

# JUDGMENT ON ROSH HASHANAH: Analysis of Content and Process in a Talmudic Aggadah

*Beryl Gershenfeld*

*The essay that follows is based upon the source provided below:*

At four intervals the world is judged:	בארבעה פרקים העולם נדון;
on Pesach, [the world is judged] regarding produce;	בפסח, על התבואה;
on Shavu'oth, [the world is judged] regarding fruit;	בעצרת, על פירות האילן;
on Rosh HaShanah, all mankind pass before Him like <i>benei maron</i> , as it is said, "He Who formed [them], [sees] their hearts together and understands all their actions;" <sup>1</sup>	בראש השנה, כל באי העולם עוברין לפניו כבני מרון, שנאמר, היוצר יחד לבם, המבין אל-כל-מעשיהם;

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RABBI GERSHENFELD is one of the founders of Yerushalayim's Machon Shlomo - Heiden Institute. He is a member of the faculty of Neve Yerushalayim Seminary and of the summer faculty of the Torah Institute in Moodus, Connecticut. He wrote this essay ז"ל יהודה אריה בן ר משה אהרן בן ר לעלוי נשמת אביו ר

and on Sukkoth, [the world]  
is judged regarding water.

ובחג,  
נדונין על המים.

(Mishnah Rosh HaShanah 1:2)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Reading this *mishnah* awakens one's memories of Rosh HaShanah's past. Hearts and minds associate the *mishnah's* image of "*benei maron*," usually translated as "sheep," with Rosh HaShanah's stirring "*UNthanneh Tokef*" prayer:

Let us relate the force of this day's holiness for it is awesome and terrifying.... All mankind pass before You like *benei maron*.... As a shepherd examines his flock, passing each sheep beneath his rod, so do You pass, count, enumerate, and recall every living soul.

(Repetition of "*Musaf*" on Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur)

We are touched and inspired. But our familiarity with the *mishnah* blunts our critical, inquisitive nature. Satisfied with our facile understanding, we proceed to the next *mishnah*.

Such a response is inappropriate to the intricacies of Mishnaic style. The words of the Sages are "like golden apples in mesh casings of silver" (Mishlei 25:11): from afar one sees the valuable silver, but the essential value of the golden interior is discovered only when one carefully peers through the external casings.<sup>2</sup> Only in the depths of the text will one discover the essential philosophical truths that are concealed within it.<sup>3</sup> We must therefore analyze this *mishnah* more thoroughly to understand Rosh HaShanah and the nature of the judgment of man on this day.

## 2. KEYS TO UNDERSTANDING THE LANGUAGE OF CHAZAL

### Difficulties Raised by the Mishnah

Studying the *mishnah*, one immediately notes both its lack of parallelism and its extraordinary emphasis on Rosh HaShanah. After stating that on Pesach, the world is judged regarding produce and on Shavu'oth, the world is judged regarding fruit, one expects the literary form to continue with the succinct character-

ization that on Rosh HaShanah, the world is judged regarding man. Instead, there is an abrupt shift and the *mishnah* interjects "on Rosh Hashanah all mankind pass before Him like *benei maron*." Why does the *mishnah* abruptly shift its form? Furthermore, why does it select the obscure nomenclature, "*benei maron*"? Indeed, what does this term signify? Finally, why is a verse cited only with regard to Rosh HaShanah's judgment and not with regard to the other judgments enumerated in the *mishnah*? Far from irrelevant, these questions represent the "mesh casings of silver" through which we can peer to discover the hidden golden interior of the *mishnah*. They are hints from R. Yehudah HaNasi, the redactor of the Mishnah, to proceed cautiously and consider carefully the meaning of these words, for one senses that in these succinct terms the uniqueness of Rosh HaShanah is implied.

Probing the *mishnah*, the Talmud seeks a more precise definition for the crucial and obscure phrase "*benei maron*":

What does "like *benei maron*" (כבני מרון) mean? Here we translate (תרגימו) "like a flock of sheep (כבני אמרנא)." Reish Lakish says: [It means] "like the ascent to Beith Maron (כמעלות בית מרון)." R. Yehudah says in the name of Shemu'el: [It means] "like the troops of the house of David [מרון' related to 'מרות', meaning sovereignty and lordship (Rashi)].

(Rosh HaShanah 18a)

The Talmud's analysis appears to compound our difficulties. Why did R. Yehudah HaNasi employ such an ambiguous term that could justify so many opinions? Moreover, why did he employ a metaphor altogether, rather than stating explicitly that men pass before G-d one at a time? Finally, are Chazal only debating semantics, or do the various explanations of "*benei maron*" represent distinct perceptions of the day of judgment?

