YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Talmudic *Aggadot***

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Shiur #15: The Story of the Riverfront Wood (Part I)

Introduction

# As in the previous *shiurim*, in this *shiur* we will deal with a narrative of a halakhic character. In the framework of the genre of “stories of the sages,” this example may be less familiar. However, as we will see, such tales are not merely the description of legal cases, but rather narratives that broaden the canvas to a certain extent.

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In the ninth chapter of *Bava Metzia* (107b), the Babylonian Talmud cites a narrative addressing cases in which trees on one’s property are impeding the passage of the public in one way or another. In our case, this is a wooded area of riverfront property. Naturally, such instances would be rare in the arid Land of Israel, but in Babylonia (i.e. Mesopotamia), in which rivers are abundant, such occurrences were common. Thus, the setting of this story is in Babylonia.

In addition, this story demonstrates two more general principles:

1. In this series of *shiurim*, we have often compared stories in the Babylonian Talmud to the parallels in the Jerusalem Talmud or other sources from the Land of Israel. However, it is important to recall that many stories in the Babylonian Talmud, in particular those dealing with Babylonian personages, are wholly original, with no analogues — certainly not complete parallels — in sources from the Land of Israel.
2. We have often stated that it is important to study a Talmudic story in its broader context in the *sugya*. Indeed, whenever we study a narrative, we must examine the context and try to determine what the story contributes to the broader context, as well as what the integration of the narrative into this context contributes to the reading of the story. At the same time, we must be aware of the existence of another editorial method, a more associative one. We may sometimes encounter stories that have a loose connection to the broader context of the *sugya*, and it may be impossible to point to a concrete contribution of the story to the *sugya* or vice versa. Experience shows that this is often not the case; we must expend serious effort to uncover the links and connections between the stories and the broader context. Nevertheless, sometimes we must accept the fact that the redactors of the Babylonian Talmud may employ a purely associative method, and we can only analyze the story on its own merits. In this *shiur*, we will demonstrate how such a *sugya* develops as well.

Before we consider the story itself, let us consider the context in the *mishna* and the *sugya*.

**Context of the Narrative in the *Sugya***

The *mishna* teaches:

If one leases a field from a neighbor to sow barley, one may not sow wheat; to sow wheat, one may sow barley. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says this is forbidden.

If one leases a field from a neighbor to sow grains, one may not sow legumes; to sow legumes, one may sow grains. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says this is forbidden. (*Bava Metzia* 9:8)

Interestingly, if we look at Mishnaic manuscripts (e.g. Kaufmann), we discover the opposite:

If one leases a field from a neighbor to sow grains, one may sow legumes.

Indeed, the contrast is expressed in the *gemara* (107a), which is aware of the contradiction between the two Mishnaic traditions, as expressed in a debate between R. Yehuda and Ravin:

If one leases a field from a neighbor to sow grains, one may not sow legumes, etc. R. Yehuda taught Ravin: If one leases a field from a neighbor to sow grains, one may sow legumes.

He replied: But did we not learn, “If one leases a field from a neighbor to sow grains, one may not sow legumes”?

He responded: There is no difficulty; this refers to ourselves; the other, to them.

In other words, R. Yehuda explains that there is difference between the Babylonian tradition of this *mishna* and that of the Land of Israel. Indeed, this is expressed precisely by the various manuscripts. Many of the manuscripts of the Babylonian Talmud have a version of the *mishna* that differs from the manuscripts of Mishna alone (such as the Kaufmann manuscript mentioned above). It is a matter of consensus that the Mishnaic manuscripts reflect a tradition more in keeping with that of the Land of Israel, which deviates somewhat from the Babylonian version.

The *gemara* goes on to cite three statement of R. Yehuda to Ravin, along with debates of varying length inspired by each of these statements:

R. Yehuda said to Ravin bar R. Nachman: My brother Ravin! The cress that grows among flax is not forbidden [to strangers] as robbery…

R. Yehuda said to Ravin bar R. Nachman: [Some of] these [fruits] of mine are really yours; and some of yours are really mine…

R. Yehuda said to Ravin bar R. Nachman: My brother Ravin, do not buy a field that is near a town…

In the next stage of the *sugya* (107b), two additional statements of R. Yehuda are mentioned, this time to R. Ada the surveyor[[1]](#footnote-2) concerning the importance of precision in measurement. These statements seem to be tied to the *sugya* solely by dint of the authority who voices them, R. Yehuda.[[2]](#footnote-3) The second statement addresses the measurement of distance kept between fields and the stream that passes between them, as well as the measurement of distance kept between fields or private wooded areas and the river. In the final case, R. Yehuda instructs the assayer to measure the distance generously, not exactly, so that the result will be a bit more than the standard four cubits.

R. Yehuda [also] said to R. Ada the surveyor: The four cubits on the canal banks you may treat lightly, but those on the riverbanks do not measure at all.

Rashi explains (s.v. *lo*): “Calculate it approximately, so that it will be visible to any observer that they are complete and broad.”

