YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**TALMUDIC AGGADA**

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The htm version of this shiur is available at:

<http://vbm-torah.org/archive/aggada72/13aggada.htm>

**Shiur #13: Recalling the Day of Death as a Strategy of Repentance**

Tremble, and do not sin; commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still. Selah (*Tehillim* 4:5).

The above translation follows Radak in reading “*rigzu*” as trembling. However, the word “*rogez*” can also connote anger and contention. The following *gemara* builds on that connotation:

R. Levi bar Chama said in the name of R. Shimon ben Lakish: A person should always incite his good inclination against his evil inclination, as it says: “Tremble and do not sin.” If he succeeds, well and good; if not, he should engage in Torah study, as it says: “Commune with your own heart.” If he succeeds, well and good; if not, he should recite the *Shema,* as it says: “Upon your bed.” If he succeeds, well and good; if not, he should remind himself of the day of death, as it says: “And be still. Selah” (*Berakhot* 5a).

This interpretation breaks the verse down into four components, where each component is a strategy for preventing sin. We begin with the basic approach of trying to overcome our evil inclinations through more positive aspects of our personality. When that does not work, we turn to Torah study and the *Shema*. Meiri has an unusual reading of those two stages in which “*ya’asok b’Torah*” refers to fulfilling the commandments, whereas *Shema* symbolizes concentrating on the existence and singularity of God. Thus, we have approaches based on repeated practice and intellectual appreciation.

R. Yechezkel Landau, in his *Tziyyun Le-nefesh Chaya*, thinks that the second strategy refers to Torah study, which prevents idleness, a frequent cause of evil actions. So much foolish behavior results from not having positive content with which to fill one’s time. R. Landau cites Rambam’s closing message in *Hilkhot Issurei Biah* (22:21): “A person should turn himself and his thoughts to words of Torah and expand his knowledge of wisdom, because thoughts of lewdness only become overpowering in a heart empty of wisdom.” According to R. Landau, if one is regularly occupied with thoughts of Torah, thoughts of sexual immorality will not be overpowering, because there is no space for them. Alternatively, Torah study provides wisdom and perspective, which helps to avoid transgression.

Of course, Torah study does not guarantee good behavior, and we may encounter those knowledgeable in Torah whose actions leave much to be desired. R. Yaakov Reisher says that Torah study only helps when the person studying allows the ideas to penetrate into the core of his being. When the study is “from the lips and outward,” an intellectual gesture with no dimension of personal transformation, it remains inert and ineffective.

How does the final strategy work? Thinking about death may inspire fear of Divine punishment on the day of ultimate judgment, and it may also provide perspective on the true worth of worldly things. Why pursue wealth when you cannot take it with you? In either case, this last strategy seems a powerful one; it works even when Torah study and reciting the *Shema* have failed. If so, why not save time and simply skip the earlier stages, beginning with the most effective remedy against the evil inclination?

In the context of physical health, powerful medicine often brings negative side effects, and the world of the spirit is no different. R. Yaakov Reisher suggests that focusing on death causes depression, which is not conducive to being productive. Illness may lead us to administer strong medication, but we only take it as a last resort, due to negative side effects. In the same way, we prefer to combat sin without dwelling on death, but will do so if necessary. R. Kook finds a related problem with this powerful prescription. In characteristic fashion, he argues that all human traits have their legitimate place; therefore, our goal is not to neutralize aspects of the human personality, but to channel them in positive directions. Torah study and reciting the *Shema* help achieve that goal. Thinking about death, on the other hand, often crushes parts of our personality, leaving them unredeemed. As a result, we only adopt this strategy as a last resort.

This issue touches on the famous story about the *mussar* movement controversy told by R. Yosef Dov Soloveitchik. When R. Yisrael Salanter and his disciples founded the *mussar* movement, prominent rabbinic figures fought the introduction of *mussar* to *yeshivot*. *Halakhic Man* recounts a debate between R. Yitzchak Blaser, disciple of R. Salanter, and R. Hayyim Soloveitchik. The latter objected to early *mussar’s* emphasis on fear of punishment and thoughts of mortality. R. Blaser cited our *gemara* in *Berakhot* to bolster his position, and R. Hayyim countered the proof:

Evidently, R. Blaser emphasized, the Sages preferred the effectiveness of the remembrance of the day of death to the study of the Torah, for do we not have here stated that at times occupying oneself with Torah will not subdue the evil impulse while the remembrance of the day of death will vanquish it? R. Hayyim replied: “If a person is sick we prescribe castor oil for him. However, it is certain that if a healthy person ingests castor oil he will become very sick… We in Volozhin, thank God, are healthy in spirit and body, are whole in our Torah; there is no need here for castor oil (*Halakhic Man*, p. 75).