Our initial emotional response to the *mishnah's* graphic description of man passing before G-d like sheep is now superseded by intellectual wonder. Clearly, the essence of Rosh HaShanah is hidden in words too cryptic and subtle for us to grasp their meaning through cursory study. Before we begin to grapple with these textual difficulties, we must first understand the literary form through which Chazal chose to express their philosophy: the world of Aggadah.

### Aggadah as a Distinct Medium

One cannot understand Aggadah with only the techniques of Halachic analysis, because Aggadah differs from Halachah not only in content (nonlegal versus legal) but also in form. The complexity of Aggadah caused Chazal to adopt a distinct mode of expression. Halachic discussions are explicitly detailed, while Aggadah are written in subtle hints and riddles that conceal their essence.<sup>4</sup> Ramchal states:

It is inappropriate that the esoteric dimension of Torah be transmitted [like the Halachic dimension] before anyone who wishes to seize it, both out of deference to the value of the concepts [involved] and because of their depth.... In consideration of their depth... only those who are pure of mind and well learned in the ways of investigative analysis will succeed in mastering them. If a boorish or unlearned mind were to chance upon them, these true and valuable concepts would be perverted into errors and bad ideas. Therefore, while the Sages concluded that these concepts must be transcribed to prevent their being lost from later generations, [they transcribed them] in concealed ways and various riddles that would be incomprehensible except by those to whom the [oral] keys had been handed. These keys are the principles through which the allusions may be understood and the riddles elucidated.

(*Ma'amar al Aggadah Chazal*)

Sublime religious truths are meaningful only if one is sufficiently refined and learned to understand them correctly and integrate them properly into one's life.<sup>5</sup> To protect the uninitiated and to preserve the glory of G-d's Torah, these complex ideas were intimated in the subtle hints called Aggadah.<sup>6</sup>

As Ramchal warns, comprehension of Aggadah is impossible without the necessary "keys." To plumb the depths of Aggadah, one must learn from a mentor who possesses the keys to unlock Chazal's allusions and riddles. Our guide to this *mishnah* will be Maharal,<sup>7</sup> who is recognized as one of the classic expositors of Aggadah.<sup>8</sup>

### Rosh HaShanah and the Purpose of Creation

The key to understanding our *mishnah* lies in Rosh HaShanah's selection as G-d's day of judgment. On Rosh HaShanah G-d com-

pleted His creation by forming man. Every year, on the anniversary of man's creation, G-d investigates to determine if man has fulfilled his purpose in creation.<sup>9</sup> But what, we may ask, is the purpose of man's creation?

This issue pierces the essence of existence; its complexity has inspired debate for generations. Is man's task to express creatively his own individuality, or is his purpose to sublimate his particular identity by submissively following G-d's commands? Is he to transcend his individual vision by identifying himself as a part of a broader community? Without answers to these classic questions, we cannot comprehend the judgment of Rosh HaShanah. We would stand before G-d without understanding the case against us; our defense would be haphazard and confused.

### 3. THE FIRST PERSPECTIVE: "LIKE A FLOCK OF SHEEP"

#### Man as a Follower with Common Obligations

The metaphor of a flock of sheep in relation to their shepherd suggests that man is judged by a single set of objective criteria. A shepherd does not require each animal to express unique individual strengths. He has only uniform tests for his flock: Are they healthy enough to walk to market? Are they heavy enough to be sold for meat? Specifically the metaphor of sheep (as opposed to another species) is employed because Chazal note that the nature of sheep is to follow faithfully.<sup>10</sup> While goats stray and make their own paths, sheep do not. The analogy to man is clear. Man was created with a uniform societal goal. He is not expected to express his unique personality or creative energies; his task is solely to follow the wise commands of G-d. What is deemed essential about mankind is not diversity but similarity. Everyone is endowed with the same 248 organs with which to fulfill the same 248 positive *mitzvot*.<sup>11</sup>

From this perspective, man's role is to conduct himself in faithful harmony with G-d's will as it is manifest through Torah and *mitzvot*. To prepare for Rosh HaShanah, one will seek to be more scrupulous in observing the *mitzvot*, to follow G-d's "lead" more faithfully. Instead of seeking to express individuality, one will strive to discharge the uniform task of functioning as a good

human being by obediently fulfilling G-d's commands.

While this analysis sheds some light on the mishnah, problems clearly remain. Why did the mishnah elaborate concerning the judgment of man? In addition, why did R. Yehudah HaNasi not state explicitly that mankind is judged like sheep? Why did he employ the cryptic phrase "כבני מרון," which is only vaguely related to the Aramaic "כבני אמרינא" ("like sheep")?

#### "These and those are the words of the Living G-d."

To respond to these difficulties a major axiom of Talmudic study must be introduced. Chazal state that when alternate opinions are expressed in Aggadah and the debate is not resolved, we conclude that "these and those are the words of the Living G-d" (Gittin 6b).<sup>12</sup> To comprehend Aggadah properly, one must recognize that all the opinions recorded contain aspects of truth. Before we proceed, further clarification of this principle is necessary.

