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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Talmudic *Aggadot***

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**Shiur #12:** **The *aggada* of the poor man, the rich man, and the wicked man – part II**

1. **Preface**

In the [previous shiur](http://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-11-aggada-poor-man-rich-man-and-wicked-man-%E2%80%93-part-i), we looked at the *aggada* of “the poor, the rich and the wicked” that appears in the third chapter of *Massekhet Yoma* (35b). The subject of the *aggada* is the obligation incumbent upon every individual to devote time to Torah study, and the rejection of several potential excuses not to study. The *aggada* comprises three parts, focusing respectively on Hillel the Elder, R. Elazar b. Charsom, and the righteous Yosef, with each illustrating the possibility of overcoming different types of challenges that might hinder one’s Torah study and service of God.

In the second part of the *shiur* we noted many significant links between the *aggada* and the *sugya* within which it appears, which discusses the linen garments of the *Kohen Gadol* on Yom Kippur. Some of these links are linguistic in nature (such as the use of the verb “to allow,” which appears in both), while others relate to content (such as the connections between the story of Yosef and the discussion of the *kohen’s* garments). In this shiur, we will explore the significance of these links.

1. ***Kohanim* vs. Sages**

The connections discussed above between the *aggada* and the discussion of the garments of the *Kohen Gadol* create a comparison between the *kohanim* described in the *sugya*, who were active at the end of the Second Temple Period, and the Sages. Of special prominence is the comparison between R. Elazar b. Charsom, the *Kohen*, presented in the first *beraita*, and R. Elazar b. Charsom, the Sage, in the second *beraita*. This comparison serves to glorify the Sages and Torah study: the Sages in the *aggadic beraita* are portrayed as having no interest in the pleasures of this world (riches and honor), and as devoting themselves wholly to the study of Torah. The *beraita* about R. Elazar b. Charsom, the *Kohen*, contains, at the very least, covert criticism: in performing his priestly service he chooses to wear a garment that is very expensive, and also transparent. This arouses the opposition of the other *kohanim*, who will not allow him to serve in this garment.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The appearance of a comparison of this sort in *Massekhet Yoma* is not surprising on its own. There are several places throughout the *massekhet*, in sources involving both Tannaim and Amoraim, that we find criticism – sometimes veiled, at other times quite open – of the conduct of the *kohanim* during this period. In fact, in the first chapter of Mishna Yoma we already read of suspicions that the *Kohen Gadol* might not perform the service properly.[[2]](#footnote-2) In the Gemara in the same chapter (9a-10b), as part of an *aggadic* unit dealing, *inter alia,* with the destruction of the two Temples, we find quite explicit criticism:

“Rabba b. Bar Hana said: What is the meaning of the verse, ‘The fear of the Lord prolongs days, but the years of the wicked shall be shortened’? ‘The fear of the Lord prolongs days’ refers to the first Temple, which remained standing for four hundred and ten years and in which there served only eighteen *Kohanim Gedolim*. ‘But the years of the wicked shall be shortened’ refers to the second Temple, which stood for four hundred and twenty years and in which more than three hundred *Kohanim Gedolim* served. Deduct from this total the forty years during which Shimon ha-Tzaddik served, eighty years during which Yochanan *Kohen Gadol* served, ten years during which Yishmael b. Fabi served (or, as some say, the eleven years of R. Elazar b. Charsom). Count the remaining years and you will find that none of the other *Kohanim* *Gedolim* completed his year [in office].” (*Yoma* 9a)

In a parallel Tosefta in our chapter – chapter 3, Mishna 11 (Tosefta, *Yoma* 2:5-8), as well as in the Bavli and the Yerushalmi, we find a unit describing the “appointees” in the Temple (priestly families at the end of the Temple period who had specific roles and specializations), some of whom are viewed in a negative light because they were not willing to pass on the “professional secrets” pertaining to various services in the Temple. These phenomena, among other problems with the conduct of the *kohanim* at that time, caused the rabbis to identify various signs that existed during those years in the Temple as predicting its upcoming destruction. For example, in the Bavli (39b) we find the following beraita:[[3]](#footnote-3)

“Our Rabbis taught: During the last forty years before the destruction of the Temple, the lot [‘For the Lord’] did not come up in the right hand; nor did the crimson-colored strap become white; nor did the westernmost light shine; and the doors of the *Heikhal* would open by themselves, until R. Yochanan b. Zakkai rebuked them, saying: *Heikhal, Heikhal*, why do you alarm yourself? I know that you are fated to be destroyed, for Zekharia ben Ido has already prophesied concerning you (*Zekharia* 11:1), ‘Open your doors, O Lebanon, that the fire may devour your cedars.’”[[4]](#footnote-4)

