YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Talmudic *Aggadot***

Rav Dr. Yonatan Feintuch

Shiur #03: Introductory *Aggadot* of Tractate *Chagiga* III

# In this *shiur*, we will conclude our analysis of the two stories that appear at the beginning of Tractate *Chagiga* in the Babylonian Talmud. We will cite the stories, with some minor omissions:

Our rabbis taught: Once R. Yochanan b. Beroka and R. Elazar Chisma were making their way from Yavneh to Lod, and they went to pay their respects to R. Yehoshua at Peki'in. He said to them: “What new teaching was there at the *beit ha-midrash* today?” They replied: “We are all your disciples, and it is your waters we drink.” He said to them: “Even so, it is impossible for a session of the *beit ha-midrash* to pass without some novel teaching. Whose Sabbath was it?” “It was the Sabbath of R. Elazar b. Azarya.” “And what was his passage?” “‘Assemble (*Hakhel*) the people: the men and the women and the little ones’. He opened with it and said: If the men came to learn, the women came to hear, but wherefore have the little ones to come? In order to grant reward to those that bring them.” He said to them: “It is not an orphan generation in which R. Elazar b. Azarya exists.”

And he also took up the text and expounded: “‘The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails well planted are the words of the masters of assemblies, which are given from one shepherd…’ ‘The masters of assemblies’: these are the Torah scholars, who sit in manifold assemblies and occupy themselves with the Torah, some pronouncing impure and others pronouncing pure, some prohibiting and others permitting, some disqualifying and others declaring fit. Should a man say: How in these circumstances shall I learn Torah? Therefore the text says: ‘All of them are given from one Shepherd’... Also make your ear like the hopper and get a perceptive heart to hear the words of those who pronounce impure and the words of those who pronounce pure, the words of those who prohibit and the words of those who permit, the words of those who disqualify and the words of those who declare fit…”

For it is taught: Once R. Yossei b. Durmaskit went to pay his respects to R. Eliezer at Lod. Said the latter to him: “What new thing was taught in the *beit ha-midrash* today?” He replied: “They decided by vote that in Ammon and Moab the tithe of the poor should be given in the seventh year.” Said [R. Eliezer] to him: “Yossei, stretch forth your hands and receive your eyes.” He stretched forth his hands and received his eyes. R. Eliezer wept, saying, “‘The secret of the Lord is with those that fear him and he will show them his covenant.’ Go and tell them, ‘Do not be anxious about your vote. I have received from Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, who heard it from his master, and his master from his master, **a rule to Moshe from Sinai,** that Ammon and Moab give poor man’s tithe in the Sabbatical year…’” It is taught: When his mind was calmed, he said: “May it be granted that Yossei's eyes be restored.” And they were restored.

In the previous *shiur*, we outlined two important connections between the halakhic discussions in the beginning of the tractate and these two stories, which appear after these halakhic discussions:

1. The motifs of vision (eyes) and hearing are central to both the halakhic discussions of the mitzva of pilgrimage and the narratives.
2. These stories open with disciples paying their respects to their masters by visiting them. Paying respects (*hakbalat panim*) is the impetus for the journey, and indeed this practice does recall the mitzva of pilgrimage, which requires “all of your males must appear before (*et penei*) the Lord, the Lord God of Israel.”

What is the meaning of these connections? In my view, these links attest to the fact that the placement of these stories in this *sugya* must be more than a mere associative matter.

The *sugyot* deal with various halakhic aspects of the mitzva of pilgrimage and the encounter with the Divine that occurs on this occasion. However, when these *sugyot* were composed, the Temple already lay in ruins, making this encounter a paradigm of “Messianic Halakha” (*hilkhata* *le-meshicha*), i.e., those laws which will be relevant again only in the Messianic Era. Nevertheless, after the Destruction of the Temple, *Chazal* sought to create an alternative to fill the vacuum left by its absence, an alternative method of drawing close to God and even encountering Him without going up to the Temple and bringing offerings. This alternative involves the Torah and studying it with the Sages. Studying the Torah and delving into it brings one closer to God. Naturally, we may say that *Chazal*, the bearers of Torah and those responsible for teaching and transmitting it, represent God’s word in the world, and perhaps even God Himself. Thus, meeting them and paying one’s respects to them is, to a certain extent, a microcosm of encountering the Divine Presence.