One approach to harmonizing disparate opinions in Aggadah is to perceive them as varied facets of the same reality.<sup>13</sup> For example, imagine three viewers analyzing a book's exterior. One sees its front and describes the gold letters, one sees the back and states that there is just a blank cover, and a third viewer perceives the book from the side and describes the white pages. While no view is complete, none is wrong. Only by adding together all three perspectives can one properly understand the reality of the book.

A second approach to resolving conflicting opinions in Aggadah is to organize them as increasingly exact analytic formulations.<sup>14</sup> One opinion is a simple approximation that provides general insight. The second opinion is a more complex reiteration of the same idea that clarifies the subject matter more precisely by adding additional factors. The relationship between classical (Newtonian) physics and the theory of relativity (which offers a more precise approximation for the behavior of exceptionally fast-moving bodies by including relativistic effects) provides a useful analogy to this second approach.

The form of the Talmud's discussion of our mishnah appears characteristic of the second approach. The Talmud indicates this

by introducing as the first explanation of "*benei maron*" the Aramaic translation — the *targum* — of the *mishnah*.<sup>15</sup> Targum, in its classic sense as the Aramaic translation of Scripture, expresses the simple understanding of the verse, enabling even the common unlearned man to grasp the basic meaning of the text.<sup>16</sup> Because of the limited intellectual sophistication of the audience, the exact meaning of the text with all of its nuances and connotations is not preserved.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the first explanation of the *mishnah* is only its *targum* — its approximate translation. It does not resolve all of the essential problems in the text. To understand the text more precisely, we must analyze it more carefully and probe thoroughly the philosophical concepts involved.

#### 4. THE SECOND PERSPECTIVE:

##### "LIKE THE ASCENT TO BEITH MARON"

#### Man as a Unique Individual

To perceive men as interchangeable, having common divine obligations without individual distinctions, is too simplistic a vision to define the nature of man adequately. In fact, the greatness of G-d's creation is the uniqueness of every individual. The Mishnah states:

Therefore man was created singly ... to proclaim the greatness of the Holy One Blessed be He: A person forms many coins with the same mold, and they all resemble one another. But the Supreme King, the Holy One Blessed be He, formed every man with the mold of the first man, yet not one of them resembles his fellow. Therefore, every single person is obligated to say, "For me the world was created."

(Mish. Sanhedrin 4:5)<sup>18</sup>

Each man is unique and, therefore, must recognize that he has a special task in life that he alone can fulfill.<sup>19</sup> Man is obligated to recognize his individuality and the responsibility that it entails; he is obligated to say, "For me the world was created."

To view oneself as part of a flock in which only the group is significant and not the individual — the first explanation offered by the Gemara — is to diminish the greatness of G-d's creation and man's responsibility. Chazal set out to supplant this vision of a flock by emphasizing the uniqueness of each individual:

"One who sees a massive group of Jews should say, 'Blessed is He [G-d] Who knows the wisdom [in the heart of each individual (Rashi)]; for their minds do not resemble one another nor do their faces resemble one another' (*Berachoth* 58a). In observing a large group of Jews one should not see a homogeneous mass: one should perceive the diversity and uniqueness of the individuals of which it is composed.

The second interpretation of "*benei maron*" in the Gemara — "like the ascent to Beith Maron" — embodies this more sophisticated vision of man's creation. The ascent to Beith Maron, narrowly winding through the mountains, was a famous landmark in Talmudic times. In Talmudic literature, "the ascent to Beith Maron" is used as the paradigm for a road traversable by only one person at a time.<sup>20</sup> As an explanation for "*benei maron*," it expresses the individuality of G-d's judgment: that "all mankind pass before Him" *one at a time*. Unlike a shepherd who surveys his flock of sheep together relative to a uniform standard, an observer on the road to Beith Maron inspects each person separately as he files past. Likewise, G-d judges every person individually, in accordance with the principle of individual uniqueness. Each human being has his own special potential to develop, relative to which he is individually judged.<sup>21</sup> In contributing this second interpretation of "*benei maron*," Reish Lakish also replaces the original subject of the metaphor — sheep — with a road traversed by *human beings*, implicitly emphasizing this additional human factor.

