather than for the outer garments.

HALACHA WITHOUT AGADA

To reduce Judaism to law, to halachā, is to dim its light, to pervert its essence and to kill its spirit. We have a legacy of agada together with a system of halacha, and although, because of a variety of reasons, that legacy was frequently overlooked and agada became subservient to halacha, halacha is ultimately dependent upon agada. Halacha, the rationalization of living, is not only forced to employ elements which are themselves unreasoned; its ultimate authority depends upon agada. For what is the basis of halacha? The statement "Moses received the Torah from Sinai." Yet this statement does not express a halachic idea. For halacha deals with what man ought to do, with that which man can translate into action, with things which are definite and concrete, and anything that lies beyond man's scope is not an object of halacha. The event at Sinai, the mystery of revelation, belongs to the sphere of agada. Thus while the content of halacha is subject to its own reasoning, its authority is derived from agada.

Halacha does not deal with the ultimate level of existence. The law does not create in us the motivation to love and to fear God, nor is it capable of endowing us with the power to overcome evil and to resist its temptations, nor with the loyalty to fulfill its precepts. It supplies the weapons, it points the way; the fighting is left to the soul of man.

The code of conduct is like the score to a musician. Rules, principles, forms may be taught; insight, feeling, the sense of rhythm must come from within. Ultimately, then, the goal of religious life is quality rather than quantity, not only *what* is done, but *how* it is done.

A philosophy of Judaism

Obedience to the letter of the law regulates our daily living, but such obedience must not stultify the spontaneity of our inner life. When the law becomes petrified and our observance mechanical, we in fact violate and distort its very spirit. He who does not know that observance of the law means constant decision is a *foolish pietist*. "What is a foolish pietist? A woman is drowning in the river, and he says: It is improper for me to look upon her and rescue her."⁶

Halacha is an *answer* to a question, namely: What does God ask of me? The moment that question dies in the heart, the answer becomes meaningless. That question, however, is agadic, spontaneous, personal. It is an outburst of insight, longing, faith. It is not given; it must come about. The task of religious teaching is to be a midwife and bring about the birth of the question. Many religious teachers are guilty of ignoring the vital role of the question and condoning spiritual sterility. But the soul is never calm. Every human being is pregnant with problems in a preconceptual form. Most of us do not know how to phrase our quest for meaning, our concern for the ultimate. Without guidance, our concern for the ultimate is not thought through and what we express is premature and penultimate, a miscarriage of the spirit.

The question is not immutable in form. Every generation must express the question in its own way. In this sense agada may be employed as denoting all religious thinking in the tradition of Judaism.

It would be a fatal error to isolate the law, to disconnect it from the perplexities, cravings, and aspirations of the soul, from spontaneity and the totality of the person. In the spiritual crisis of the modern Jew the problem of faith takes precedence over the problem of law. Without faith, inwardness and the power of appreciation, the law is meaningless.

AGADA WITHOUT HALACHA

To reduce Judaism to inwardness, to agada, is to blot out its light, to dissolve its essence and to destroy its reality. Indeed, the surest way to forfeit agada is to abolish halacha. They can only survive in

synthesis. Without halacha agada loses its substance, its character, its source of inspiration, its security against becoming secularized.

By inwardness alone we do not come close to God.* The purest intentions, the finest sense of devotion, the noblest spiritual aspirations are fatuous when not realized in action. Spiritualism is a way for angels, not for man. There is only one function that can take place without the aid of external means: dreaming. When dreaming, man is almost detached from concrete reality. Yet spiritual life is not a dream and is in constant need of action. Action is the verification of the spirit. Does friendship consist of mere emotion? Of indulgence in feeling? Is it not always in need of tangible, material means of expression? The life of the spirit too needs concrete actions for its actualization. The body must not be left alone; the spirit must be fulfilled in the flesh. The spirit is decisive; but it is life, all of life, where the spirit is at stake. To consecrate our tongue and our hands we need extraordinary means of pedagogy.

It is impossible to decide whether in Judaism supremacy belongs to halacha or to agada, to the lawgiver or to the Psalmist. The Rabbis may have sensed the problem. Rab said: The world was created for the sake of David, so that he might sing hymns and psalms to God. Samuel said: The world was created for the sake of Moses, so that he might receive the Torah.⁶

A view of the supremacy of agada is reflected in the following tradition: It is said of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai that his studies included all fields of Jewish learning, *great matters* or *small matters*. *Great matters* mean *ma'aseh merkabah* (mystical doctrines), *small matters* the discussions of *Abaye* and *Raba* (legal interpretations).⁷ Here the study of the law is called "a small matter" compared with the study of mystical wisdom.⁸

Maimónides, one of the greatest scholars of the law of all times, declares: "It is more precious to me to teach some of the fundamentals of our religion than any of the other things I study."⁹

* See above, pp. 293-97.

THE POLARITY OF JUDAISM

Jewish thinking and living can only be adequately understood in terms of a dialectic pattern, containing opposite or contrasted properties. As in a magnet, the ends of which have opposite magnetic qualities, these terms are opposite to one another and exemplify a *polarity* which lies at the very heart of Judaism, the polarity of ideas and events, of *mitsvah* and sin, of *kavanah* and deed, of regularity and spontaneity, of uniformity and individuality, of *halacha* and *agada*, of law and inwardness, of love and fear, of understanding and obedience, of joy and discipline, of the good and the evil drive, of time and eternity, of this world and the world to come, of revelation and response, of insight and information, of empathy and self-expression, of creed and faith, of the word and that which is beyond words, of man's quest for God and God in search of man. Even God's relation to the world is characterized by the polarity of justice and mercy, providence and concealment, the promise of reward and the demand to serve Him for His sake. Taken abstractedly, all these terms seem to be mutually exclusive, yet in actual living they involve each other; the separation of the two is fatal to both. There is no *halacha* without *agada*, and no *agada* without *halacha*. We must neither disparage the body, nor sacrifice the spirit. The body is the discipline, the pattern, the law; the spirit is inner devotion, spontaneity, freedom. The body without the spirit is a corpse; the spirit without the body is a ghost. Thus a *mitsvah* is both a discipline and an inspiration, an act of obedience and an experience of joy, a yoke and a prerogative. Our task is to learn how to maintain a harmony between the demands of *halacha* and the spirit of *agada*.

Since each of the two principles moves in the opposite direction, equilibrium can only be maintained if both are of equal force. But such a condition is rarely attained. Polarity is an essential trait of all things. Tension, contrast, and contradiction characterize all of reality. In the language of the *Zohar*, this world is called *alma deperuda*, "the world of separation." Discrepancy, contention, ambiguity, and