In the literature of *Chazal*, this concept appears numerous times. We will take one small example for illustrative purposes. The Babylonian Talmud at the end of Tractate *Yoma* discusses the High Priest’s journey home after the successful conclusion of the Yom Kippur service:

When he who was to take [the he-goat] away came back and met the High Priest in the street, he would say to him: “Lord High Priest, we have fulfilled your request.” If he met him in his house, he would say to him: “We have fulfilled the request of He Who grants life to all who live.”

Rabba said: When rabbis in Pumbedita would take leave of each other, they would say: “May He Who grants life to all who live grant you a long, happy, and right life! ‘I shall walk before the Lord in the lands of the living…’”

R. Berekhya also said: If a man wishes to offer a libation up on the altar, let him fill the throat of the Torah scholars with wine… (*Yoma* 71a)

The *sugya* goes from the parting of the courier to *azazel* from the High Priest to the parting of sages from each other, and then to the words of R. Berekhya. This sharp transition illustrates this point quite well. Indeed, even in the case of pilgrimage, we find the explicit declaration: “Whoever pays his respects to his teacher is as if he has received the Divine Presence” (JT *Sanhedrin* 11:4).

We may explain that citing the stories of students paying their respects to their teachers fulfills a similar role as that of the passage in *Yoma*. Discussing the halakhic aspects of the mitzva of pilgrimage on the festivals is significant as an act of learning Torah even if these matters are not practicable during the era in which these discussions take place. Nevertheless, the Talmud complements this by presenting a contemporary alternative to pilgrimage.

Thus, the appearance of the motifs of seeing and hearing in these stories is no coincidence. In halakhic debates, the Talmud discusses the exemptions of the blind and the deaf from the mitzva of pilgrimage. These are two senses connected to the encounter with the Divine. Seeing is a part of every festival pilgrimage, while the crucial nature of hearing is derived, as we recall, from the mitzva of *Hakhel*. We may, in fact, conceive of this study as the missing link between the era of the Temple and the era of the Destruction. Even while the Temple still stands, the Torah adds another component to the encounter with the Divine, to seeing the face of God, as it were — even though this element is only realized once every seven years. The unique ceremony of *Hakhel* adds another integral constituent of going up to the place chosen by God – listening to the reading of the Torah, as the text stresses:

When all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God in the Place He shall choose, you shall read this Torah facing all of Israel, in their ears. Assemble (*Hakhel*) the people: the men and the women and the little ones, that they may hear and that they may learn, and they shall fear the Lord your God… And their children who have not known shall hear and shall learn to fear the Lord your God. (*Devarim* 31:10-13)

It is no coincidence that the *derasha* concerning this passage is cited in the first story, that of R. Yehoshua.

Indeed, these two stories present two different views of this alternative. R. Eliezer believes that the emphasis should be on transmitting the tradition of the Oral Torah as it has come down through the generations. Halakhic rulings must follow this tradition, rather than expounding new *halakhot* and deciding among the views of the sages by majority vote.

Therefore, when R. Yossei relates the *chiddush*, the novel teaching from the *beit ha-midrash*, R. Eliezer is furious. He blinds R. Yossei to demonstrate, metaphorically, the severity of his opposition to the form of Torah scholarship the latter represents. In the view of R. Eliezer, such study is not the proper way to encounter God’s word or God himself. This is why R. Yossei loses his eyes, as they symbolize, in the halakhic debate, the organ with which one encounters God in the Temple. The blind are exempt from pilgrimage and do not encounter God during the festival, and this is the message R. Eliezer is attempting to impart concerning R. Yossei and the Torah methodology he represents. (Of course, R. Yossei himself is not the focus of R. Eliezer’s fury, but rather the approach to Torah scholarship that he presents to his teacher. For this reason, the addendum to the tale notes that R. Eliezer ultimately restores R. Yossei's eyes.)