The critical attitude of the Sages towards the *kohanim* arose largely from the affiliation of many *Kohanim Gedolim* with the Sadducee sect, starting in the late 2nd century B.C.E. when the *kohanim* of the House of Chashmonai joined the Sadducees.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In the generations after the destruction, the Sages seem to have aspired to fill in the vacuum left in the absence of the Temple and the sacrificial service by promoting alternatives such as the prayer services and Torah study.[[6]](#footnote-6) We discussed an example of this approach in the previous shiur, in the story of the *Kohen Gadol* and Shemaya and Avtalyon. This story and the *sugya* preceding it, suggest that the Sages sought to present Torah study as an alternative to the service of the *kohanim,* in light of the problematic conduct of *kohanim*, and in the wake of the religious vacuum left after the Temple’s destruction. The sharp change of focus that we noted, from the greeting addressed to the *Kohen Gadol* by the man who led away the he-goat to Azazel, to Rabba’s statement concerning a similar salutation among Sages, emphasizes the way in which the Sages and their learning filled the vacuum left in the absence of the *kohanim* and their sacrificial service. The words of R. Berakhia in that discussion (“One who wishes to pour a wine libation upon the altar, should fill the throats of Torah sages with wine”) present the Torah as replacing the Temple service, and the Sages as replacing the altar. The unit that follows – the story of Shemaya and Avtalyon – gives expression to the relationship between the Sages and the *kohanim* during the late Temple period.

It is important to note that the proposing of alternatives to the Temple service was not meant to establish an absolute replacement for all future generations. Along with the alternatives, rabbinic literature throughout the generations does, of course, maintain a general theme of mourning over the destruction and longing for the re-establishment of the Temple and its service. Evidence of this is to be found, *inter alia*, in the development of the *massekhtot* of *Seder Kodashim* even in generations after the destruction, and in the prayers expressing longing for the rebuilding of the Temple, instituted by *Chazal*. However, at least in the situation created by the problematic behavior of the *kohanim* in the late Temple Period, and in the wake of the destruction, the Sages found it necessary to propose some sort of spiritual alternative.

1. “Elazar b. Charsom, the *Kohen*” vs. “R. Elazar b. Charsom, the Sage”

Contrast between two portrayals of R. Elazar b. Charsom

The *aggada* that we are discussing appears to contain a similar message, albeit perhaps in gentler form. Above we looked at the links between the story of R. Elazar b. Charsom in the *aggada,* and the description of R. Elazar b. Charsom in the beraita within the sugya discussing the garments of the *Kohen Gadol*. It seems that the Gemara seeks to contrast these two portrayals. In other words, as a contrast to “R. Elazar b. Charsom, the *Kohen Gadol,”* the Gemara presents “R. Elazar b. Charsom, engaged in Torah study.” The two portrayals offer two models for the way in which this character relates to the huge wealth that he possesses.[[7]](#footnote-7)

R. Elazar b. Charsom, the *Kohen*

“R. Elazar b. Charsom, the *Kohen*” chooses to wear a very expensive garment during his performance of the sacrificial service upon the altar.[[8]](#footnote-8) The tunic costs ‘twenty thousand’ – and if we assume that the currency denomination intended here is the maneh,[[9]](#footnote-9) as suggested by the context with its description of the basic value of a garment (eighteen maneh) and the garment of Yishmael b. Fabi (a hundred maneh), then this is truly an astronomical sum.[[10]](#footnote-10) The decision to don such an expensive garment would be a flamboyant act of showing-off.[[11]](#footnote-11) The continuation of the description in the *beraita* suggests that there was indeed a problem with R. Elazar b. Charsom’s behavior in this instance, since the *kohanim* “would not allow him” (in the words of the *beraita* in the Bavli) to continue performing the sacrificial service, and “brought him down” from the altar (as the Tosefta describes it). The explanation offered in the *beraita* for this reaction by the *kohanim* is that “he appeared naked” – in other words, the garment was so sheer that it was transparent, or too close-fitting. Such a garment is unbefitting a *Kohen Gadol* in the Temple, since it does not cover his body properly (and thus goes against at least the spirit of the command, “And you shall not ascend My altar by steps, so that your nakedness not be revealed upon it” - *Shemot* 20:22, and “to cover the flesh of their nakedness” – *Shemot* 28:42). From our knowledge of the textile industry of that period, we may also conclude that the transparency of the garment attests to its hefty price,[[12]](#footnote-12) and thus the behavior of R. Elazar be. Charsom, which draws criticism from his fellow *kohanim*, is not only unbefitting, but also a flaunting of his great wealth.[[13]](#footnote-13)

*Chazal’s* sensitivity to any hint of arrogance in the context of the garments of the *Kohen Gadol* is explicit in the following excerpt from the Yerushalmi, which explains why the *Kohen Gadol* wears linen garments on Yom Kippur rather than golden ones:

“Why does he not use golden garments? Lest he become proud. R. Simon said, this is in accordance with the verse (*Mishlei* 25:6), ‘Do not glorify yourself in the presence of the King’….” (*Yerushalmi Yoma* 7:1, 4b).

