YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**TALMUDIC AGGADA**

**By Rav Yitzchak Blau**

The htm version of this shiur is available at:

<http://vbm-torah.org/archive/aggada72/06aggada.htm>

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This week’s shiurim are dedicated by Carole S. Daman of Scarsdale in memory of Tzvi Hersh ben David Arye z”l – Harlan Daman

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**Shiur #06: A Stroll in the Garden and Talmud Torah**

This teaches you that the Divine presence does not rest [on someone in a state of] sadness, laziness, levity, lightheadedness, chatter, or idle words, but [only on someone who is experiencing] the joy of a *mitzva*, as it says “And now bring me a minstrel. And when the minstrel played, the hand of God came upon him” (*Melakhim II* 3:15). R. Yehuda said in the name of Rav: “And so too for a halakhic matter.” …Is that so? Did not R. Gidel say in the name of Rav: “If any scholar sits before his teacher and his lips are not dripping bitterness, they should be burned, as it says: ‘His lips are like lilies dripping with flowing myrrh’ (*Shir Ha-shirim* 5:13). Do not read it as flowing myrrh, but as flowing bitterness (‘*mar*’ in Hebrew). Do not read it as ‘lilies’ (‘*shoshanim*’) but as ‘that study;’ (‘*she-shonim*’).” There is no difficulty. One source speaks of the teacher, and one of the student. Alternatively, both sources speak of the teacher, but one speaks about before he begins the lesson, and the other speaks about after he begins, just as Rabba began every lesson with, a joke and the rabbis would laugh. After that, he sat in awe and began the lesson (*Shabbat* 30b).

R. Gidel cites a remarkable interpretation from Rav which somehow converts, “His lips are like lilies dripping myrrh,” into “Lips that study drip bitterness.” This interpretation contradicts R. Yehuda’s quote from Rav that joy promotes productive halakhic study. What motivates the creative reading of *Shir Ha-shirim,* and why associate Torah study with bitterness? Moreover, how do we understand the Gemara’s two methods of resolving the contradiction? Either the instructor is happy while the students are bitter, or the teacher himself grows bitter over the course of the lesson. Again, what generates bitterness in the context of Torah learning?

Torah Temima attempts to account for the innovative interpretation. He points out that the structure of the Hebrew phrase, “His lips are like lilies,” differs from the usual structure of metaphors for parts of the body in the fifth chapter of *Shir Ha-shirim,* in that the phrase leaves out the *kaf ha-dimayon* (the letter *kaf* that indicates that one thing is like another). If the intent of the phrase had been to make a comparison, it should have read “*siftotav ke-shoshanim*” (“His lips are like lilies”) and not “*siftitav shoshanim*” (“His lips are lilies”). Furthermore, myrrh is not the kind of spice that drips, so we have good reason to reinterpret the phrase “*notfot mor.*” Torah Temima’s clever explanations hardly render Rav’s reading the simple interpretation; presumably, non-exegetical factors motivated Rav’s exposition on Torah study and bitterness.

One possible explanation for Rav’s association of Torah study with bitterness is that bitterness stems from fear of embarrassment, which is part of almost any educational setting. Students fear revealing their ignorance in front of peers or teachers. Schools often become highly competitive environments in which a poor answer inspires ridicule. From this perspective, it makes sense that the students experience bitterness in a way that the instructors do not. Teachers who know the material and control the flow of discussion have less to fear. If this explanation is correct, we can understand the Gemara’s first answer, but still have difficulty understanding the second answer, in which the teacher grows bitter after starting the lesson.

Alternatively, the bitterness may be due to the apprehension that goes along with reverence for the rebbe. Rav speaks about a student sitting in front of his teacher. Sitting in front of someone one really admires generates nervous tension, even if one does not fear punishment or embarrassment. Maharsha adopts this approach. This approach, however, still does not explain why the teacher becomes bitter during the course of his presentation.

R. Kook offers a beautiful interpretation of this *gemara* in *Ein Aya*. For him, bitterness refers to the arduous task of striving for wisdom and insight. Attempting to plumb the depths of Torah often brings frustration when insight proves elusive. Acquiring skills, a prerequisite for the authentic pursuit of knowledge, depends upon drudgery and tedious work. Many would prefer to skip the hard labor and just hear nicely laid out conclusions; in a sense, they want to be consumers of Torah, but not producers. I once had a student who would frequently ask me to relate a good *vort* (word of Torah). He was bright enough to appreciate a profound idea, but was uninterested in plowing through sources himself or thinking extensively about how to solve a difficulty. R. Kook argues that such an approach misses an essential component of Torah study.

“Do not read it as lilies.” Do not treat the Torah as a pleasant stroll through a beautiful flower garden. The deepest connection to Torah builds on laborious toil and ongoing effort which includes moments of bitterness and frustration. Who experiences this bitterness? One could say that the students, less knowledgeable by definition, struggle towards comprehension, whereas the erudite teacher simply enjoys Torah, having worked out the issues many years ago. Thus, the first answer says that the student experiences bitterness, whereas the teacher experiences the joy of *mitzvot*.

The second answer takes on profound meaning according to R. Kook’s reading. We have all encountered two types of teachers. Some teachers come with well organized, neatly packaged lectures that the finest student’s comment or question cannot make a dent in. Others find a way to incorporate the queries and insights of the students into the discussion when appropriate. In the second model, the teacher addresses points he did not anticipate or plan for, and this requires hard work. The complexity of Torah means that finished products do not exist, and the material sometimes needs fresh thinking.

A teacher of this latter type enters the lesson feeling content about having worked out the issues. As the lesson progresses, a student raises an important point or the teacher himself suddenly considers a new angle, and the worthwhile teacher realizes that more work remains to be done. In that sense, the teacher moves on to “bitterness” during the course of the lesson. Of course, this bitterness brings joy as well. In R. Gidel’s reading, the verse refers to “*mar over*,” passing bitterness. Complex thought causes moments of aggravation; however, the process of developing an idea or solving a conceptual dilemma ultimately is a source of happiness.

R. Kook accomplishes something quite unusual in his interpretation. Most interpretations of the form, “do not read it as x,” such as “do not read it as sons, but as builders” (*Berakhot* 64a) focus only on the novel reading, but do not derive meaning from the rejected reading. Here, R. Kook makes use of the rejected reading as well. Read it as “bitterness” and do not read it as “lilies.” Relate to Torah as something demanding, not just as something pleasant.

This message should have particular resonance in our contemporary world. Many forces within education seem dedicated to making the pursuit of knowledge easy. Students will read the Cliff notes rather than Shakespeare, and the *Idiot’s Guide to Philosophy* in place of David Hume or William James. Let us candidly admit that the same phenomenon exists in the Torah world. A boon in Jewish publishing includes numerous works translated into English as well as complex works summarized and abridged in neat packages. It is much easier to read Ramban’s Torah commentary in translation or to look at a summary than to take on the difficult task of deciphering the original unabridged text. Is it only a matter of time before the Art Scroll *Minchat Chinukh* or *Ketzot Ha-choshen* comes out? These English works make a contribution in opening up Torah for many who could not access it otherwise; nevertheless, those capable of more should strive for more. A dedicated student willing to go through the bitterness of planting and cultivating will eventually experience a far sweeter smelling rose garden, but there are no shortcuts.