Recognition of individual uniqueness and G-d's individualized judgment will stimulate man to identify his own special capabilities in anticipation of Rosh HaShanah. Merely studying Torah and heeding G-d's commandments more diligently will not suffice. Man must introspect and apply his unique skills to each deed that he performs.<sup>22</sup> He will have to be sensitive to his intellectual inclinations, emotional responses, and physical needs. Indeed, nothing less than his unique worth must be discovered and actualized. He cannot copy other men — even great men — but must seek to sanctify G-d with his own unique heart and soul.<sup>23</sup>

This challenge confronts man in all arenas of expression. When one sits before a Gemara engrossed in study, one is not simply partaking of a routine deed already undertaken by count-

less Jews throughout history. It is a unique act, because one's own mind, shaped by one's particular milieu, is called upon to grapple with G-d's wisdom. We must strive to find our own special potential in Torah.<sup>24</sup> One's unique portion contains ideas that one can teach to the entire world; one's judgment on Rosh HaShanah must then depend on how faithfully one has expressed these crucial ideas. In a similar fashion, all of one's endeavors in life (e.g., prayer, mode of livelihood, and acts of charity) should reflect the unique capabilities and sensitivities that G-d has implanted within him.<sup>25</sup>

From this perspective, the lack of parallelism in the *mishnah* is understandable. The uniqueness of man is reflected in the uniqueness of man's judgment. Had the *mishnah* merely continued its literary form and stated that on Rosh HaShanah, the world is judged regarding man, this essential distinction of the role of man in creation would have been lost. The Gemara alludes to this implication in the *mishnah* by the shift in metaphor from a flock of sheep to a narrow path upon which *men walk singly*. While the *targum* provides a first approximation for explaining the *mishnah*, only by probing more thoroughly the nature of man through the insight of Reish Lakish does the deeper meaning of the text become evident. The anomalies of the *mishnah*, at first so mystifying, intimate its rich meaning.

### The Dangers of Individual Creativity

Yet several difficulties still remain. According to Reish Lakish, why did the *mishnah* choose the ambiguous term, "*benei maron*"? Why did it not state explicitly, "G-d judges each man individually"? In addition, why did the Gemara first explain the *mishnah* according to the *targum* and not according to Reish Lakish's more sophisticated perspective?

In response to these questions, we note Ramchal's explanation that Chazal purposely expressed their ideas in the Aggadic form of hints and riddles because they realized that complex concepts are often misinterpreted and misapplied by the masses. Chazal feared that if they explicitly emphasized that man's judgment on Rosh HaShanah assesses his actualization of his own creative individuality, many errant notions and responses would

develop. The Mishnah therefore opted to couch this idea in ambiguity. Similarly, the Gemara, in explaining the *mishnah*, initially provided a simple interpretation appropriate for the common man: "like sheep," emphasizing man's collective, uniform obligations to serve and heed G-d.

Why did Chazal avoid stressing the importance of man's individuality? They recognized that such emphasis would engender a lack of appreciation of both traditional, received knowledge and the need for uniform actions. Man would fail to recognize that such means are necessary in order to achieve the goal of true individuality. Indeed, if a person begins life by searching for creativity and individuality, he usually accomplishes little. Imagine, for example, an individual attempting to create modern physics without any recourse to the last millennia of scientific development. The sensible approach is for him first to study the accumulated scientific tradition of his predecessors and then to apply his own creativity to unsolved problems. R. Bachyei b. Pekudah notes that this confusion of goals and means applies equally in the religious sphere. For example, while personalized rational knowledge of G-d (the goal) is qualitatively better than accepted traditional knowledge (the means), one can rarely achieve the higher level without first integrating the more elementary level.<sup>26</sup> One must train and discipline one's mind before one can successfully seek creative expression.

Chazal recognized that emphasis on individuality may lead to mediocrity, because untrained minds tend to overlook the necessary preconditions of acceptance and discipline. To avoid such misunderstanding, the Mishnah did not explicitly state this rarefied goal of individuality but alluded to it in an ambiguous term that suggests two distinct facets. The initial understanding of "*benei maron*," "like sheep," is the simple first step a person should seek to attain by recognizing his common obligations. The second more refined meaning, "like the ascent to Beith Maron," alludes to an additional dimension where the emphasis is on man's individual obligations. The wise student properly trained in analysis will grasp this dual-faceted expression correctly and develop both the common and unique aspects of his existence. The Talmud, similarly, first expresses the *mishnah's* more simplistic face, and only subsequently provides Reish Lakish's deeper interpretation.