In this context, R. Ammi’s declaration is cited: “Cut down [all vegetation] in the shoulder-breadth of bargemen on both sides of the river.”[[3]](#footnote-4) The bargemen would pull the boats along by rope, and they needed enough space on the riverbank to move freely as they leaned away from the water and pulled the barges.

After the proclamation, we find the case of R. Natan bar Hoshaya, who errs and cuts down sixteen cubits of vegetation on the riverbank, even though less would have been sufficient. After this case, the story of Rabba bar R. Huna’s wood is cited.

**The Story**

**A**

1. Rabba bar R. Huna possessed a forest by the riverbank.
2. They said to him, “Sir, make a clearing [for river traffic].”
3. He replied, “Let the owners above and below me first clear [their portion], and then I will cut down mine.”

**B**

1. But how might he act so? Is it not written, “Gather yourselves together, and gather [others] (*hitkosheshu va-koshu*)”?
2. And Resh Lakish rendered it thus: “First adorn [rebuke] yourself, and then adorn others.”
3. In that instance, the [neighboring] forests belonged to Parzak the satrap.  Therefore, he [Rabba] said, “If they cut down [their forests], I will do so likewise; but if not, why should I?
4. For if they can still haul their ropes, they have room for walking; if not, they cannot walk there [in any case].”

**C**

1. Rabba bar R. Nachman was travelling in a boat.
2. He saw a forest on the riverbank.
3. He inquired, “To whom does this belong?”
4. “To Rabba bar R. Huna,” he was told.
5. He thereupon cited the verse, *“*And the leaders and officials have led the way in this unfaithfulness” (*Ezra* 9:2).
6. He then ordered, “Cut it down, cut it down (*Kotzu, kotzu*)!”
7. Then Rabba bar R. Huna came and found it cut down.
8. He declared, “Whoever cut it down, may his branches be cut down!”
9. It was related that during the whole lifetime of Rabba bar R. Huna, none of Rabba bar R. Nachman's children remained alive.

**Narrative Design and Literary Structure**

The *aggada* before us consists of a narrative about Babylonian *Amora’im* containing two parts. In the middle, the Gemara interrupts, as it were, to offer commentary, creating a tripartite *aggada*.

In order to analyze this *aggada*, we will address the Amoraic narrative on its own merits, as well as the whole of this section, as it exists in its final state before us in the *sugya*.

In the Amoraic narrative, Rabba bar R. Huna is asked to cut down the growth of a wooded area belong to him on the riverbank, in accordance with the law propounded before the *aggada*. Rabba bar R. Huna demurs, declaring that he will do so only once his neighbors upriver and downriver have cut down the trees on their property.

In the second stage, Rabba bar R. Nachman floats down the river and is furious at Rabba bar R. Huna for not trimming his wood, so he gives the order personally to chop down the trees and clear the brush. In his wrath upon Rabba bar R. Huna, he quotes a verse from the book of *Ezra* referring to leaders who fail as role models, neglecting their legal responsibilities. Rabba bar R. Huna takes umbrage at the aggressive landscaping, and he pronounces a curse that is phrased to invoke and incur the practical ramifications of logging: “Whoever cut it down, may his branches be cut down.” Rabba bar R. Nachman’s family tree is to be savaged the way Rabba bar R. Huna’s literal tree has been chopped down. This is measure for measure, *midda ke-negged midda*. Indeed, the *aggada* concludes with the observation that the curse comes true; throughout Rabba bar R. Huna’s lifetime, Rabba bar R. Nachman does not merit to see offspring.

The Amoraic narrative does something of a hatchet job on Rabba bar R. Huna’s character, as his conduct is quite problematic for almost the entire length of the story. His refusal to clear his land is in direct opposition to the accepted ordinance cited before the story, and the criticism of Rabba bar R. Nachman is particularly caustic and lacerating. Rabba bar R. Nachman uses a biblical citation from the beginning of the ninth chapter of *Ezra*:

After these things had been done, the leaders came to me and said, “The people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the neighboring peoples with their detestable practices, like those of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites. They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, and have mingled the holy seed with the peoples around them. And the leaders and officials have led the way in this unfaithfulness.

This quote makes Rabba bar R. Nachman’s claim particularly wounding. Ezra is confronted by the serious indictment of the Jewish People in the Land of Israel, among whom intermarriage has become a widespread phenomenon — particularly among the ruling class. This information leads Ezra to respond harshly,[[4]](#footnote-5) demonstrating how seriously he takes this sin in general, and the complicity of the ruling class in particular. Many Talmudic stories attest to the fact that the Sages did not hesitate to criticize their fellow scholars — as long as those scholars were not their superiors — in cases in which their colleagues had seem to act improperly.

However, the story concludes with a curse that Rabba bar R. Huna pronounces against Rabba bar R. Nachman, as well as the fulfillment of that curse. This conclusion seems to challenge, to a certain extent, the feeling that arises from the rest of the story, a feeling that absolute justice lies on the side of Rabba bar R. Nachman.

