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/aggada72/08aggada.htm>

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This week’s shiurim are dedicated by Drs. Irving and Roberta Strauchler  
in memory of Jonas Strauchler z”l

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**Shiur #08: Negative Characters in the *Aggada***

How do we know that Eisav did not rebel during Avraham’s lifetime? Because it says, “And Eisav came from the field, and he was tired” (*Bereishit* 25:29). And it was taught: “This was the day that Avraham our patriarch had died, and Yaakov our patriarch prepared lentils to console his father Yitzchak.” Why was it lentils? They said in the West in the name of R. Abba bar Mari: “Just as the lentil has no mouth, so too the mourner has no mouth.” Others say: “Just as the lentil is round, so too mourning is a cycle that comes to everyone in the world.” What is the practical difference between the two opinions? The difference is whether we can console with eggs.

R. Yochanan taught: “That wicked fellow transgressed five sins on that day. He had relations with a betrothed girl, committed murder, denied fundamental beliefs, denied resurrection, and disgraced the birthright. We know that he had relations with a betrothed girl since it is written here, “He came from the field,” and it is written there, “He found her in the field” (*Devarim* 22:27). We know he murdered, since it is written here, “tired (*ayef)*,” and it is written there, “'Woe is me, now! For my soul faints (*ayefa*) before the murderers” (*Yirmiyahu* 4:31). We know he denied fundamental principles, since it is written here, “Why do I need this (*zeh*),” and it is written there, “This (*zeh*) is my God and I will glorify Him” (*Shemot* 16:2). We know that he denied the resurrection of the dead since it is written, “Behold I am about to die.” He disgraced the birthright, as it is written, “And Eisav disgraced the birthright” (*Bava Batra* 16b).

Before proceeding to our main topic, two other aspects of this *aggada* deserve mention. The *gemara* presents two different reasons that lentils are an appropriate symbol for mourning. While we could think of this as a debate, we could also view the two reasons as complementary. R. Yoshiyhau Pinto (Rif in *Ein Yaakov*) suggests that each reason refers to a different mourning scenario. We have all likely noted the vast difference between the atmosphere at a funeral or a house of mourning for someone who lived to advanced years, and that for someone who perished in the early budding of life. R. Pinto says that we can talk about death as part of the cycle of life when the deceased was elderly. Indeed, we do not demand immortality in this world, and understand that every life eventually comes to a conclusion. However, talking of the cycle of life provides no comfort when someone was taken from us when still young. Our theological speculations break down, and we are left silent like the lentil without a mouth. When consoling mourners, we should keep this distinction in mind.

Tosafot object to the *gemara* listing relations with a betrothed woman as one of Eisav’s five sins. According to *Halakha*, Noachides only achieve marital status when they consummate their marriage. If so, betrothal has no legal ramifications, and a Noachide cannot legally commit this particular sin. Tosafot answer that such an act is an ugly thing to do despite the absence of any concrete prohibition. This Tosafot reminds us not to limit Jewish responsibility to definitive halakhic details. It is immoral to become involved with a woman betrothed to someone else, and a religiously serious Noachide will reject such behavior even if *Halakha* does not forbid it.

*Chazal* (the Sages, may their memory be a blessing) seem to be set against Eisav, attributing many serious transgressions to him based on very shaky evidence, such as drawing a parallel because the word “field” appears in two verses. Unless they had a specific tradition on this matter, they could have associated Eisav with a host of verses, positive and negative, in which the word “field” appears. Other Talmudic sources apply a similar methodology to other biblical bad guys. Note the following text about Bilaam.

“And he has knowledge of the most high.” Is it possible that he does not have knowledge of his animal and he has knowledge of the most high? What does it mean that he does not have knowledge of his animal? When they saw him riding on his donkey, they said to him: “Why are you not riding on a horse?” He said: “It is grazing.” Immediately, the donkey said: “Am I not your donkey?” He said to her: “Just for carrying burdens.” She said to him: “Upon whom you ride.” He said to her: “Occasionally.” She said to him: “For your entire life. And not only that, but you have ridden on me during the day and had relations with me at night.” It is written here, “Was I ever wont to do to you” (*hahisken hiskanti*) and it is written there, “And be a companion for him” (*sokhenet*). So what does it mean that he has knowledge of the most high? He knows the time that God gets angry (*Avoda Zara* 4b).

Now Bilaam is certainly not an outstanding moral personality, but this *gemara* also seems to have a powerful agenda of Bilaam bashing. Why attribute bestiality to this non-Jewish sorcerer? The cited proof only strengthens the difficulty. The *gemara* links Bilaam’s donkey with Avishag Ha-shunamit, the companion of the elderly King David, to suggest that the root made up of the letters *samekh, kaf, nun*, connotes sexual relations. Yet the biblical account of Avishag explicitly states that the king did not know her (*Melakhim* I 1:4). Why cite a faulty support for an unnecessary idea?

