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/aggada72/25aggada.htm>

**Shiur #25: Miracles and Religion**

R. Yochanan said: “What is meant by the verse: ‘Many daughters have done valiantly, but you surpass them all’ (*Mishlei* 26:29)? ‘Many daughters,' refers to Yosef and Boaz; 'and you surpass them all,' to Palti son of Layish.” R. Shmuel b. Nahmani said in R. Yonatan's name: “What is meant by the verse: ‘Grace is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman that fears the Lord, she shall be praised’ (*Mishlei* 26:30)?'Grace is deceitful' refers to Yosef; 'and beauty is vain' to Boaz; while 'and a woman that fears the Lord, she shall be praised,' to the case of Palti son of Layish.” Another interpretation is: “'Grace is deceitful,' refers to the generation of Moshe; 'and beauty is vain' to that of Yehoshua; 'and she that fears the Lord shall be praised,' to that of Chizkiya.” Others say: “'Grace is deceitful,' refers to the generations of Moshe and Yehoshua; 'and beauty is vain,' to the generation of Chizkiya; while 'she that fears the Lord shall be praised' refers to the generation of R. Yehuda son of R. Ila'i. They said about R. Yehuda bar Ila’i that six of his disciples had to cover themselves with one garment between them, yet they studied the Torah.” (*Sanhedrin* 20a)

This Gemara offers three different interrelations of the well known penultimate verse of *Mishlei*, all of which involve one person or generation surpassing two others. In the first example, the nature of the contrast is clear. Both Yosef and Boaz overcame sexual temptation and, according to the *aggada*, so did Palti when he refrained from relations with Michal due to her marriage to David. Commentators explain that Palti outdid Yosef and Boaz because his restraint was over a longer period of time. The other two contrasts require more elucidation.

According to the second interpretation, Chizkiya’s generation outdid those of Moshe and Aharon. Rashi explains that all three generations studied a good deal of Torah, but Chizkiya’s generation achieved the most. Indeed, the Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 94b) says about this generation: “Search was made from Dan to Beer Sheva and no ignoramus was found; from Gabbat to Antipris, and no boy or girl, man or woman was found who was not thoroughly versed in the laws of *tuma* and *tahara* (ritual impurity and purity).” Every child knowing the laws of *tuma* and *tahara* reflects a fairly astounding educational achievement.

R. Yaakov Reisher suggests that the comparison relates to dealing with difficulty and the degree of Divine help received. Moshe’s generation witnessed the wonders of manna falling and God miraculously providing daily sustenance. Yehoshua’s generation also received intensive Divine assistance. Chizkiya’s generation, though they did experience miraculous intervention against the threat of Sancherev, dealt with far greater difficulty, including both economic hardship and political dependence as manifest in the king’s decision to give the doors of the *heikhal* (sanctuary) as a gift to the king of Ashur.

This reading would flow naturally into the third opinion contrasting the generations of Moshe, Yehoshua, and Chizkiya with that of R. Yehuda bar Ila’i. That contrast clearly relates to withstanding economic hardship, since the students of R. Yehuda are praised for studying Torah despite their need to share a garment among six people. If so, the last two comparisons utilize the identical measure —a measure which first highlights the worth of Chizkiya’s generation and then that of R. Yehuda bar Ila’i.

R. Reuven Margoliyot, in his *Margoliyot Ha-yam*, notes an oddity in the Gemara’s wording. Why introduce a story about disciples with the words: “They said about R. Yehuda bar Ila’i?” It is actually a story about his students’ dedication, not about their teacher. He notes that R. Yehuda and his wife apparently shared one cloak (*Nedarim* 49b). R. Yehuda’s students watched a model of overcoming poverty on a daily basis, and this impacted on their behavior. If so, a story about these students is also a story about their teacher.

Until now, we have assumed the simple interpretation of six students studying under one cloak. Maharsha posits an alternative reading based on associations with the cloak (*talit)* in other Talmudic sources. One *gemara* (*Bava Batra* 98a) speaks of someone arrogantly dressing up in the *talit* of a scholar. Another *gemara* (*Bava Batra* 57b) indicates that a scholar’s *talit* was larger than the norm. If so, dressing up in a larger garment indicates excessive pride in donning the mantle of a scholar. In contrast, six students dividing up one *talit* bespeaks impressive humility.

Let us return to R. Reisher’s reading and take it in a different direction. He pointed out the greater miraculous help that earlier generations experienced in contrast to that of a later generation. For R. Reisher, the *gemara* teaches about dedication under trying circumstances. R. Meir Simcha Ha-kohen from Dvinsk sees this *gemara* as advancing a broader theological point about miracles (*Meshekh Chokhma Devarim* 32:3). In several places in his commentary, he emphasizes that life within the natural order reflects the true purpose of existence. A miraculous existence mirrors the world to come, but is not the ideal in this world. The *gemara* first favors Chizkiya’s generation for functioning within nature more than the generations of Moshe and Aharon. It then favors R. Yehuda who lived in a fully non–miraculous era, whereas Chizkiya benefitted from the wondrous destruction of Sancherev’s army.

Even though God prefers the stability of the natural order, He allowed for a more obvious Divine presence in some early generations to encourage faith in God to take root in the Jewish soul. This explains the generations of Moshe and Aharon. R. Meir Simcha insightfully points out how our patriarchs’ existence did not resemble that of Moshe. Avraham does not receive overt Divine help in finding a burial plot for his wife; rather, he pays the full fee of four hundred coins.

In fact, this distinction helps explain God’s meaning when He tells Moshe: “I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov, as God Almighty, but by My name YHWH I have not made Myself known to them” (*Shemot* 6:3). In what sense did God not reveal his name to our patriarchs? Some commentators explain that God made promises to them, and they did not witness the fulfillment of those promises. Ramban disagrees; instead, he explains that the patriarchsdid not experience God altering the fundamental laws of nature. Avraham won a battle against four powerful kings with weaponry and soldiers. God helped behind the scenes, but not in a manner similar to the ten plagues or the splitting of the Red Sea. For R. Meir Simcha, the patriarchs’ more naturalistic life represents the model future generations follow.

Though I strongly identify with R. Meir Simcha’s position, I must demur from one of his arguments. He writes that the more miraculous time period produced a situation in which “they almost lost their free will.” It seems that an advantage of the natural order is that it more successfully preserves human freedom. Miracles overwhelm humanity with the Divine presence and power, and reduce our ability to freely choose. I question whether biblical history backs up this assumption. The generation that lived the most miraculous existence in our history also committed the transgressions of the golden calf, the spies, and the Korach rebellion, among many others. Apparently, witnessing the plagues and the daily arrival of manna is no guarantee against moral and spiritual backsliding.

John Henry Newman has a sermon entitled “Miracles No Remedy for Unbelief” in which he makes this point. He says that many religious people do not doubt God’s existence and providence, and yet they manage to sin. Why should experiencing a miracle change that? True, miracles can startle, but such emotional impact tends to wear off over the course of time. Instead of thinking that witnessing a miracle would insure our religious devotion, we should heed Newman’s word: “Let us then put aside vain excuses; and instead of looking for outward events to change our course of life, be sure of this, that if our course of life is to be changed, it must be from within.”

This shiur will take a break and resume in a few weeks. Kol tuv.