

BETWEEN TORAH STUDY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN A TALMUDIC
AGGADAH

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Abstract

This article wishes to demonstrate that among the *stamaim*—the anonymous redactors of the Babylonian Talmud—was a cohort of individuals who objected to the elitist values of the Babylonian academies. Within this article the famous aggadic tales of Hillel in the study hall of Shemayah and Avtalyon and that of the wealthy Talmudic sage R. Eleazar b. Harsom, found in *b. Yoma* 35b, are critically analyzed. The analysis reveals a multi-layered writing process—a “chain novel” in the terminology of Ronald Dworkin—that transforms these foundational stories concerning exemplary rabbinic sages and the importance of Torah study into a social critique of the connection between Torah study and economic status. Thus, an aggadic unit was created that preserves both the values of Torah study and social justice, while balancing them.