“Take a dialogue and remove the voices, remove the intonations, carve out abstract concepts and judgments from living words and responses, cram everything into one abstract consciousness – and that’s how you get dialectics.” (Mikhail Bakhtin)

Teaching Gemara to young students in Yeshiva high schools in our generation is a problem; that is well-known. The halakhic discussions in the Gemara usually cause the youths to feel distant and alienated, and they resolutely claim that they cannot understand how studying these ancient discussions might add relevant and practical meaning to their daily lives. This is apparently not just a practical challenge. Deep down, educators discover an emotional and psychological barrier that prevents these youngsters from “connecting” with the Gemara and recognizing the relevance of this text to our day. In addition, it is not only the content of the discussions in the Talmud that creates an obstacle for the youth. How the Gemara chooses to present its discussions also significantly contributes to the lack of interest. The Talmud describes the halakhic discussion in the *Beit Midrash* dialectically, and not as dialogue. This means that when the editors of the Gemara set out the halakhic discussions which took place in the *Beit Midrash*, they omitted the emotional and interpersonal aspects of these debates which the Sages must have experienced. The Talmud preserves for posterity only the abstract arguments of the *Tanna’im* and *’Amora’im* but not their inner thoughts. It is easier for the reader to identify with characters who actively engage in substantial dialogue than with dialectically presented abstract claims that lack emotional and interpersonal context. Dr. Moshe Sokol’s book is a creative and refreshing attempt to address this complex phenomenon. He does so by clarifying the role of the Aggadetot, that is, the narrative and story-like texts which are found within the Talmud.

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In his book *The Snake at the Mouth of the Cave*, Sokol closely analyzes eight *Aggadetot* in which the Talmud paints powerful emotional interactions between different Sages. Sokol precisely clarifies how these great Sages’ opinions regarding the halakhic discussion in which they participated in the *Beit Midrash* are integrated into the stories and the described dialogues. For example, we find a principled discussion between early *’Amora’im* regarding the need for the careful use of the contemporary method of study. R. Eliezer thought that the accepted method of study in the Beit Midrash gave the Sages too much creative leeway, R. Yoḥanan believed that the method of study used in Babylonia encouraged too much aggressive criticism, and ’Ilfa claimed that learning in the *Beit Midrash* may lead to an exaggerated disconnect from material life. Sokol seeks not only to extract the opinions of the Sages on various basic issues from these *Aggadetot* but also to understand how these opinions impacted the Sages’ emotional and interpersonal lives. For example, when a Sage expressed his opinion in the *Beit Midrash*, it often happened that this led to discord and discomfort among the other Sages present during the discussion. In other cases, a Sage’s unpopular spiritual or halakhic opinion, would cause him to experience internal ambivalence. Through the in-depth analysis of *Aggadetot*, Sokol strives to emphasize that the reality of the *Beit Midrash* as expressed in the Aggadic sources, as opposed to the description of the *Beit Midrash* in the halakhic texts of the Gemara, was not characterized by a dichotomy between the abstract spiritual and halakhic stances of the Sages and their emotional world and interpersonal relations.

Is there not a danger that analyzing the Sages’ emotional world in modern psychological terms will diminish their standing as “*Gedolei Yisrael*” in the eyes of the public? Unsurprisingly, Sokol is well aware of this issue, as he is not only a professor in an accredited academic institution but also the rabbi of an established community in New York. To contend with this concern, Sokol claims – several times throughout his book – that he does not pretend to understand the personalities of the Sages described in the *Aggadetot*; this, according to him, would be an impossible task. Rather, Sokol emphasizes, he is only trying to clarify how the authors of the *Aggadetot* understood and described these Sages. This approach makes it possible to clarify their messages and internalize what these creative authors sought to teach.

“… those of us living in the twenty-first century can have no access to inner lives as such towering figures as R. Yoḥanan, Rav, and R. Kahana. What we can attempt to do, as best, is to understand what the *author of the particular aggada seeks to convey* in the story he tells, or, put it differently, what the text’s moral, religious, or psychological lessons are.”

In this context, we should note that although Sokol uses his academic knowledge in the fields of psychology, philosophy, and Jewish thought, his general approach in this book to the Gemara and its Sages is traditional. He does not approach the Gemara from an alienated and so-called objective academic standpoint, but rather with emotional intimacy and a personal appreciation of the Talmud’s Sages. In this respect, the book is primarily intended for those who wish to study the *Aggadetot* in the Gemara from a traditional viewpoint with the help of academic knowledge.

In conclusion, I believe that there is one point that Sokol developed in his book which is deserving of further elaboration. Sokol quotes the opinion of R. Hai Gaon and other Sages, that the events described in the *Aggadetot* never actually occurred but were rather the product of the Sages’ dreams. Sokol endeavors to understand those dreams according to psychoanalytic theories that date back to Freud that posit that the dreams a person sees in his sleep are the result of unresolved internal tensions generated during his waking hours. However, it must be noted that there are other psychological approaches to dreams. Among these is the important contribution of Wilfred Bion, who believed that dreaming does not only occur in sleep and is not the product of psychological tensions. According to Bion, “dream-thoughts” are mental processes that often occur during waking hours as well, parallel to logical thinking, and these processes are necessary for deep and creative learning. In light of Bion’s approach, we may view the *Aggadetot* as contributing not only to the revelation of significant aspects of the emotional lives of those Sages mentioned in the text but also to the intensification of “dream-thoughts” among those who study the *Aggadetot*. This intensification may enable the learner to then learn explicitly halakhic texts more deeply and creatively. This means that the *Aggadetot*, in their capacity to reflect the products of “dream-thoughts,” have the power to strengthen the processes of “dream-thoughts” among those who learn them, and these learning processes may also contribute to the learning of other *sugyot*. I can personally testify that Sokol’s book awakened “dream-thoughts” in me which continued to echo in my mind even after I finished reading it.

I recommend this important book to all those who wish to revive the learning of Gemara and to all those who wish to glean from the Gemara new insights regarding the integration of their halakhic and moral understanding with their emotional and interpersonal worlds.