## 5. THE THIRD PERSPECTIVE:

### "LIKE THE TROOPS OF THE HOUSE OF DAVID"

#### Individuals Integrated into a Community

While the intricacies of our *mishnah* are now in sharper focus, the verse cited by the *mishnah* still requires analysis: "He Who formed [them, sees] their hearts together and understands all their actions" (Tehillim 33:15). What is intended by "[sees] their hearts together (יחד)"? If the explanation of Reish Lakish — "like the ascent to Beith Maron" — is sufficient, then G-d should relate to every person individually. The statement that He relates to "their hearts together" seems incongruous. In addition, further analysis of the verse cited introduces a new complication; "המבין אל-כל-מעשיהם" (here trans. "understands all their actions") literally means "understands to where (אל) all their actions [reach]." The insertion of "אל" appears confusing and unnecessary.<sup>27</sup>

To resolve these difficulties a more complex vision of man's role in creation must be developed. Shemu'el provides an alternate explanation for the metaphor "*benei maron*": "like the troops of the house of David." According to this metaphor, man's purpose in creation is not limited to personal, individual development; he must also seek to develop the nation Yisra'el and ultimately to enhance all of human society.<sup>28</sup> An individual alone can achieve little, but as part of a group working together, his efforts can contribute to the accomplishment of monumental tasks. When Yisra'el fulfills the will of G-d, the Torah promises, "Five from among you will pursue one hundred [a ratio of one to twenty] and one hundred from among you will pursue ten thousand [a ratio of one to one hundred]" (VaYikra 26:8). From this shift in ratios, Chazal derive that the efficiency of large groups is incomparably greater than that of smaller units.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, such concerted action benefits both the individual and the larger community: "Ingathering...for the righteous is beneficial to them and beneficial to the world" (*Mish. Sanhedrin* 8:5). An individual whose actions are divorced from those of a group squanders his potential and ultimately fails to accomplish his divine obligations.

Because the effect of isolated individuals on the world is limited, G-d selected the nation Yisra'el, rather than individuals,

as the primary means for His revelation in this world: "The heavens and earth were created solely through the merit of Yisra'el" (*VaY.R.* 36:4). Therefore, the Torah was given to Yisra'el only after they had united "as one man with one heart" (Rashi on Shemoth 19:2, citing *Mechilta*, *ibid.*).<sup>30</sup> Following the sin of the golden calf, G-d reiterated this principle. Mosheh could not continue as G-d's mediator — in spite of his personal blamelessness — because his fitness for conveying the Torah was dependent not on his personal greatness but on the national greatness of Yisra'el: "Said R. Elazar: The Holy One, Blessed be He said to Mosheh, 'Mosheh! Go down from your greatness. Did I grant you greatness other than for the sake of Yisra'el? Now, Yisra'el has sinned; Why should you have greatness?' " (*Berachoth* 32a).<sup>31</sup> Shemu'el's explanation of "*benei maron*" as "the troops of the house of David" expresses this concept. The ascent to Beith Maron can be scaled only singly, but wars are waged communally.

This vision of community does not preclude individual distinctions.<sup>32</sup> Each individual should recognize his uniqueness and importance. But as a special limb of the communal body, his individuality is only truly significant if he integrates it into the organic whole of the nation Yisra'el. This relation is implied in the metaphor cited above from Rashi: "as one man with one heart." Similarly, Shemu'el's vision of man builds on Reish Lakish's individualistic perspective and adds to it the importance of national integration. "The troops of the house of David" were a differentiated society of experts: cavalry, archers, and infantry all functioning in their proper roles. In such a community, each member contributes his own special skills; another specialist compensates for his weaknesses. An army's greatness is expressed in its unity as it marches in formation into battle. Each individual has his own special task, but he must march in step with his fellow soldiers.

A more careful analysis of the Gemara in *Makkoth* 23b cited earlier also reveals this need for communal integration. The Gemara states that one sanctifies each of his 248 organs by performing the 248 positive *mitzvot*. This statement is perplexing, since no individual is obligated to observe all 248 commandments: some apply only to priests, others only to kings, and others only to judges. Does this mean that no one can sanctify all of his

organs because no one can fulfill all 248 *mitzvot*? Mabit resolves this difficulty by referring to the concept of *arvuth* (collective responsibility): one must aid others in their divine obligations even if personally exempt from those specific obligations.<sup>33</sup> The obligation of *arvuth* binds one to the nation Yisra'el; one becomes responsible even for *mitzvot* addressed to kings and priests.<sup>34</sup> In this way, every Jew is obligated to perform 248 *mitzvot*. Only through this communal vision can one sanctify all of one's organs and truly actualize one's complete potential.

Rambam regards this sense of community as a fundamental principle of the Torah: "It is improper for one to say, 'Since I shall not sin, if another will sin, of what [interest] to me is [his relationship] with G-d?' This is a negation of the Torah" (*Sefer HaMitzvot*, *Aseh* 205). Torah is meant to awaken group consciousness.

Now, the peculiarities of the verse cited by our *mishnah* can be understood: "He Who formed [them, sees] their hearts together and understands *to where* all their actions [reach]" (*Tehillim* 33:15). Man's task is to perfect both himself and the nation Yisra'el. Therefore, G-d's focus must expand beyond the individual. Only by judging the individual as part of society — "their hearts together" — can G-d properly assess his impact. The seemingly superfluous "וְיָ" — "to where all their actions [reach]" — expresses this perspective. G-d judges the consequences of man's actions for society and the world — to where they reach — not just their impact on the individual himself. The peculiarities of the verse allude to the theme of community found in the *mishnah*.

