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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Talmudic *Aggadot***

Rav Dr. Yonatan Feintuch

Shiur #16: The Story of the Riverfront Wood (Part II)

Introduction

# In the [previous *shiur*](http://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-15-story-riverfront-wood-part-i)*,* we encountered the story of the riverfront wood as it appears in the Babylonian Talmud (*Bava Metzia* 107a). Our main focus was upon the structure of the story and the dynamic among its various parts. In the current *shiur*, we will conclude the discussion of this narrative by comparing it to a number of parallels in the Babylonian Talmud, as well as by briefly analyzing the relationship between the narrative and the *sugya* in which it appears.

As a refresher, let us take a second look at this 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 cut down [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 Rav 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.

**The First Parallel**

The narrative we are discussing here is decidedly a Babylonian narrative. The characters are Babylonian rabbis, *amoraim*; the setting, with its river and barges, is typical of Babylonia, where Jews settled along the rivers. There are no analogues in sources from the Land of Israel. However, there are some partial parallels elsewhere in the Babylonian Talmud.

A general remark: There is literary value in an intertextual reading of *aggadot* that appear in different Babylonian *sugyot*, but which parallel each other. Although it is not always possible to determine which story in the Babylonian Talmud precedes the other, in the diachronic sense (i.e. which one is the source for the other), if we proceed based on the assumption that the final development of many of the narratives in the Babylonian Talmud dates back to the same period, we may find common motifs, characters, details, and ideas emerging from a common cultural bedrock. Thus, an intertextual reading of this type does not conceive of the connections between the stories as unidirectional; instead, they have a mutual relationship. Reading one story enriches our understanding of the other and vice versa.

As for our story, we may find parallels containing a common theme or formulation that is shared by these stories but not by others in the Babylonian Talmud. One such parallel to the story of Rabba bar R. Huna is found in Tractate *Bava Batra* (60a-b).

R. Yannai had a tree that overhung the public way, and another man also had a tree overhanging the street. Some passersby objected, and he [the second man] was summoned before R. Yannai.

He said to him, “Go away now and come again tomorrow.” During the night, he sent and had his own tree cut down.

The next day, the man came back and he [R. Yannai] told him to go and cut the tree down.

He said, “But you, sir, also have one?”

He replied, “Go and see. If mine is cut down, cut yours down; and if mine is not cut down, you need not cut yours down.”

What, then, was Rabbi Yannai's idea at first [when he kept his tree] and afterwards [when he had it cut down]? At first he thought that passersby were glad of it because they could sit in its shade; but when he saw that they objected to it, he had it cut down.

Still, why did he not say to the man, “Go and cut yours down and then I will cut down mine”? He was adhering to the dictum of Resh Lakish, who said: “‘Gather yourselves together, and gather [others] (*hitkosheshu va-koshu*)’ — first adorn [rebuke] yourself, and then adorn others.”

This story about R. Yannai holds up something of a mirror to the story of Rabba bar R. Huna. The Talmud makes a suggestion that is ultimately rejected: “Why did he not say to the man: ‘Go and **cut yours down** and **then I will cut down mine**’?” This echoes the defiant declaration of Rabba bar R. Huna: “Let the owners above and below me **first cut down** [their portion], and **then I will cut down mine**.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Reish Lakish’s *derasha* explicates R. Yannai’s behavior, while it challenges Rabba bar R. Huna’s behavior.

In truth, the circumstances are not exactly identical. R. Yannai is in the position of compelling, through his verdict, a litigant to act in a manner that he himself has not, which makes his neglect of his duties particularly inappropriate. Nevertheless, Rabba bar R. Huna also holds a public position that creates the expectation of exemplary behavior. The yawning gap between this expectation and Rabba bar R. Huna’s variant behavior is only broadened by comparing his actions to those of R. Yannai.

The relationship between the two stories is actually more complicated than what we have said so far. A deeper analysis of R. Yannai’s story reveals a gap between the tale on its own and the words of the *gemara* that follow after it.

From the story, it sounds as though R. Yannai’s tree does not bother the passersby. Strictly by the letter of the law, he need not cut it down; the requirement emerges from broader ethical concerns. Nevertheless, the Talmudic redactors explain that R. Yannai does indeed have an obligation to cut down his own tree, as it becomes clear to him from the public complaints against the litigant in his court that the judge’s tree is also a public nuisance. The Talmudic redactors then apply the *derasha* of Reish Lakish on “*hitkosheshu va-koshu*” in order to explain why he must cut down his own tree first.

