

"Halachel & Agsadeh"

HAIM NAHMAN BIALIK

REVEALMENT
AND
CONCEALMENT

FIVE ESSAYS

Afterword by Zali Gurevitch



they were not petrified, because actually the oral tradition and natural feeling never ceased to function for an instant, and their currents of fresh air ceaselessly played upon the written word, quickening it, expanding or contracting it, sometimes even annulling it for a short time or for all time, in response to new needs or even to new opinions and beliefs. Not only might Ezekiel abrogate what Moses had written; a mere "Daniel the Tailor" did not scruple to ride full tilt against an important negative precept of the Torah, and to hope that it would be abrogated at some future date.¹

¹ I quote his saying here in full, because of its unusual boldness. The passage is found in *Midrash Rabbah* on Leviticus 32, and again in *Koheler Rabbah* on the verse: "So I returned and considered all the oppressions..." (Eccles. iv. 1.) It runs thus: "Daniel the Tailor explained this verse referring to children in forbidden unions. 'And behold the tears of such as were oppressed'—their parents sinned, but what has that to do with these poor wretches? The father sinned in giving him birth, but how has the son sinned? And on the side of their oppressors there was power—that is, on the side of the Grand Sanhedrin, which expelled them by the power of the Torah. 'But they had no comforter'—God says: It is for Me to comfort them, because in this life they are impure, but in the future world they will be like the 'candlestick all of gold' which Zechariah saw in his vision."

The processes of solution and condensation which *Halachah* and *Aggadah* undergo are clearly visible, especially in times of revolution and the making of new laws; they are plain and familiar to all. An old *halachah*, abrogated, retires into the crucible of the heart, and is transmuted into an *aggadah*—like it or unlike—and the *aggadah* in turn, after being purified, emerges thence into the molds of thought and action, and then again condenses into *Halachah*, but in an improved or wholly new form. Thus *Halachah* is, no less than *Aggadah*, a creative process. It is the supreme form of art—the art of life and of living. Its medium is the living man, with all his impulses; its instrument is education, individual, social, and national; its product is a continuous chain of goodly life and action, the carving of a path through the obstacles and the snares that beset individual and community, a seemingly existence for man on earth, a civilized mode of life. The creations of *Halachah* are not, like those of the other arts—statue, painting, building, song, poem—concentrated and individualized in material, time and place; they grow little by little, piece by piece, out of all the stream of human life and

action, till in the end the fragments add up to a single total, and produce a single form, whether complete or incomplete. *Halachah* is the master-art that has shaped and trained a whole nation, and every line that it has graven on the nation's soul, be it coarse or fine, has been inspired and guided by a supreme wisdom which sees the end in the beginning. Day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute, it is intent on its task of creating one form and one form only—the true likeness of God's creatures, the image of God in man.

Cologne Cathedral, Milan Cathedral, Notre Dame de Paris—these have been made the things of beauty that they are by the efforts of supreme artists through hundreds of years. Each of these artists in his day gave his life and the best of his genius to a task which for him alone was holy; and doubtless it was only because all of them subordinated themselves to a single central idea, of supreme significance for them, that their sacred task was so successfully accomplished. The idea of building a house for their God hovered before all of them like a visible thing—as the Tabernacle was built “according to the vision which thou wast shown”—and

gave them inspiration; and that idea it was which guided the rule and the angle, the style and the graver in their hands, and told them where to put each line and each mark, each beam and each brick, until at last, after centuries of work done by men who were separated in space and in time, the whole became one mighty, noble edifice.

The Jews have their own superb creation—their sacred and sublime day, “the Queen Sabbath.” In the popular imagination the Sabbath is personified, given bodily shape, and endowed with wondrous and dazzling beauty. God brought the Sabbath into His world when the creation was complete, so that the richly decorated bridal canopy should not lack a bride. She was the most precious of his treasures, and he found no mate fit for her except Israel. Another popular *aggadah* pictures her sitting like a princess, “like a bride arrayed among her companions,” in the Garden of Eden, hidden in the innermost of seven chambers, and attended by her six handmaidens, the six days of creation. When she enters a city all its inhabitants turn to the gate and welcome her with the greeting: “Come,

