

# The Aggadah of Spiritual Integrity

MARTIN S. COHEN



**W**hen I was in rabbinical school in the mid-1970s, the problems presented by the kind of critical Bible scholarship to which we were exposed in class were dealt with in two distinct ways. Mostly, they were ignored and those who found this unacceptable were denounced, then dismissed, as crypto-Orthodox crybabies. (Some left the school; most, myself included, learned to keep their own counsel.) But there was also another approach and it served, in a sense, as the aggadah of our generation, I think, far more potently than any of those mentioned by Ira Stone in his essay.

The theory was that truth was far more roomy a concept than we might have previously imagined and could be stretched far beyond the criteria of what average people bring to bear in distinguishing true statements from false ones.

According to this theory, there are actually two different kinds of truth: scientific and spiritual. The former is the kind that plays well in laboratories and undergraduate classrooms. It is the kind of truth understands history to be the inflexible record of what really happened. And it is the kind of truth to which people refer when they swear in the witness box to tell it without adulteration or exaggeration, and, as far as possible, without filtering it through the subjective lens of human (I should say: all too human) perception.

The latter, on the other hand, was elasticity itself and embracing it yielded the greatest of all spiritual discoveries: that things that couldn't be proven or demonstrated could still be affirmed, honestly and virtuously, as

## — The Aggadah of Spiritual Integrity —

true! Even biblical stories that no one imagined to be scientifically possible, let alone plausible or likely, could still be declared profoundly true—without evidence, eyewitness testimony or even the weight of probability on its side (or even close by its side.) Empiricism is not a bad thing, we blithely (and piously, often with vague reference to Buber or Heschel) told each other, merely irrelevant: provability only matters when you're really trying to prove something—like a scientific theorem or a historical sequence of events—but not at all when you're merely asserting the kind of articles of dogmatic faith that function at the heart of religion and which, by their very *unprovability*, set it apart from science.

This two-truth theory was never, in my experience, denounced as hypocrisy or silliness. And because it appeared not only to solve the problems we encountered in Bible class, but also to set us off nicely from the movements to either side of us, we felt that this aggadah suited us perfectly. The movements to the left *and* the right, we concluded, were benighted because they embraced one truth to the exclusion of the other. But we, hungry for identity—and blissfully willing to forget that Hans Christian Andersen's fable about the emperor's new clothes was meant as a cautionary tale for adults far more than as a fairy story for children—had found the aggadah that set us free. And, as Rabbi Stone noted about so many other of our movement's aggadot, it worked for a while—even for a long while—but then, at least for this author personally, it stopped working.

I think that a great many of our movement's woes have been caused by the fact that so many of us embraced this kind of gobbledygook instead of seeking to build a religious movement on the twin foundations of unwavering intellectual honesty and unyielding spiritual integrity. And that is my proposal for a new aggadah for the movement, one rooted not in what other movements aren't, but in what we ourselves, at our finest, should and can be. The essential elements in my aggadah are not that many. There is only one kind of truth, just as there is only one kind of knowledge and one kind of love. Lying is always a sin, but, when the lie in question is about God, then lying is blasphemy as well. There is no way to know something that you don't really know, no way to embrace as true something that you have no way to prove or to demonstrate and which, therefore—and for all you know—could just as easily not be true. The fact that one's life would

be simpler if something *were* true doesn't make it true, nor does it make lying about it noble or worthy behavior. When the words "having faith" are used to mean insisting on the truth of things one can only hope are true—and to denigrate those who decline to accept them—then the whole exercise is merely a justification for arrogance and the Bible teaches us (at Proverbs 21:24) that arrogance is merely an especially malign form of buffoonery, and that it is sinful and wrong.

I propose this notion of spiritual integrity as the next aggadah. The way it works is simple. We refuse to be threatened by scholarship, but insist on being challenged by it. We respond to how things are—which is how the independent thinkers and scholars we respect (not those we feel called upon to respect or duty-bound to respect, but those we actually do respect for their own intellectual integrity and lack of self-referential bias) see the lay of the land—not by inventing new refuges from reality in which to hide, but by developing modes of thought that actually *do* correspond to historical, empirical, verifiable reality and then to build a civilization rooted in obedience to divine law on a foundation that exists outside our own fantasy lives. We decline to dismiss as irrelevant all the data that shakes the foundations of our piety and, instead, insist on finding the courage to build a world of faith in God and adherence to the mitzvot based on that data . . . and we accept as our leaders men and women possessed of the wisdom, the creativity and the learning to do just that, and only such people. We find wisdom in insecurity, to borrow Alan Watts' felicitous phrase, and comfort in the fact that when Jacob, wishing to know how things truly were for him as night ended and the first rays of sunlight appeared on the horizon, asked that a secret be revealed no human fully can know, the angel responded not with insult, indignation or outrage, but with blessing.

Is that an aggadah? It is in Rabbi Stone's sense of the word, but not in the traditional one. Therefore, I present, also, an aggadah in the classical style composed by myself.

*Once upon a time, a prince sent letters to a princess from a distant land of whom he had heard, but whom he had not ever actually met, and received letters back from her at regular intervals. As long as the prince remembered that the mental image of the princess that he saw in his mind's eye—and which he deeply*

## — The Aggadah of Spiritual Integrity —

*cherished in his heart—was not the princess' real face, but rather a mental image that existed solely as a kind of self-generated commentary on the qualities and attributes of the princess he himself discerned from remarks and comments in her various letters, he was able to feel sure he would not be disappointed when they finally did manage to meet . . . because disappointment is nothing other than the inner response triggered in the human heart by a sudden, unexpected lack of agreement between fantasy and reality and can, therefore, be effectively staved off by refusing to confuse the two.*

*Therefore, as long as the prince remembered—and believed with perfect faith—that there was no real relationship between the image of his beloved he saw in his head and her actual appearance—and that the image before his eyes was totally fictitious and artificial and that the origin of the picture he saw in his mind's eye was located somewhere within the chambers of a heart that yearned for love and that it—the picture in his mind's eye—was a kind of two-dimensional projection of his most profound desire that the princess look the specific way that he himself was most likely to find appealing and alluring—as long as he remembered all those things and kept them in mind constantly, then it was possible to say that his love remained pure and flowed from the inmost chambers of his heart into his reflective, perceptive consciousness in the context of total and unyielding intellectual and spiritual integrity.*

*This was key, because then—and only then—did the possibility exist that the princess might someday honor his feelings and reciprocate his yearning and requite his passion . . . and that, some day in the future, she might agree to leave her distant castle to wed the prince who, at that point, will have spent a lifetime longing for her and who, on that day, will still be loving her with perfect honesty and commitment.*

*The most important detail for the prince was to remember always that the actual way the princess looked was unrelated—and unrelated absolutely—both to the ability of his own imagination to conceive of her as looking one way or another in his waking or nighttime dreams . . . and also to the way her face seemed to him reflected in his tears of frustration and unsatisfied longing. She was totally independent from the prince . . . at the same time that she was, somehow, part of him. She lived outside his world, but she also lived in it and, in a certain sense,*

— Martin S. Cohen —

*in him. And although they were separated by thousands of miles, it was the purity of his longing—and its unyielding, unwavering integrity—that enabled the prince to live life as though theirs was the kind of love that could be had merely for the asking and, in so doing, to find comfort and true solace in things as they truly were in a world suffused with hope.*

---

*Martin S. Cohen is the rabbi of the Shelter Rock Jewish Center in Roslyn, New York, and chairman of the editorial board of this journal.*