However, other sages have different views, as we see in the first tale. In the view of R. Yehoshua and R. Elazar b. Azarya, expounding the verses and deriving novel *halakhot* is a wholly appropriate encounter with Torah as the word of God. Indeed, this dovetails with the homily on the verse from *Kohelet* concerning the word of Torah scholars, presented as “‘The masters of assemblies’: these are the Torah scholars, who sit in manifold assemblies and occupy themselves with the Torah, some pronouncing impure and others pronouncing pure, some prohibiting and others permitting, some disqualifying and others declaring fit.” The occupation with Torah represents the disputes created among those who study it. In R. Eliezer’s precise tradition of transmission, differences of opinion have no place. Such disagreements are the result of developments and innovation within the Torah. According to this *derasha*, these disputes connect current Torah scholarship to the original Torah given on Sinai and faithfully represent it: “‘All of them are given from one Shepherd’. One God gave them; one leader uttered them from the mouth of the Lord of all creation, blessed be He; for it is written: ‘And God spoke all of these words.’” Naturally, such occupation in Torah, in opposition to R. Eliezer’s view, may be a sort of encounter with the Divine. The narrative in the Babylonian Talmud stresses, even more so than its parallel in the Tosefta which we analyzed in the first *shiur*, the Godly source of these matters, since this is the purpose of these stories in the Babylonian Talmud: to present the encounter with Torah and Torah scholars as something of a replacement for the encounter with God in the Temple in a bygone era.

**The Lengthy Aggadic Collection at the End of the *Sugya***

It is interesting to note that the Talmud builds on the approach characterized by these stories as the *sugya* continues. After the narrative we have analyzed, the *gemara* goes on to consider various exemptions in the *mishna*. However, once the halakhic discussion is exhausted, a rather extensive aggadic collections appears, running from 4b to 5b. I have dealt with this collection at length in my previous series,[[1]](#footnote-1) and we therefore will not consider all of them at this time. Nevertheless, a few brief citations, mainly from the opening and the conclusion of the collection, will shed some light on our current discussion, as we shall see how this aggadic collection enhances the approach that we have been exploring.

This *aggada* also follows the discussion of the exemption of the blind from the mitzva of pilgrimage:

What does “all” come to include? It comes to include a man who is blind in one eye; and it is contrary to the opinion of the following *Tanna*. For it is taught: Yochanan b. Dahavai said in the name of R. Yehuda: A man who is blind in one eye is exempt from appearing [at the Temple], as it is said: "*yireh*" (He will see), "*yeira'eh*" (He will be seen). As He comes to see, so he comes to be seen; just as [He comes] to see with both eyes, so also to be seen with both eyes. (4b)

Subsequently, a brief description of R. Huna opens an aggadic collection in light of this *baraita*:

R. Huna, whenever he would encounter this verse of “*yireh*" (He will see), "*yeira'eh*" (He will be seen), would weep, saying: Shall a servant whose master desires his presence be distanced from him? As it is written, “When you come to see My face, who requested this of you, that you trample My courtyards?”

Apparently, R. Huna is responding to the derivation we mentioned above, the *derasha* concerning the ambiguous word in *Shemot* 23:17 – “Three times a year, all of your males *yreh* before the Lord” – which could be vowelized "*yireh*" (He will see) or "*yeira'eh*" (He will be seen). The blind are exempted from pilgrimage on this basis. R. Huna lived in an era in which the Temple had lain in ruins for centuries, so that pilgrimage was purely theoretical: one could no longer see or be seen by the Divine Presence. R. Huna cries because the *derasha* emphasizes God’s hope to see people on the festival. R. Huna responds, “Shall a servant whose master desires his presence be distanced from him?” He buttresses his reaction with a verse from the first chapter of *Yeshayahu*, describing the distancing of Israel from that appearance due to their behavior: “When you come to appear before My face, who requested this of you, that you trample My courtyards?”