In light of this, the flaunting of especially expensive “linen garments” by R. Elazar b. Charsom the *Kohen* is emphasized even more strongly, since it contradicts the spirit of the law that linen garments be worn on Yom Kippur. It is important to note that the Mishna itself permits the *Kohen Gadol* to “pay the difference from his own money” and wear linen garments of finer quality, and it is possible that there were *kohanim* who did so for the sake of Heaven, thereby enhancing their performance of the command (as the description of Yishmael b. Fabi would suggest). However, there is a difference (one that is difficult to determine with precision) between a worthy addition and a sum that projects showiness and goes against the spirit of the requirement that the *Kohen Gadol* wear linen garments rather than golden ones. In any event, although the criticism in the *beraita* concerning this particular *Kohen Gadol* might be veiled and understated, it would seem to join the examples cited above reflecting the attitude of the Sages toward the *kohanim* at the time.

R. Elazar b. Charsom, the Sage

“Rabbi Elazar b. Charsom, the Sage”, as presented in the *aggadic* *beraita*, represents the opposite pole. The character described here, who inherits tremendous wealth from his father, is not the least bit interested in his possessions – and certainly does not try to show off. His life is a constant flight from the spotlight, and a desperate attempt to protect his precious anonymity,– representing his only chance of continuing to engage in Torah study. The moment he resumes his persona as “R. Elazar b. Charsom, the wealthy man,” he will lose his freedom to study Torah. This R. Elazar, who forgoes all his wealth and status, and is even willing to bear humiliation at the hands of his own servants for the sake of his Torah, serves as a contrast to the *Kohen Gadol* who stood atop the altar, at “center stage”, as it were, showing off his fortune. We lack more extensive background about the life of R. Elazar b. Charsom, and therefore cannot determine which period of his life each of these two descriptions belongs to, but a reading of the *beraita* in our *sugya* within its context would seem to portray a process of “*tikkun*” (repair) that this *Kohen Gadol* undergoes, fleeing from his wealth and his respected status in order to devote himself to Torah.

Connections between the *sugya* of the garments and the story of Yosef

The connections between the *sugya* of the garments and the story of Yosef reveal themselves in a similar way. Yosef, too, undergoes a process of *tikkun:* as a young man he receives a special striped coat from his father – like R. Elazar b. Charsom who receives an expensive tunic from his mother. Likewise, Yosef shows off his coat despite the jealousy that this arouses among his brothers, who ultimately strip him forcibly of his coat, just as the kohanim “would not allow” R. Elazar b. Charsom to serve wearing his transparent tunic.[[14]](#footnote-14) However, when it comes to the encounter with Potifar’s wife, Yosef withstands temptation, and in a symbolic gesture parts with his garment, as a way of fleeing from sin. Perhaps this serves to present, once again, the *tikkun* of a *Kohen* who wears extremely expensive garments.

However, the story of Yosef may be meant to convey even stronger criticism. We have already noted the parallel between the description of Potifar’s wife (“The garments she put on for him in the morning, she did not wear in the evening…”) and the Mishna. At this point, the connection between the *sugya* and the *aggada* hints that the changing into linen garments in the middle of the day – which could be intended to honor the Temple and the special service of Yom Kippur – might, in the case of a *Kohen Gadol* who is preoccupied with his own good looks and glory, parallel the changing of garments for the purposes of sin. In the background we hear an echo of the rebuke that appears towards the end of the chapter, concerning those appointees who would not reveal their “professional secrets:” “Your forefathers, who sought to increase their own honor, and to diminish God’s honor...”

The connection between the story of Hillel and the *Kohen Gadol*

It may be that the presentation of the Sages as a model that contrasts with that of the *kohanim* is also hinted to in the story about Hillel the Elder. The story recounts how Hillel was found on the roof with “snow three cubits high” on top of him. The expression “*rum –-- amot*” (“X cubits high”) is not common in the Talmud. In every instance in which it appears, with just one exception, the measurement is “three cubits high,” and in each of the appearances of this expression, with one exception, the text refers to the size of a *mikve* in which a person is able to immerse his whole body. One such description of a *mikve* is found in our chapter, in the context of the immersion of the *Kohen* *Gadol* during the Yom Kippur service (*Yoma* 31a):

“And it was taught: ‘And he shall bathe his flesh in water’ – i.e., in the waters of a *mikve*, ‘all his flesh’ - in water which covers his whole body. What is its quantity? One cubit square, three cubits high (*be-rum shalosh amot*), and the Sages calculated that the quantity [of water] required for a *mikve* is forty *se'ah*.”