With this perspective in mind, one will prepare for the judgment of Rosh HaShanah by attempting to aid one's community achieve growth and completion. One will seek to determine the weaknesses of his society and to discover how he can mitigate them. The cogency of R. Yisra'el Salanter's advice now becomes apparent: "In preparation for Rosh HaShanah's judgment, make yourself a person whom the community requires."<sup>35</sup>

### The Dangers of a Communal Vision

Shemu'el's interpretation of man's role explains our *mishnah*'s form and style convincingly. Why then, we ask once more, did Chazal refrain from a more explicit statement in the *mishnah* and

employ the ambiguous term "benei maron" instead? Once again, the evident response is that Chazal were wary of the inability of the masses to distinguish between goals and means. Unfortunately, the axiom that the full development of individual potential is a prerequisite of national service is often forgotten. From the Mishnaic period through our modern age, our rabbis and teachers have sensed a recurrent need to redress this error.<sup>36</sup>

While the goal is certainly to assist the community, one who has yet to realize his own individual potential will have little of true consequence to contribute to this goal. A successful army is composed of specialists who first develop their own individual skills and then integrate their strengths to form a greater whole.

To avoid unintentionally abetting this error, the Mishnah chose not to express the goal of communal development explicitly. The Gemara likewise only alludes to this third, final level. The depth of the concept was left as a hint for later rabbis to reveal slowly, only to those students "who are pure of mind and well learned in the ways of investigative analysis."<sup>37</sup> Only such students will properly recognize all three facets of man. For most individuals this multiple perspective is too complex. Simpler approximations will prove more beneficial to them in their quest for growth.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The *mishnah* that we have studied contains within it a synopsis of the task that awaits each individual in preparation for Rosh HaShanah. Ultimately, to stand judgment, we must clarify our role and determine our level of readiness. To do so, we must first recognize our common obligations as human beings and as Jews. This remains the foundation upon which we must build. From there we must proceed to discern our own unique characteristics and aptitudes. To be fully human, we must recognize these as the basis of personal expression through which each individual fulfills the mission for which he was created. Finally, we must appreciate that the uniqueness of every individual, once fully actualized, can be truly significant only when integrated into the multifaceted *kelal*. It is with this recognition that we ready ourselves for Rosh HaShanah, the day of judgment.

## NOTES

1. See Tehillim 33:15. See also *Rosh HaShanah* 18a, where this verse is explained in the manner suggested in this translation.
2. See Gra on Mishlei 25:11. This text is usually understood as a reference to the written Torah. Maharal, however, expands its scope to include Talmudic Aggadah. See *Be'er HaGolah*, *Be'er* 5 (p. 88).  
*Ed. note:* See also the preface of *Moreh HaNevochim*, where Rambam explicitly expounds this verse in reference to Aggadah.
3. See Gra on Mishlei 16:16 and 25:11. The metaphors of gold and silver are not incidental. Silver provides man with a currency of exchange through which he can procure his *daily needs*. Gold is too valuable to employ for daily transactions; it *defines value* and is used only for major investments. Similarly, the external understanding of an Aggadah is like silver: it inspires man, enabling him to meet a *basic need* for initial understanding. The deeper meaning, like gold, *gives value* to man's existence. (See also *Michtav MeEliyahu*, IV, 252.)
4. See also Gra on Mishlei 1:6.
5. Secrecy is required to prevent perversion of the Torah by unrefined minds. "R. Shimon b. Chalafta and R. Chaggai in the name of R. Shemu'el b. Nachman [said]: ... When the students are small, conceal from them [esoteric] words of Torah; [once] they have grown ... reveal to them the depths of Torah" (*Yer. Avodah Zarah* 2:7 [11a]).  
The negative consequences of unintegrated knowledge were vividly portrayed in the response of the masses to the teachings of Antigenos of Socho. He taught, "Do not be as servants who minister to the master in order to receive a reward; instead, be as servants who minister to the master not in order to receive a reward" (*Avoth* 1:3). While his intent was to inspire people to serve G-d altruistically, through pure love, this sublime goal was too abstract for the masses to understand. Consequently, the message was corrupted by some into a heretical belief that negated reward and punishment. Eventually, the heretical sects of Tzedukim and Baithusim arose, expounding this belief. Chazal criticized Antigenos for expressing so profound a concept so openly. Rambam concludes, "One does not teach the young and ... ignorant [to serve G-d altruistically, through pure love] ... until their abstract understanding increases and they become exceedingly wise. Then one reveals this wisdom to them little by little, and accustoms them to this matter gradually, until they grasp it and understand it and serve Him through love" (*Yad Hil. Teshuvah* 10:5).
6. Part of the beauty of Hebrew is its precision of expression. Synonyms are not interchangeable, but a family of terms each of which has its own specific connotation. *Amar*, *dibber*, *higgid*, *sipper*, and *tzivvah* all denote the verbal expression of ideas, but each has a distinct connotation. R. Avraham b. HaGra (see *Perush HaTefillah*) notes that *amar*, *dibber*, *sipper*, and *tzivvah* all refer to relatively explicit speech; *higgid* describes expression through subtle hints.