This interpretation of the story is certainly feasible, although it is not necessarily accurate. It may be that the fact that there was a public complaint against the litigant, but not against R. Yannai, was not due to some inherent difference between the two trees, but rather the status of R. Yannai. From this perspective, the law for R. Yannai’s tree would be the same as the law for the litigant.

This creates an interesting situation. Were we to simply compare the two Amoraic stories, without the *gemara*’s editorial comments, we would find a yawning gap between the behavior of these two sages, and the criticism of Rabba bar R. Huna’s actions would be even sharper. However, the editorial comments of the *gemara* veer off in two diametrically opposed directions. Reading the two *sugyot* in their entirety, the gap is narrowed: R. Yannai is presented as acting out of a simple halakhic obligation to cut down his trees, minimizing the positive impression of his act, while cutting down Rabba bar R. Huna’s trees is presented as practically worthless (as we observed in studying the editorial comments of the *gemara* in the previous *shiur*), which blunts or belays the criticism of his behavior. In any case, we may learn something more about the power of the *gemara* to interpret narratives and the acts of the Sages by means of brief comments on the stories themselves.

**The Second Parallel**

The second parallel is found in *Bava Kama* (80a ff). It addresses the established prohibition of raising small cattle in the Land of Israel and the question of whether it extends to the eastern lands as well:

R. Yehuda said in the name of Rav: “We put ourselves in Babylon, with regard to the law of breeding small cattle, on the same footing as if we were in the Land of Israel.”

R. Ada bar Ahava said to R. Huna, “What about yours?”

He answered him, “Ours are guarded by Chuba [my wife].”

He, however, said to him, “Is Chuba prepared to bury her child?”

**It was related that during the whole lifetime of R. Ada bar Ahava, none of Rav Huna’s children born to Chuba remained alive.**[[2]](#footnote-2)

**R. Huna vs. Rabba bar R. Huna**

The formulation, “during the whole lifetime of X, none of Y’s children remained alive,” which appears in the Talmud only in these two contexts, creates a literary link between the stories.[[3]](#footnote-3) This connection is strengthened by the association among the characters. One additional intriguing element is that in *Bava Kama*, the accursed character who is to have no children is R. Huna, father of the protagonist of our story, Rabba bar R. Huna. Beyond the filial connection between the two characters, Rabba bar R. Huna is the child of R. Huna — who was cursed not to have children!

We will ignore the historical questions of when Rabba bar R. Huna was born and who his mother was; instead, let us focus on the literary significance of the connection between the sources. R. Huna, father of Rabba, is rebuked by R. Ada bar Ahava due to the nonfulfillment of the enactment forbidding the raising of small cattle in Babylonia. The response of R. Huna is on the practical level. There is no problem that he raises small cattle, since his wife watches them to make sure they do not cause any damage, so that in practice there is no benefit to be had by abiding by this prohibition.

We may identify a certain similarity between the position of the father, R. Huna, and the son, Rabba, even though the situations and the positions are not identical. The curse of R. Ada expresses, apparently, the position that an enactment of the Sages cannot be measured only by the results. According to this view, from the moment that the enactment is instituted, it is binding in a sweeping manner, especially upon Torah scholars, and the level of obligation is not to be determined on the basis of the ultimate results. A similar position to that of R. Ada is represented by Rabba bar R. Nachman, who words are cited as a claim against Rabba bar R. Huna to compel him to cut down his trees.

An interesting question arises from comparing the aforementioned sources: What are we to make of this abrupt reversal, in which Rabba bar R. Huna is the one to curse someone who acts towards Rabba bar R. Huna’s property in a way similar to the one we have attributed to R. Ada bar Ahava? Theoretically, as we said in the previous *shiur*, it is feasible to interpret the pronouncement and fulfillment of the curse as buttressing the position of Rabba bar R. Huna and as a protest against the overly activist behavior of Rabba bar R. Nachman, which extended beyond verbal reprimand.