Despite the cogency of the above approaches, I believe that a more profound argument lies at the heart of R. Shimon ben Lakish’s reluctance to use the day of death as a spur to repentance. R. Reisher argues that the day of death is a very effective medicine, but one with dangerous side effects. But one can challenge R. Reisher’s assumption that remembering the day of death is effective. R Eliyahu Lopian (1876 - 1970) was an influential *Rosh Yeshiva and Mashgiach* (Yeshiva head and spiritual advisor) in England and Israel. In his *Lev Eliyahu* (*parashat Toldot*), he insightfully explains why musing about death may be ineffective. Thoughts of mortality certainly create a sense of urgency; given little time, we rightfully focus on what we truly care about. Yet some people’s ultimate concerns revolve around the trivial and the mundane. If a person’s lifetime goal is pursuing the perfect steak, then thinking about the limited time remaining will only energize his attempts to locate novel steak options. As Yeshayahu pointed out long ago, some react to the prospect of death by indulging in physicality: “And behold joy and gladness, slaying oxen and killing sheep, eating flesh and drinking wine--'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we shall die!'” (*Yeshayahu* 22:13). A sense of urgency only helps those whose heart is in the right place to begin with.

R. Lopian cites an earlier biblical source for this idea. Esav says: “I am at the point of death; what do I need the birthright for?” (*Bereishit* 25:32). According to Rashi, Esav considers the many halakhic restrictions involved in Temple service and foresees committing a capital offense. In a more straightforward reading, Ibn Ezra explains that hunting reflects a dangerous lifestyle, so Esav harbors constant doubts about how long he will live. Either way, thoughts of mortality do not bring Esav to greater religiosity; on the contrary, they make him think about his next meal.

Chatam Sofer’s creative reading of a different *gemara* echoes R. Lopian’s insight:

Reish Lakish sold himself to the Ludae (Rashi *Shabbat* 10a says that they Ludae were cannibals. Marcus Jastrow says that they were people who hire men for gladiatorial contests). He took with him a sack and a stone. He said (to himself): “I know that on a person’s last day (before they kill him), they grant him whatever he wishes so that his blood will be atoned for.” On his last day, they said: “What would you like?” He said: “I want to tie you up and sit you down and give each one of you a sack and a half (i.e. hit them with the sack).” He tied them up and sat them down. He hit each one of them, and their spirit departed. They gnashed their teeth. He said: “Are you smiling at me? I still have another half to give you.” He killed them all (*Gittin* 47a).

We could take this *gemara* at face value, portraying Reish Lakish as heroically and cleverly removing scourges of society. Accepting such a literal approach, Tosafot think this story must have occurred in the earlier stages of Reish Lakish’s life, before he joined the world of the *beit midrash* (see *Bava Metzia* 84a). Yet given the fantastical nature of this tale, it might make more sense to read it allegorically. R. Sofer does so by connecting this *gemara* with Reish Lakish’s statement in *Berakhot* 5a. He identifies the Ludae as the evil inclination that consumes flesh. The hit refers to *Shema* and Torah study, the preferable ways of subduing the evil inclination; the half hit refers to recalling the day of death, a less optimum strategy. Given Reish Lakish’s righteousness, the first hit knocked out the evil inclination, and he did not require the half hit.

Like R. Lopian, R. Sofer mentions the possibility of mortality motivating a turn to hedonism. He says that remembering the day of death only works when one first studies Torah and recites *Shema*. Given the right background and priorities, thoughts of death can help. Yet this strategy has great limitations; it requires the right context to work and, even when effective, causes negative side effects.

Educators who are frustrated by their students’ apathy may try to up the emotional ante by talking about such matters as death or the Holocaust. They feel that only such powerful themes will affect indifferent students. R. Lopian and R. Sofer remind us not to quickly adopt such an approach. Torah study and reciting the *Shema* are more basic and positive educational strategies.