“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. However, this is apparently not only a practical challenge. Deep down, educators discover an emotional and psychological barrier which 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 which create an obstacle for the youth. The way in which the Gemara chooses to present its discussions also significantly contributes to the lack of interest which many experience. The Talmud describes the halakhic transpirations in the *Beit Midrash* dialectically, and not as dialogue. This means that when the editors of the Gemara described 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 which the Tannaites and Amorites put forth, but not their inner thoughts. It is easier for the reader to identify with characters who actively engage in substantial dialogue than with the abstract claims which are dialectically presented without the emotional and interpersonal contexts in which they were stated. 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 minutely analyzes eight *Aggadetot* in which the Talmud paints powerful emotional interactions between different Sages. Sokol precisely clarifies how the personal stances of these Sages, giants of the Mishnah and the Gemara, regarding the halakhic they debated in the *Beit Midrash*, are integrated in the stories and the described dialogues. So, for example, we find a principled discussion between early Amorites regarding the need for the careful use of the learning method which was acceptable in those days. R. Eliezer thought that the method of learning which was popular in the Beit Midrash gave the Sages far too much creative leeway, R. Yoḥanan believed that the method of learning acceptable in Babylon encouraged too much aggressive criticism, while Ilfa posited that learning in the *Beit Midrash* may lead to an exaggerated disconnect from material life. In addition, Sokol seeks to milk these *Aggadetot* not only for the stances of the Sages regarding various basic issues, but also for the ways in which these opinions impacted upon the Sages’ emotional and interpersonal lives. For example, it often happened that when a Sage expressed his opinion in the *Beit Midrash*, this led to discord and discomfort among the other Sages present during the discussion. In addition, when a Sage held an unpopular spiritual or halakhic opinion, this often cause him to experience intrapsychic ambivalence. This means that through the in-depth analysis of *Aggadetot*, Sokol strives to emphasize that as opposed to the description of the *Beit Midrash* in the halakhic texts of the Gemara, the reality of the *Beit Midrash*, as expressed through the Aggadic sources, was not characterized by a dichotomy between the abstract spiritual and halakhic stances of the Sages and their emotional world or interpersonal relations.

However, is there no danger that analyzing the Sages’ emotional world in modern psychological terms would diminish their position as “*Gedolei Yisrael*”? It seems that this issue concerned Sokol as well. Which is not surprising, since Sokol serves not only as professor in an accredited academic institution but also as the rabbi of an established community in New York. To contend with this fear, 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 the ways in which the authors of the *Aggadetot* understood and described these Sages. This approach allows us to clarify and internalize the messages which these creative authors tried 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 though Sokol employs in his book the knowledge he acquired from his academic training in the fields of Psychology, Philosophy, and Jewish Thought, Sokol’s general approach to the Gemara and its Sages, in this book, is traditional. He does not approach the Gemara from a distant and so-called objective academic standpoint, but rather from emotional intimacy and a personal appreciation of the Talmud’s Sages. From this aspect, the book is primarily intended for those who wish to study the *Aggadetot* in the Gemara from a traditional viewpoint, with the additional help of academic knowledge.

Finally, I believe that there is one point which Sokol developed in his book which is deserving of further elaboration. Sokol quotes the method of R. Hai Gaon and other Sages, according to which 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, which posit that the dreams a person sees in his sleep are the result of unresolved intra-psychic tensions which he experienced during his waking hours. However, other psychological approaches exist as well. 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 intra-psychic tensions. According to Bion, “dream thoughts” are a mental process which often occurs during waking hours as well, parallel to logical thinking, and that this process is necessary for deep and creative learning. It seems that according to Bion’s approach, we may view the *Aggadetot* as contributing not only to the exposure of the significant emotional constitution of those Sages mentioned in the text, but also to the intensification of “dream thoughts” among those who learn the *Aggadetot*. This intensification may enable the learner to then learn explicitly halakhic texts in a deeper and more creative manner. 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* which they will subsequently approach. 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 world with their emotional and interpersonal one.