YESHIVAT HAR EZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Ein Yaakov - The World of Talmudic Aggada**

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**Lecture 33: Daf 9a-9b**

**The Borrowers**

After concluding its discussion of prayer in the synagogue, the Gemara at long last returns to the *mishna*. The Gemara takes up the *mishna*’s discussion of practices, like the evening *Shema*, which have deadlines at night. This discussion brings the Gemara to the dispute between R. Akiva and R. Elazar ben Azaria regarding whether the final time for eating the *korban* *Pesach* (Passover sacrifice) is the end of the night or midnight. The Ein Yaakov cites the end of this discussion. As far as I can tell, he does so only in order to set the context for the aggadic passages that follow. These passages open with a discussion of the night of the first Passover, when the Children of Israel asked “to borrow” gold and silver utensils from the Egyptians:

‘Speak now [*na*] in the ears of the people, etc.’ (*Shemot* 11:2).

In the school of R. Yanai they said:

The word *'na'* is a term of entreaty.

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moshe:

I pray of thee, go and tell Israel,

I pray of you to borrow from the Egyptians

vessels of silver and vessels of gold,

so that this righteous man [Avraham] may not say:

‘And they shall serve them, and they shall afflict them,’

He did fulfill for them,

But, ‘And afterward shall they come out

with great substance’ (*Bereishit* 15:14)

He did not fulfill for them.

This passage appears to express certain qualms with the whole incident in which the Israelites deceived the Egyptians in order to despoil them of all their wealth. The Gemara stresses that the Children of Israel did not undertake this mission out of greed. God had to beg Moshe, who in turn had to beg the Children of Israel, to go forward with this plan. Taking the Egyptians’ gold was more for God’s benefit than for Israel’s. God promised Avraham that his descendants would gain great wealth after they were freed from their years of bondage and persecution. God is now dependent on Moshe and Israel to go and ask the Egyptians for their riches. Should they decline to do so, God will appear as having reneged on his promise to Avraham.

The Gemara now explains Israel’s lack of interest in wealth,

They said to him:

If only we could get out with our lives!

A parable:

[They were] like a man who was kept in prison

and people told him:

Tomorrow, they will release you from the prison

and give you plenty of money.

And he answered them:

I pray of you, let me go free today

and I shall ask nothing more!

After suffering so much at the hands of the Egyptians, the Children of Israel had only one interest --freedom. They could not concern themselves with ‘minor’ issues such as money. On one level, this state of mind can be seen as a positive thing. Through their sufferings, the Israelites gain perspective on that which is important in life. They are no longer interested in the material pleasures that can be bought with gold and silver. Rather, they are only interested in being free to serve God.

One can also read this passage as being mildly critical of the Children of Israel. They have been so beaten down and broken by their enslavement that they lack the ability to see beyond their own most immediate needs. In George Bernard Shaw’s image, “When a prisoner sees the door to his dungeon open, he dashes for it without stopping to think where he shall get his dinner outside” (*Back to Methuselah*, Introduction). The Israelites cannot conceive of a future in which gold and silver might be of use to them. They are like Bontche Schveig, the hero of the classic I.L. Peretz story of the same name. Having lived a life of depravation and suffering, in which he has never once complained about his lot, Bontche is at long last called to heaven. In reward for his forbearance, the heavenly tribunal declares that he may have whatever he wants among all the riches of the universe. Bontche asks merely for a roll with butter every day. Sometimes, the Jewish people are so crushed by exile that when redemption comes they are not up to embracing it. In our case, God must beg the Children of Israel to take their just reward for their years of service.

The Gemara continues its discussion of this matter:

‘And they let them have what they asked’ (*Shemot* 12:36).

R. Ami says:

This teaches that

they let them have it against their will.

Some say,

against the will of the Egyptians,

and some say,

against the will of the Israelites.

Those that say

'against the will of the Egyptians'

cite the verse:

‘And she that tarrieth at home divideth the spoil’ (*Tehillim* 66:13).

Those that say:

'against the will of the Israelites’

say it was because of the burden [of carrying it].

‘And they despoiled Egypt’ (*Shemot* 12:36).

R. Ami says:

This teaches that

they made it like a trap  without grain [as bait].

Resh Lakish said:

They made it like a pond without fish.

Here we have a debate regarding the meaning of R. Ami’s statement that the Egyptians’ gold and silver was given “against their will.” Some say this phrase means against the Egyptians’ will. This explanation would appear to be the most simple. The Egyptians did not want to part with their valuables. They only did so because they want the Israelites out of their country at all costs, in order to forestall any further plagues from God.