Moreover, the *mikve* in which the *Kohen Gadol* would perform most of his immersions on Yom Kippur – as recorded earlier in the *massekhet*[[15]](#footnote-15) – was upon the roof of the Parvah house, while the snow that piles up to a height of three cubits over Hillel falls on the roof of the Beit Midrash. Therefore, the snow that is “three cubits high” over Hillel on the roof in the *aggada* is reminiscent of the other “three cubits high” in our chapter. We can perceive an image of Hillel entering the Beit Midrash via an “immersion” that is reminiscent of the *Kohen Gadol* on Yom Kippur.[[16]](#footnote-16)

1. A reading of the *aggada* about “the rich, the poor and the wicked” within the *sugya*

In light of our discussion above, it seems that the placement of our *aggada* serves to reflect a message about the problematic conduct of the *kohanim* at the end of the Temple period. Our *sugya* contains a veiled hint at the way in which the *kohanim* relate to their garments, and perhaps to their economic status in general. The *aggada* presents an alternative to the problematic conduct of some of these *kohanim*. The characters of Hillel the Elder and R. Elazar b. Charsom the Sage – who, in the original context of the *aggada*, serve to rebuke poor and rich people respectively who neglect Torah study – are presented in context as a contrast to the *kohanim*. Hillel, who is not wealthy like these *kohanim*, devotes himself selflessly to Torah study, while R. Elazar b. Charsom’s “*tikkun*” has him fleeing from his wealth and devoting his life to Torah.

As we showed in last week’s shiur, the subject of the story about Yosef in the *aggadic beraita* (the battle against the inclination for forbidden sexual relations) is different from the other two stories in the *aggada* (commitment to Torah study in conditions that make this difficult). However, the links that we have explored between the story of Yosef and the discussion that precedes it in the chapter indicate that the presence of the story of Yosef in this *aggada* about “the rich, the poor and the wicked” plays an important role. The links between the story of Yosef and the *halakhic-aggadic* discussion about the garments of the *Kohen Gadol* put *Chazal’s* apparent criticism of the attitude of the *kohanim* towards their garments into sharper focus. We might propose – although, as noted, we cannot establish with certainty – that as part of the criticism that the *sugya* conveys with regard to the garments, the story of Yosef within the *aggada* is an important motivation for the inclusion of the *aggada* within the chapter

In summary, it seems that the *sugya* brings the *aggada* of “the poor, the rich and the wicked” in order to express a message that pertains to the halakhic discussion appearing in it, concerning the value of the garments of the *Kohen Gadol* on Yom Kippur. It must be emphasized that this message in no way affects the *halakha*: the Mishna still permits the *Kohen Gadol* to add from his own money to the minimum value of the linen garments purchased with communal funds. If this is done in proportion and for the sake of Heaven, it may be an appropriate enhancement of the mitzva. However, it seems that the Gemara calls for caution and sensitivity in applying this license, owing to the danger that the Kohen will become proud and show off – which is especially to be avoided by the *Kohen Gadol* on Yom Kippur. The *sugya* seems to maintain that the manner in which this license is implemented by R. Elazar b. Charsom, in the description in the *beraita*, is inappropriate, and for this reason, *inter alia*, a completely opposite story concerning R. Elazar b. Charsom is brought, to balance the picture.