The Talmudic tendency to add sins to the ledger of problematic characters finds explicit expression in another *gemara*.

Mar the son of Ravina said to his son: “Regarding all of them (the individuals mentioned in *Sanhedrin* 10:1), do not try to expound (to place them in a more negative light), except in the case of Bilaam, where whatever you can find (against him), expound” (*Sanhedrin* 106b).

Mar instructs his son to comb biblical verses about Bilaam in search of more wrongdoing. Why do our sages do this for Eisav, Bilaam and others, and why did Mar declare that Bilaam, in particular, deserved such treatment? Of course, we might argue that *Chazal* received a tradition that biblical verses about these characters allude to additional transgressions. R. Moshe Chayim Luzzato takes this position in his introduction to *aggada*. Yet perhaps they were not working off any tradition, but simply making a particular educational point. R. Zvi Hirsch Chajes outlines this alternate approach in his *Mavo Ha-talmud* (chapter 20). He cites a *gemara* to establish that *Chazal* were expounding on these matters without a tradition.

R. Levi expounded on these verses for six months in a negative fashion. “Only he was not like Achav who was dedicated to doing evil in the eye of God” (*Melakhim I* 2:25). Achav came to him in a dream. He said to him: “How have I sinned towards you… You cite the beginning of the verse but do not cite the end, ‘who was incited by Izevel his wife.’” He [R. Levi] then expounded the verses for six months in a positive fashion (Yerushalmi *Sanhedrin* 10:2).

R. Chajes argues that R. Levi would not have changed his interpretative approach because of a dream had he based his original reading on a definitive tradition regarding Achav. In fact, R. Levi was only interpreting in this way as a pedagogic tool, and he could easily choose to reverse direction. Once Achav appeared to R. Levi, the latter decided to embark on a different course of teaching.

According to R. Chajes, homilies discovering new misdeeds for Eisav, Bilaam, and Achav convey that individuals with certain character traits are liable to lapse into serious crimes. Eisav may not have murdered anyone, and Bilaam may not have engaged in bestiality, but both were capable of such evil. I would add that *Chazal* selected transgressions specific to the individuals involved. Eisav certainly had a violent streak; after all, he was a hunter and he planned to murder his younger brother. Therefore, attributing murder to Eisav fits the personality type. Bilaam, on the other hand, had problems in the sexual realm. As Rambam notes (commentary on *Avot* 5:19), anyone who could recommend to the Midianites that they let their daughters loose in order to entice the enemy must oppose sexual restraint. Rambam makes the reasonable psychological claim that Bilaam suggested such a snare because that reflected his own desires. A person interested in sexual license, who has no compunctions about advising parents to use their daughters as a physical snare, could ultimately desire relations with a donkey.

This explains two of the attributed sins; what about the others? In particular, why are additional sins attributed to Bilaam? I once heard an excellent class by R. Mosheh Lichtenstein that contrasted Balak and Bilaam. Both plan to destroy Israel, yet we treat Bilaam as the essential villain. R. Mosheh explained that Balak feels threatened by the approach of a nation who overcame mighty Egypt and has designs on Canaan. Bilaam, on the other hand, was simply a hired mercenary with no reason to get involved other than a lust for money. Both were evil, but Bilaam is a much more problematic personality. Perhaps this understanding of Bilaam’s personality explains the interpretative instructions Mar offered his son. Someone willing to sell ideals for profit is capable of any crime, provided the price is right. Regarding the mercenary personality, the interpreter feels comfortable inventing any transgression, since the appropriate financial incentives could indeed lead to such a misdeed.

Finally, let us return to the list of sins associated with Eisav. We have already explained murder, and disgracing the birthright requires no explanation. This *gemara* attributes to Eisav the three sins that the Gemara argues one should be killed rather than commit –murder, sexual immorality, and idolatry (the *gemara* mentions denial of God). The *gemara* may want to say that a violent and angry personality like Eisav is capable of the worst kind of crimes. Whereas a mercenary personality might commit any crime, the angry and impetuous personality will more likely be liable for a passionate wrongdoing on a massive scale.

To be sure, contrasting themes also appear in *Chazal*. They credit Eisav with outstanding reverence for his parents (*Yalkut Shimoni* 808), and they state that Bilaam’s prophetic level rivaled that of Moshe *Rabbenu* (*Sifrei Vezot Ha-berakha* 357). Indeed, they do not always treat these characters negatively. Nevertheless, *Chazal* exhibit a tendency towards attributing more iniquity to Esau, Bilaam, and the like; R. Chajes offers an insightful approach for understanding why.