However, it may be that the curse and its fulfillment emerge from Rabba bar R. Nachman’s method of operation — chopping down Rabba bar R. Huna’s trees without speaking to him first — as opposed to his sharp claim against him. This also arises from the formulation of Rabba bar R. Huna’s response: “Whoever **cut it down,** may his branches be cut down!”Thus, the fact that the curse if fulfilled does not necessarily prove that Rabba bar R. Nachman’s claim has no validity. It is possible that he would have emerged unscathed if his criticism of Rabba bar R. Huna had been limited to verbalization, stopping before the instruction, “Cut it down, cut it down!” His action creates a change in reality; otherwise, he would not be cursed.

Another possibility is that a scholar’s curse has an inherent, independent power, regardless of its justification.[[5]](#footnote-6) Indeed, this fact alone constitutes a certain positive reflection of Rabba bar R. Huna’s character; he is of sufficient stature to have his curse fulfilled. Thus, in terms of the literary effect on the reader, it appears that the end of the narrative, with the punishment of Rabba bar R. Nachman, challenges to a certain extent the one-sidedness of the decision among the sages, leaving the reader with a complex feeling, even though the matter is not conclusive.

As noted above, the Amoraic narrative is cited in the *sugya* as separated into two parts. In between, the *gemara* challenges Rabba bar R. Huna’s conduct based on the statement of Reish Lakish, which requires a person to serve as a role model and to first personally fulfill that which one demands from others. The response of the *gemara* is that in this case, Rabba bar R. Huna’s actions would have been irrelevant, since his neighbor was a Persian official;[[6]](#footnote-7) it would have been quite unlikely that such a person would have agreed to cut down the vegetation on his property. Thus, even if Rabba bar R. Huna would have chopped down his wood, the bargemen would never have had true freedom of movement to ply their trade on the riverbank.

It is possible that the *gemara*’s interruption of the flow of the narrative emerges from an external concern – the desire to moderate criticism of one of the sages, out of a general viewpoint that, as much as possible, depictions of the sages as sinful or mistaken should be minimized. This is true despite the fact that, as noted above, in other places in the Babylonian Talmud we find sharp criticism of a given sage who erred or stumbled.

Another possibility is that the *gemara*’s question is not propelled by some ideological motivation. Rather, since Rabba bar R. Huna’s claim contradicts Reish Lakish’s dictum, “First adorn yourself, and then adorn others,” the *gemara* has no choice but to point out the incongruity of these two elements.

Alternatively, it is possible that the Talmudic redactors’ interruption is motivated by the conclusion of the story. As stated above, the fulfillment of the curse challenges, at least to a certain extent, the clear feeling that Rabba bar R. Nachman is in the right and Rabba bar R. Huna is in the wrong. In light of this, there is an increased need to find a reasonable explanation that justifies Rabba bar R. Huna’s conduct. If this is correct, the middle part of the *aggada* ties together the two other parts:[[7]](#footnote-8) it provides an explanation for the conduct of Rabba bar R. Huna described in the first part, as well as further explaining Rabba bar R. Huna’s ire and the fulfillment of his curse in the third part.

Conversely, it appears that on another level, the middle part of the story also directs a certain degree of criticism at Rabba bar R. Huna. Considering the literary structure of the story reveals the term that recurs, “Cut it down, cut it down (*Kotzu, kotzu*)!” This creates wordplay with the verse cited by Reish Lakish, “Gather yourselves together, and gather [others] (*Hitkosheshu va-koshu)*.” The similarity between the words emphasizes the claim made against Rabba bar R. Huna, who was supposed to be an example and cut down his trees on the riverbank, as the law requires.

Thus, the role of the second part in the *aggada* is complex. This in turn reflects the complexity that characterizes the *aggada* in its entirety in evaluating the actions of the characters within it.

In next week's shiur we will shed more light on the various parts of the story by examining parallels on which some of the building blocks of this story based on.

Translated by Yoseif Bloch

1. Rashi ad loc. See Sokoloff, *Babylonian Aramaic Dictionary*, p. 712. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. It may be that the topic of precision is shared with the law in the *mishna*, which deals with the precise designation of a field and the laws of precision in measurement, but this link appears to be very general and rather loose. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. E.S. Rosenthal address this expression in his article, *“Masoret Halakha Ve-Chiddushei Halakhot Be-Mishnat Chakhamim,” Tarbitz* 63 (1994), pp. 368-374, particularly n. 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. See ibid., vv. 3-6 in particular. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Some sources in the Babylonian Talmud relate to a sage’s curse (e.g. *Berakhot* 56a, *Sanhedrin* 90b; cf. *Makkot* 11a): “The curse of a sage, even if unmerited, is fulfilled.” Thus, it is not apparent from the fact that the curse was fulfilled that the end of the story favors the position of Rabba bar R. Huna. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Cf. Rashi, s.v. *hatam*; Sokoloff (*Babylonian Aramaic Dictionary*, p. 1067) translates the term as “high official.” See also Samuel Krauss*,* *Paras Ve-Romi Ba-Talmud U-Vamidrashim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1948), p. 250. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Such a role for the middle section of a tripartite story is typical; see Yona Fraenkel, *Sippur Ha-Aggada: Achdut shel Tokhen Ve-Tzura* (Tel Aviv: 2001), pp. 82-88. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)