The other position argues that the Children of Israel received this wealth against their will. This explanation takes us back to the previous passage, in which the Israelites are portrayed as wanting no part in the Egyptians’ treasures. This time, however, their lack of interest is explained somewhat differently. The Israelites did not lack interest in, or appreciation of, material wealth. Rather, they had a pragmatic concern. When traveling in the desert, a person needs to keep his baggage to a minimum. All of these extra possessions would only weigh them down and potentially endanger their lives.

**Too Much Information**

The next piece of exegesis would at first appear to be unrelated to the current discussion:

‘I am that I am’ (*Shemot* 3:14).

The Holy One, blessed be He,

said to Moshe:

Go and say to Israel:

I was with you in this servitude,

and I shall be with you

in the servitude of the [other] kingdoms.

He said to Him:

Lord of the Universe,

sufficient is the evil in the time thereof!

Thereupon the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him:

Go and tell them:

‘I AM has sent me unto you’ (ibid.).

This piece of exegesis seeks to resolve an apparent contradiction in a biblical verse. When God appears to Moshe at the burning bush, He declares His name to be, *eheyeh* *asher* *eheyeh*, commonly translated as “I am that I am”. However, at the end of the very same verse, God refers to Himself simply as *eheyeh.* How can we account for God’s sudden shortening of His name?

The Gemara understands the term *eheyeh* here as being in the future tense, meaning “I will be.” The Gemara also sees *eheyeh* as shorthand for the phrase “I will be with you in your suffering.” We have seen the theme of God accompanying His people into exile and suffering on several occasions in this chapter of *Berakhot*. The *Midrash Tanchuma* (14) famously cited by Rashi, similarly understands the burning bush as symbolizing God’s willingness to suffer along with His people. Perhaps this is why *Chazal* (the Sages) interpreted the term *eheyeh* as referring to God’s empathy for Israel’s suffering.

The Gemara interprets God’s initial double use of the term *eheyeh* as meaning that God is committed to accompanying Israel not only through their current exile in Egypt, but through all future exiles as well. This prompts Moshe to respond, “Sufficient is the evil in the time thereof!” We might render this more colloquially as, “We have enough trouble right now!” We don’t need to hear about future exiles as well! God responds by shortening His name to *eheyeh*, thereby referring only to the current exile in Egypt and relieving Moshe and the Israelites of any need to contemplate future travails.

Moshe’s response here is reminiscent of the Israelites’ attitude toward the Egyptian gold above. In both cases, Moshe and Israel are so beaten down by their present circumstances that they lack the strength to focus on anything but their immediate salvation from bondage. They want to hear neither about riches nor about God’s future kindness in trials that are yet to come. I believe that this thematic connection accounts for this passage’s place in the Gemara here.

**Miracle of Miracles**

Having dealt with one case of seemingly superfluous repetition in the Bible, the Gemara goes on to treat another such instance:

‘Hear me, O Lord, hear me’ (*Melakhim I* 18:37).

R. Abahu said:

Why did Eliyahu say twice:

'Hear me?’

This teaches that Eliyahu said

before the Holy One, blessed be He:

Lord of the Universe,

'hear me,’

that the fire may descend from heaven

and consume everything that is upon the altar;

and 'hear me,’

that Thou mayest turn their mind

that they may not say that

it was the work of sorcery.

For it is said:

‘For Thou didst turn their heart backward.’

The reader will recall the story of Eliyahu on Mt. Carmel. Eliyahu gathered together the people of Israel to witness a showdown between him and the priests of Ba’al. Each side had an opportunity to call down fire from heaven in order to consume a sacrifice to their respective god. The priests, of course, fail, while Eliyahu succeeds in calling down Divine fire from heaven, which consumes his sacrifice. R. Abahu is concerned because Eliyahu repeats the word *aneini*, “answer me,” twice in his prayer to bring down the fire from heaven. R. Abahu explains that Eliyahu actually offered two prayers to God, one for the miracle and the other asking God to make sure that the people do not interpret this miracle as a mere act of sorcery.

This commentary raises one of the fundamental issues in the theology of miracles. Miracles are very much in the eye of the beholder. What one person sees as an act of Divine intervention, another might attribute to sorcery, trickery, natural processes, or sheer coincidence. Granting a miracle is not enough. God must also ensure that the people are in the proper state of mind to receive the miracle as evidence of God’s presence in the world.

**Who would be King?**

The Gemara now begins its analysis of the second *mishna* in the first chapter of *Berakhot*. This *mishna* deals with the earliest possible time to say the morning *Shema*. In this context, the *mishna* raises the concept of *semikhut* *geula* *le-tefila,* that a person should say the *Shemone* *Esrei* immediately after the blessing of “redemption” which follows the *Shema*. We previously encountered and discussed this idea in detail on *daf* 4b.