Chazal selected the term "Aggadah" (from the root of *higgid*) for their philosophical statements, because it implies such subtle expression. See also *Nefesh HaChayyim* 1:13 for additional sources that discuss this implication of the term "Aggadah."

7. Many commentators have grappled with this Aggadah and the three disparate explanations offered by the Gemara for the term "benei maron" (see text, below). These are obviously predicated upon different approaches to Aggadah. For example, "UNthanneh Tokef" (quoted in the text, above) expresses Rashi's understanding of the Mishnaic metaphor. See also *Chiddushei Aggadah* (Maharsha) on *Rosh HaShanah* *ibid.*, "Derashath Moharach" (R. Chayyim Volozhiner), and *Kochevei Or* (R. Yitzchak Peterberg), *Ma'amar* 4, for other classic approaches to this Talmudic passage. This essay is predicated upon the approach of Maharal. See *Chiddushei Aggadah* (Maharal) on *Rosh HaShanah* *ibid.*
8. Maharal's eminence in esoteric literature establishes the significance of his commentary. In *Be'er HaGolah*, *Be'er* 5 (p. 86), Maharal notes that many concepts that are only implicitly suggested in Aggadah are expounded explicitly in Kabbalistic sources. While Maharal does not generally employ esoteric language, his content is often culled from more hidden sources. Indeed, R. Yitzchak Hutner (*Sefer HaZikaron LeVa'al Pachad Yitzchak*, p. 76) comments that Maharal's words are always laden with deeper meaning. It is for this reason that Maharal's thoughts must be studied in depth and with due care.
9. See Ran on *Rosh HaShanah* 17a.
10. See *Shabbath* 77b and *Machshevoth Charutz* (R. Tzadok HaKohen), ch. 7 (p. 44)
11. See *Makkoth* 23b.
12. See *Michtav MeEliyahu*, III, 353.
13. In *Be'er HaGolah*, *Be'er* 1 (p. 20), Maharal establishes the general framework for this mode of analysis. For examples of this approach in the commentaries of Maharal, see *Gur Aryeh* on *BeReshith* 4:8; *Derech HaChayyim* on *Avoth* 4:22; *Chiddushei Aggadah* on *Babba Kamma* 30a; and *Geuroth HaShem*, ch. 9 (p. 59).
14. For examples of this approach in the commentaries of Maharal, see *Gur Aryeh* on *BeReshith* 21:9; *Chiddushei Aggadah* on *Nedarim* 41a, *ד"ה בלא נר*, and on *Sotah* 11b, *ד"ה ותרם אותו כי טוב וכו'*; and *Nethivoth Olam*, "Nethiv HaKa'as," ch. 2 (p. 238).
15. See com. of Maharal, here: "The targum is ... according to the simple meaning." More detailed consideration of this principle is beyond the scope of this essay. See for example *Rosh HaShanah* 30b and *Babba Metz'a* 20a.
16. Regarding the role of Targum for common folk, see Rashi on *Megillah* 25a, *ד"ה ומעשה עגל*; Tosafoth on *Berachoth* 3a, *מבורך הגדול שמיה הגדול מבורך*; and *Tifereth Yisra'el* (Maharal), ch. 65 (p. 196).
17. This principle is suggested by the observation of Rashi (on *BeReshith* 43:3), R. Eliyahu Mizrachi (*ibid.* 40:10), and *Gur Aryeh* (*ibid.* 20:14), that the Targum

provides the "concept (עניין) and not the words." The Targum analyzes words based only on their context and is not concerned with analyzing the deeper nuances of connotation and syntax.