The aggadic collection opens with the stark contrast between the situation of the post-Destruction era, that of exile and distance from the Divine Presence, and the situation when the Temple stood, in which a Jew would appear three times annually for a mutual and intimate encounter with the Divine Presence, as it were – to see God and to be seen by God.

The next description of R. Huna is quite similar. He does not directly address the verse in the *baraita* and the mitzva of pilgrimage, but he opens in the exact same way, and the content of the explanation is similar:

R. Huna, whenever he would encounter this verse, he would weep: “You shall sacrifice peace-offerings and eat there,” saying: Shall a servant whose master desires his presence at his table be distanced from him? As it is written, “What need have I of the multitude of your sacrifices, so says God.”

This line, a reflection on a world with no Temple, which moves Rav Huna to tears, expounds the immediately preceding verse in *Yeshayahu*.

The Talmud goes on to describe others sages and other topics, all of whom share the experience of R. Huna and the opening, “Whenever he would encounter this verse, he would weep,” after which a verse is cited and the sage explains why he bursts into tears.

If we take a broader view of this aggadic collection, we see that it has a sevenfold structure. In each case, an *Amora* cries to express his grief at exile and the absence of God, weeping at the existence of difficulties and distress in the world, the Attribute of Justice, and distance from the Divine Presence.

However, there is an eighth component to the aggadic section, dealing not with human tears, but with those of God. This structure of seven-plus-one does not seem to be a coincidence.

“But if you will not hear it, My soul shall weep in secret for the pride.” R. Shemuel b. Inia said in the name of Rav: The Holy One, blessed be He, has a place and its name is “Secret.”

What is the meaning of [the expression] “for the pride”? R. Shemuel b. Yitzchak said: For the glory that has been taken from them and given to the nations of the world. R. Shemuel b. Nachmani said: For the glory of the Kingdom of Heaven.

But is there any weeping in the presence of the Holy One, blessed be He? For behold R. Papa said: There is no grief in the Presence of the Holy One blessed be He; for it is said: “Honor and majesty are before Him; strength and beauty are it His sanctuary!”

There is no contradiction; the one case [refers to] the inner chambers, the other case [refers to] the outer chambers.

But behold it is written: “And in that day did the Lord, the God of Hosts, call to weeping and to lamentation, and to baldness, and to girding with sackcloth!” The destruction of the Temple is different, for even the angels of peace wept [over it]; for it is said: “Behold for their altar they cried without; the angels of peace wept bitterly.”

“And mine eye shall drop tears and tears, and run down with tears, because the Lord's flock is carried away captive.” R. Eliezer said: Wherefore these three [expressions of] ‘tears’? One for the First Temple, and one for the Second Temple, and one for Israel, who have become exiled from their place.

Here God is presented as weeping over some of the same topics raised by the *Amoraim*: destruction, Israel’s exile and the disconnection between Him and His people. One of the topics raised is “the glory that has been taken from them and given to the nations of the world”—the *hester panim*, concealment of God’s Presence, which has put the non-Jews in a position of superiority over Israel. In fact, this passage of the *gemara* discusses two instances in which God weeps. One is at the time of the Destruction, which is obvious to all. However, later, during the years of exile, God weeps privately and clandestinely, considering the distance between him and the Jewish People and the position of His children. This is a sort of wordplay about the *hester panim* mentionedabove in the collection; God hides his face, as it were, since He wants to weep over his children. This is also connected to the *hester panim* that the Jewish People experience because they do not feel God’s providence.

The mutual weeping brings a certain consolation, since it reflects the fact that the disconnection is not absolute; even if there is no direct link as exists while the Temple stands, there is still a certain communication, at times indirect, between God and His people. God's weeping, albeit concealed, serves as a type of response to His people's tears.

Ostensibly, we would expect the *sugya* to end at this point, describing the weeping of God, which would complete the circle begun by describing the weeping of the *Amoraim*. However, there are two additional parts of this *sugya* before it draws to a close. The first is the story of Rabbi and R. Chiya.