In this context the Gemara cites the following statement:

R. Yosi b. Elyakim testified

in the name of the holy community of Jerusalem:

If one joins *geula* to *tefila*,

he will not meet with any mishap for the whole of the day.

This claim is quite radical. All Jews who pray daily fulfill the desideratum of linking *geula* to *tefila*, yet such Jews experience mishaps and worse all the time. Tosafot, responding to this problem, suggest that it refers only to those who do so exactly at sunrise, a practice known as *vatikin.*  Still, many individuals pray at a *vatikin* service daily, and their lives do not seem to be markedly easier than those of anyone else. Indeed, the idea that a person can expect to be rewarded for his good deeds in this world has been repeatedly challenged in this chapter of the Gemara. It is therefore hardly surprising that R. Zeira objects to this claim on empirical grounds:

Said R. Zeira:

This is not so!

For I did join [*geula* with *tefila*],

and did meet with a mishap.

The other rabbis though are determined to defend this principle:

They asked him:

What was your mishap?

That you had to carry a myrtle branch

into the king's palace?

That was no mishap,

for in any case you would have had to pay something

in order to see the king!

R. Zeira’s claimed misfortune is that he became obligated to bring a myrtle branch (*hadas*) before the king. I am not sure what the meaning of this act is. However, myrtle branches played an important role in Persian religion and ritual at the time. People showing their loyalty to the king through a ceremonial presentation of a myrtle branch makes sense in this context.

The other rabbis seek to deflect R. Zeira’s claim by arguing that whether or not he wanted to go to the king, such an audience generally costs money. Hence, technically, he had benefited from this event, and it could not be described as a misfortune. The Gemara, however, goes one step further in arguing for the value of going to see the king:

For R. Yochanan said:

A man should always be eager

to run to see the kings of Israel.

And not only to see the kings of Israel,

but also to see the kings of the gentiles,

so that, if he is found worthy,

he may be able to distinguish between the kings of Israel

and the kings of the gentiles.

In this statement R. Yochanan presents a most interesting and nuanced approach to the phenomena of non-Jewish political power in the world. As is well known, the Gemara proscribes a blessing upon seeing a gentile king: “Blessed is He who gives of His glory to His creations” (*Berakhot* 58a). The novelist [S.Y. Agnon](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1966/agnon-speech.html) famously recited this blessing upon seeing the king of Sweden when he received his Nobel Prize. This blessing implies a fundamental acceptance of the legitimacy of gentile governments. They rule with Divine sanction. Meetings with kings should be sought out, because they are a sort of encounter with Divine glory.

R. Yochanan rejects this view. An audience with a gentile king is not a positive thing in and of itself. Rather, such an encounter is meant to remind a person that the rule of the gentile kings is only temporary and defective. A person should yearn to see the reinstitution of true monarchy in the world, that of the Davidic line. He will then be able to appreciate just how small and limited the rule of people like the Roman emperors really is.

R. Yochanan thus transforms meeting a gentile king from an act which implicitly declares a person’s loyalty to the government to a subversive act in which one prepares and yearns for the toppling of the current regime by the king Messiah. R. Yochanan is thus a sort of covert revolutionary. Far from ordering revolt against the Empire, he counsels to continue even enthusiastically participating in imperial rituals meant to reinforce the authority of the emperor. However, he advocates internally subverting these occasions by recasting them in our hearts as opportunities to contemplate that even the greatest emperors are but a pale shadow of the power and the glory that will be borne by the son of David and to hope that we will merit being present at his arrival.

**Never Fully Dressed without a Smile**

The Gemara now presents an alternative view regarding the rewards for joining *geula* and *tefila*.

R. Ela said to Ula:

When you go up there [to Israel]

give my greeting to my brother R. Berona

in the presence of the whole college,

for he is a great man

and rejoices to perform a precept [in the correct manner].

Once he joined *geula* with *tefila*,

and a smile did not leave his lips the whole day.

Previously, the Gemara suggested that a person can expect to be rewarded almost immediately for joining *geula* with *tefila*. Now R. Ela suggests that we should not expect some material reward for performing this mitzva*.* Rather, the mitzvais itsown reward, which should provide enough joy to keep a person smiling the whole day, regardless of what mishaps occur. This approach to reward and punishment in this world is most succinctly summed up in the famous line from *Pirkei Avot* 4:22:

Better is one hour of penitence and good deeds

in this world,

than all the life of the world to come.

In this view, speaking about rewards for good deeds in either this world or the next is pointless. The pleasure and benefit that one derives from doing these deeds is greater than any potential external reward, and should outweigh any suffering to which a person may be subject in this world.