As noted at the beginning of our discussion of the *aggada* of “the poor, the rich and the wicked”, it is a story rich in narratives and details, not all of which can be covered within the limited scope of this shiur. However, we have attempted to open a door to an understanding of why this *aggada* appears in this particular location in *Massekhet Yoma*, and the message arising from a reading of the *sugya* as a whole, including both its halakha and its *aggada*, as a single continuum.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. We will discuss this beraita in greater detail below. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See M. Peri’s article, “Makbilim Nifgashim – Hearot al Ituzvan ha-Sifruti shel Mishnayot Yoma”, *Netu’im* 13 (5765), pp. 36-38. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cf. Bavli *Rosh Ha-shana* 31b; Yerushalmi, Yoma 6,6 (43c) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The description in this *beraita* is brought as a contrast to the situation that prevailed during the tenure of Shimon ha-Tzaddik as *Kohen Gadol*, at the beginning of the Second Temple Period. Shimon ha-Tzaddik is described to have served as a Kohen Gadol for forty years, which were considered the 'golden age' of that Temple. The final forty years of the Temple are presented as a sharp contrast to Shimon's days, in terms of the conduct of the *kohanim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See, in this regard, *Berakhot* 29a concerning Yochanan *Kohen Gadol*, as well as the story about the Sadducee *Kohen Gadol* in *Yoma* 19b. For more extensive discussion see M.D. Har, “Ha-Retzef she-ba-Shalshelet Mesirutah shal ha-Torah”, Tzion 44 (5739), pp. 49-50. Har also argues that from the time of Herod the priesthood became morally corrupt, drawing fierce criticism from the Sages. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. As we find, for example, in the fourth chapter of *Massekhet Berakhot* (26a, 26b and elsewhere); we shall not elaborate here. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. It should be noted that the story of “R. Elazar b. Charsom, the scholar” makes no mention of the fact that he is a *kohen* – a fact that intensifies the impression of the difference between the two characters. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Admittedly, according to the Tosefta, it was his mother who created the garment, but he nevertheless bears responsibility for choosing to wear it while performing the service. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. As Rashi interprets it (ad loc.). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Cf. values of garments in Mishna *Ketubot* 5:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In the *beraita* we cited previously, which calculates the years served by the various *Kohanim Gedolim*, R. Elazar b. Charsom would seem to be included in the list of those who fulfilled their office faithfully. Nevertheless, the *beraita* about his tunic conveys criticism – at least on this specific point – as reflected in the sharp response on the part of his fellow *kohanim* (which appears to be unusual in relation to the *Kohen Gadol*), who remove him from the altar. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. At that time, the textile industry in Egypt reached an impressive degree of expertise in creating very sheer fabrics. My thanks to R. Nachum Ben-Yehuda, whose research specializes in textiles during the Talmudic period, for sharing his knowledge in this sphere with me. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. It should be noted that the Yerushalmi adds another sentence at the end of the *beraita*, after the *kohanim* halt his service: “What did he do? He filled it with water, and circumnavigated the altar seven times.” According to the interpretation of *Penei Moshe*, this means that R. Elazar b. Charsom tried to prove, by means of this “display”, that the garment was not perforated, but rather waterproof – as evidenced by the fact that it loses none of the water absorbed in it even after seven circles around the altar. Perhaps his intention was to show that he had not meant to show any lack of modesty. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. As to Yosef showing off his own beauty, see also *Bereishit Rabba* 87,3: “’And his master’s wife cast [her eyes]…’ (*Bereishit* 39:7)… R. Meir and R. Yehuda and R. Shimon: ‘And his master’s wife cast her eyes’ – what was written just prior to this? ‘And Yosef was of beautiful form and fair to look upon’ (ibid., v. 6). This may be compared to a mighty warrior who would stand in the marketplace, penciling his eyes and combing his hair and prancing on his heels, proclaiming, ‘I am handsome, I am worthy, I am mighty.’ The response to him was, ‘If you are mighty, if you are worthy – here comes a bear [a test] that will rise up and consume you.’” [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Mishna *Yoma* 3,3 and also Bavli, *Yoma* 19a (also Mishna *Middot* 5,3). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The story of Hillel may contain further allusions to the chapter:

    In the story of Hillel, Shemaya tells Avtalyon, “Usually this house is well-lit, but today it is darkened” – since Hillel’s body is covering the opening of the window, and the beit midrash remains dark even after dawn. This artificial situation that has been created in the beit midrash recalls the discussion that introduced the chapter, concerning the distinction between the end of the night and the beginning of the day. The first Mishna describes an error that occurred once on account of the light of the moon. The Gemara explains that the inability to distinguish between the light of the moon and sunlight was because it was a “cloudy day”. Correspondingly, in the story about Hillel, we find Shemaya wondering, “Perhaps it is a cloudy day?”

    Perhaps the story of Hillel contains a subtle allusion to a discussion that is recorded in the Bavli in close proximity to our *sugya*. The Gemara discusses ways of warming the water in the *mikve* for a *Kohen Gadol* who is elderly or frail, and the halakhic problems involved in terms of the categories of labor forbidden on Yom Kippur. In the story of Hillel, the occupants of the *Beit* *Midrash* wash him and warm him, desecrating Shabbat as they do so. The story concludes with the words, “They said: ‘This [man] is worthy of having the Shabbat desecrated for him.’” Perhaps there is a slight emphasis on the word “this” – i.e., as opposed to certain *Kohanim Gedolim* who were less worthy of being warmed on Yom Kippur. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)