O Bride; come, O Bride, Queen Sabbath"; and the pious go out to welcome her before she reaches the city. Once upon a time she appeared in a dream to Ibn Ezra, all sad and grief-stricken, and gave him a letter to Israel, her spouse, the celebrated "Letter on the Sabbath." Every Jewish poet, from Jehudah Halevi to Heine, has hymned her in song. Is she not a piece of *Aggadah* from first to last? And is she not a source of life and holiness to a whole nation, and a fountain of inspiration to its singers and poets? Yet who shall presume to decide whether *Halachah* or *Aggadah* gave her being and made her what she is? There are one hundred and fifty-seven double pages in Tractate *Shabbat*, and one hundred and five in *Eruvin*, and in both there is next to no *Aggadah*; for the most part they consist of discussions and decisions on the minutiae of the thirty-nine kinds of work and their branches, and on the limits within which it is permissible to carry on the Sabbath. What the Sabbath candles are to be made of; what a beast may be loaded with; how the limits may be jointly fixed—such are the questions discussed. What weariness of the flesh! What waste of good wits on

every trifling point! But when I turn over those pages and see the various groups of *Tannaim* and *Amoraim* at their work, I say to myself that these whom I see are in very truth artists of life in the throes of creation. Such mighty spiritual work as this, ant-like and giant-like at once, work performed for its own sake and out of boundless love and faith, could not be done without inspiration. Every one of those men did his own part of the task according to his own bent and inclination, and all of them were bowed before an overmastering higher will. One lofty idea, one supreme image of the Sabbath hovered before these scattered men like a visible thing, and its spirit gathered them here from out of all the generations, and made them co-workers in its fashioning and perfecting. Every question, every challenge, every limitation and definition is but a new piece added to the mosaic, another bit of the pattern, which had to be put in because without it the whole could not have been what it must be. And the result of all this tiresome work of *Halachah* is—a day which is wholly *Aggadah*.

This is but one example out of many. Take the

halachah was relearned from the practice of everyday life. Why should not the process be reversed, and life be reconstructed from *Halachah*?

True, the epic is on a small scale; its narrative content is almost negligible. It is all descriptive—brief glimpses of the customs of a poor life, an unexciting daily round. And even these glimpses are given us not for their own sake, but hurriedly and incidentally. But that we cannot help. Such was the Hebrew life of the time, and so it has been preserved in the only national book of that long period. We had no other life, or, if we had, it has left no record. The vigorous, heroic period, the epoch of splendid creation whereof the biblical epics tell—these had passed irrevocably out of life and literature alike. The advance had ceased: the time had come for mounting guard, for defending what had been built up long before, for sentry duty in inner and outer lines. Both the *Halachah* and the *Aggadah* of those days bear the stamp of their time, the stamp of passivity. Neither the one nor the other tells of great things: they are both made up of little scraps—scraps of thought, scraps of feeling, scraps of action. But a true

artist, one who does not seek inspiration by sucking his thumb or by foraging for crumbs from others' tables, but draws it from the fathomless depths of the nation's soul and the mystery of its life—a true artist will find no insuperable difficulty in producing something great even from material such as this, if only the greatness is in his own soul. How much does the inspired artist need to enable him to create? Merely a little raw material, enough for the spirit to lay hold on. If the material is poor, he will enrich it from his own store; if it is dead, he will quicken it from the fountain of his own life. Real art, art which is not a means to a livelihood or a feather in the cap of vain-glorious fools intoxicated with self-love—real art, like the Torah, cannot be truly served except by him who sacrifices his life for it—in order to give life. What matters is the vital relation of the artist to the form of life which lies before him. If an artist disqualifies any form of life as unsuitable for art, the question at once arises whether it is not he himself who is unqualified in that particular regard.

But can we draw living water from this rock of

Halachah? Our "age of revival" asks the question in a tone of amazement, of skepticism.

Yes—if you have the divine rod in your hand and the fountain of life in your heart. If we had true artists and inspired creators, whose own lives were not out of joint, they would draw speech even out of this rock; with the aid of that little something which is called genius, they would transform *Halachah* into a national epic. But at present our artists prefer borrowed vessels and feeble imitation of ready-made alien forms. If their way is not always a very reputable one, it is at any rate easy, inexpensive and familiar. The result is that they have not yet shown any great mastery even in *Aggadah*, in which they believe; and here, too, we wait for the redeeming hand that shall transform it into real lyric poetry. Even our early poets, for all their labor, did not succeed in doing this, because they had not the genius, and because even for them this literary form was not truly alive.

Shall we return, then, to the *Shulhan Aruch*?

So to interpret my words is to misunderstand them completely. The words *Halachah* and *Aggadah* come from the Talmud, where they have each a fixed meaning; but from the point of view of their inner reality their meaning is capable of extension and enlargement to cover the whole range of related phenomena, whether earlier or later than the Talmud. They are two definite forms, two distinct styles that go together in life and in literature. To each age its own *Aggadah*; to each *Aggadah* its own *Halachah*.

We are speaking not of this or that particular *halachah* or *aggadah*. Our concern is with *Halachah* in general—with *Halachah* as a concrete and definite form of actual life, of a life which is not in the clouds, which does not depend on vague feeling and beautiful phrases alone, but has physical reality and physical beauty. *Halachah* in that sense, I assert, is but the inevitable continuation and sequel of *Aggadah*.

The value of *Aggadah* is that it issues in *Halachah*. *Aggadah* that does not bring *Halachah* in its train is ineffective. Useless itself, it will end by incapacitating its author for action.