18. See also *Yad Hil. Sanhedrin* 12:3; *Derech HaChayyim* on *Avoth* 3:2; and *Pachad Yitzchak* (R. Yitzchak Hutner), "Shavu'oth," *Ma'amar* 21.
19. This important foundation is axiomatic in Judaism. See, for example, *Sifrei* on *Devarim* 32:2, *Sh.R.* 40:3, and *BeM.R.* 21:2.
20. See *Sanhedrin* 32b.
21. It should be emphasized that, although each man is judged on an individualized scale, G-d's judgment is not subjective. G-d's judgment is objective: that everyone actualize his potential. Of course, since each man's potential is distinct, this judgment is necessarily individual.
22. See *Sefath Emeth* on *Noach* (5631) and *Pachad Yitzchak* (R. Yitzchak Hutner), "Shavu'oth," *Ma'amar* 17.
23. See *Da'ath Chochmah UMusar*, II, 173.
24. It should be noted that the method of determination of one's own special potential in Torah appears to be rooted in an essential disagreement. According to R. Yisra'el Me'ir of Radin (see *Shem Olam*, I, "Sha'ar Chezkat HaTorah," ch. 13), one's "portion" in Torah is the subject that one naturally enjoys and is drawn to study. R. Tzadok HaKohen (see *Tzidkath HaTzaddik*, ch. 49) contends that the area that one finds most difficult to understand and actualize is one's special "portion." A more extensive analysis of this dispute is beyond the scope of this essay.
25. See *Torath Chovoth HaLevavoth* 4:3, Gra on *Mishlei* 22:6 and 16:4, and *Ha'amek Davar* on *BeMidbar* 15:41.
26. See *Torath Chovoth HaLevavoth* 3:3.
27. See *Nefesh HaChayyim* 1:12,14.
28. See *Shevu'oth* 39a, *Dev.R.* 11:3, *Tan. Nitzavim*:2, Tosafoth on *Shabbath* 4a, *ד"ה וכי אומרים וכו'*, *Torath Chovoth HaLevavoth* 8:3 (Cheshbon 22) and 10:6, *Derech HaChayyim* on *Avoth* 2:2, and *Mishnah Berurah* 306:56.
29. See *Sifra* on *VaYikra* 26:8; *Zevachim* 41b; *Tan. Nitzavim*:1; *Derech HaChayyim* on *Avoth* 2:4; *Chiddushei Aggadah* (Maharal) on *Sotah* 13b, *ד"ה מפני שההיג עצמו ברבנות וכו'*; and *Tomer Devorah*, ch. 1, *ד"ה לשארית נחלתו וכו'*.
30. Maharal emphasizes this idea repeatedly. See *Derech HaChayyim* on *Avoth* 4:12 and 6:7, *ד"ה ויהי איהו*; *Derush al HaTorah*, pp. 26-27; *Geuroth HaShem*, ch. 38 (pp. 142-143); and *Nethivoth Olam*, "Nethiv HaAvodah," ch. 7 (p. 98).
31. This translation is in accordance with *Haghoth HaBach* on *Berachoth* *ibid.*
32. See *Pachad Yitzchak* (R. Yitzchak Hutner), "Shavu'oth," *Ma'amar* 21.
33. See *Kiryat Sefer*, Introduction, ch. 7.
34. See *Shevu'oth* 39a, *VaY.R.* 4:6, and *Tomer Devorah* loc. cit.

35. See *Alei Shor*, II, 424.
36. See *Yer. Pesachim* 3:7 (21b-22a), *Chazon Ish* 4:16, and *Sefer HaZikaron LeVa'al Pachad Yitzchak*, p. 107. See also the advice of R. Yisra'el Me'ir of Radin to his son regarding communal responsibility (quoted in *Kol Kithvei Chafetz Chayyim HaShalem*, III, "Dugma MiDarchei Avi z.tz.l.," p. 19).
37. It should be emphasized that, in spite of the dangers inherent in recognition of this highest level, such recognition is important because it gives man direction, clarity, and inspiration. (See *Michtav MeEliyahu*, III, 174.)

## UNMASKING AVRAHAM'S SLAVE: A Midrashic Analysis of Eli'ezer

*Chaim Eisen*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Unquestionably one of the most pivotal, but mysterious, personalities in *Sefer BeReshith* is Eli'ezer, slave of our forefather Avraham. He is identified by Chazal<sup>1</sup> as the anonymous "elder of [Avraham's] household who rules over all that is his" (*BeReshith* 24:2), who bridges between the first two generations of patriarchs and the future by finding an appropriate wife for Yitzchak and bringing her back to Eretz Yisra'el. And yet, the same individual is described in the same verse and throughout the adjacent narrative in the Torah as a mere "slave." He is apparently the only member of Avraham's illustrious household to whom the Torah refers by name (*ibid.* 15:2). But the context of this apparent reference to Eli'ezer is disqualification: "This one will not be your heir" (*ibid.* 15:4); moreover, since the Midrash considers the possibility that this reference to "Eli'ezer" may not be a name at all but a descriptive label for Lot,<sup>2</sup> even this mention is contested. The man who faithfully insures the perpetuation of Avraham's

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RABBI EISEN, formerly of the faculty of the Yeshivat Hakotel, has lectured extensively in *machsheveth Yisra'el* and *parshanuth HaMikra* at post-secondary institutions in Israel. He teaches at Yeshivat Ohr Yerushalayim and at the OU-NCSY Israel Center, and he is an editor of *Jewish Thought*.