Rabbi and R. Chiya were once going on a journey. When they came to a certain town, they said: If there is a rabbinical scholar here, we shall go and pay him our respects. They were told: There is a rabbinical scholar here, and he is blind. Said R. Chiya to Rabbi: “Stay [here]; you must not lower your princely dignity; I shall go and visit him.” But [Rabbi] took hold of him and went with him. When they were taking leave from him, he said to them: “You have visited one who is seen but does not see; may you be granted to visit Him who sees but is not seen.” Said [Rabbi to R. Chiya]: “If now [I had listened to you] you would have deprived me of this blessing.” They [then] said to him: “From whom did you hear this?” “I heard it at a discourse of R. Yaakov's.”

For R. Yaakov of Kfar Chittaya used to visit his teacher every day. When he became old, the latter said to him: “Let the master not trouble himself since he is unable.” He replied: “Is it a small thing that is written concerning the Rabbis: ‘And he shall still live always. He shall not see the pit; when he sees that wise man die’? Now if he who sees wise men at their death shall live, how much more so [he who sees them] in their life!”

At first glance, this story seems to diverge from the themes of the aggadic collection. However, if we consider it more fundamentally, we may see that the story of Rabbi and R. Chiya completes the circle and brings us back to the beginning of the collection, which deals with the main topic of the *sugya*: the mitzva of pilgrimage. Two sages go to pay their respects to a blind scholar (even though he cannot see them) and receive a significant blessing: “You have visited one who is seen but does not see; may you be granted to visit Him who sees but is not seen.” In other words, the blessing refers to an ultimate reward of fulfilling the mitzva of pilgrimage with which this *sugya* deals: to the see the face of God in the Temple.

We should note that in this story, we find the same term that appears in the two previous stories discussed above, *hakbalat panim*. The words of the blind scholar here explicitly address the link between *hakbalat panim* of a Torah scholar and *hakbalat panim* of the Divine Presence on the festival! This indicates that in a time of exile, since there can be no *hakbalat panim* of the Divine Presence, there is something of a substitute: *hakbalat panim* of one’s rabbi, as we saw above. The encounter with the Divine Presence in exile is fulfilled by an encounter with the Torah, replacing a direct encounter in the Temple. Therefore, the link between *hakbalat panim* of a blind scholar and the blessing to merit to perform *hakbalat panim* of the Divine Presence is clear. [[2]](#footnote-2)

**Conclusion**

In the first *sugya* in Tractate *Chagiga*, there is an innovative and significant connection between halakhic and aggadic material. The halakhic debate concerns pilgrimage of the festivals, which by the times of the *gemara* was a purely theoretical exercise, in the absence of the Temple. Adding the aggadic sections of the *sugya* reflects the Talmud’s intent to enhance the halakhic debate with additional content, one of great existential power for those living their lives in exile with no possibility of accomplishing a physical encounter, as it were, with the Divine Presence by fulfilling the mitzva of appearing in the Temple. Torah study and encountering its scholars may be something of a Divine encounter, which may serve as a substitute, in time of exile, for the encounter in the Temple. Of course, the more one’s Torah study is lively, deep, and introspective, the more significant the encounter with the Divine Presence becomes. The aggadic sections of the *sugya* thus fill, however it may be, the vacuum in the lives of those who reside in exile, with dynamic, meaningful content—a lacuna which is all the more prominent when one studies the laws and discussions of the mitzva to go up to the Temple and to see the face of God.

Translated by Yoseif Bloch

1. See:

   <http://www.etzion.org.il/he/אגדות-מצות-הראיה-חגיגה-ד-עב-ה-עב-חלק-א>

   <http://www.etzion.org.il/he/אגדות-מצות-הראיה-חגיגה-ד-עב-ה-עב-חלק-ב> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Later on in the *sugya*, an additional story appears, concerning R. Idi, which also suggests a link between pilgrimage on the festivals, on the one hand, and paying respects to one’s teacher and Torah story on the other, but this is not the place to deal with it at length. See the links to my previous series on this topic, which appear in the previous footnote. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)