Perhaps there is a certain irony directed against Rabba bar R. Huna himself and his conduct in the fact that the child of the target of a curse of childlessness similarly curses a scholar who holds a position opposed to his own. This interpretation is based on the fact that R. Ada bar Ahava, R. Huna’s disputant in the story in *Bava Kama*, is well-known from various sources in the Babylonian Talmud as a particularly positive character, a paragon of virtue, piety and saintliness.[[4]](#footnote-4) In light of the essential view that R. Ada bar Ahava represents in the story in *Bava Kama*, one that may be applicable to Rabba bar R. Huna’s conduct as well, we may justify the choice of the author of our story of the riverfront wood to put in Rabba bar R. Huna’s mouth a similar curse as an ironic one, which would naturally indicate that the narrative is critical of him and of his view.

A survey of Talmudic narrative reveals an additional intriguing point. Let us consider the two sources we have compared to the story of the riverfront wood, the story of R. Huna and R. Ada bar Ahava and the story of R. Yannai. They have an independent literary connection that directly relates to the ethical question under discussion – a scholar’s obligation to fulfill a given law or enactment. R. Ada bar Ahava’s objection to R. Huna concerning the ban against raising small cattle in Babylonia is phrased in the following way: “What about **yours (*didakh***)?”[[5]](#footnote-5) In the story of R. Yannai, this is a central aspect of the language of the story, repeated at every critical juncture. “During the night, he sent and had **his own (*dideih*)** tree cut down;” “If **mine (*didi*)** is cut down, cut **yours *(didakh****)* down.” Similarly, in the parallel passage of R. Yannai’s story in the Jerusalem Talmud, the Roman neighbor asks the exact same question as R. Ada bar Ahava: “What about **yours (*didakh***)?”[[6]](#footnote-6)

This comparison reveals an interesting phenomenon, as we have something of a triad of sources; each source is tied to the two others by some literary clue, which strengthens the idea of reading all three together as a complete assortment of stories scattered throughout the Babylonian Talmud. This approach presents different sides of an ethical question that stands, in various versions, against the background of different *sugyot* in the tractates of *Seder* *Nezikin* – the connection between a given law or enactment and the behavior of a given sage, particularly when there are no clear-cut ramifications to the failure to follow the rule. This narrative collection presents different positions of various scholars without coming to a clear decision among them, but the inclination of these stories is towards a certain criticism of any scholar who himself fails to fulfill the given law or enactment.

**Summary**

Our literary analysis and comparison of parallel stories indicates that beyond the specific halakhic question under discussion in the narrative – namely cutting down one’s trees in various situations – the tale includes a different central theme, on a more general plane. This theme addresses the formal fulfillment of an enactment having no particular utility, particularly when the action is taken by a public figure, so that there are communal and societal implications of this inaction. Specifically, in our story, the question is whether Rabba bar R. Huna has the duty to cut down trees in a situation in which he is not legally required to do so because of the practical uselessness of such activity. We have seen that the narrative’s response to this question is complex and certainly not monolithic.

In conclusion, let us once against address the broader context of the story of the riverfront wood in the *sugya*. As we saw in the previous *shiur*, the structure of the *sugya* in which the narrative is integrated may be described in the following manner: the rule (R. Ammi’s declaration that overgrowth on the riverbanks must be cleared), a simple case study (R. Natan bar Hoshaya’s enthusiastic fulfillment of this duty, which goes beyond the required amount), and then a story that addresses a similar case, but contains details and a plot that go beyond the specific circumstance and law previously raised, so that the message is not confined to the practical halakhic viewpoint alone. The story does deal with the question of the distance to be maintained from the riverbank, but as mentioned above, the essential question analyzed here is the ethical question of fulfilling a rabbinical enactment, particularly when this duty rests with a Torah scholar, even in a case in which following the rule does not seem to have any clear pragmatic utility.

The sole link between the story of Rabba bar R. Huna and the broader *sugya* in which it appears is expressed by the enactment mentioned immediately before, the statutory distance from the river’s edge to allow the bargemen to ply their trade. As mentioned above, this enactment is mentioned in the *sugya* due to the development of the discussion based on R. Yehuda’s order to R. Ada the surveyor. Similarly, R. Yehuda’s words in this context are part of a lengthy series of quotes attributed to that sage cited in the *sugya*; aside from the speaker, there does not seem to be any link among all of these statements.

Thus, the connection of the narrative to the *sugya* in its entirety is, in any case, merely associative and technical.[[7]](#footnote-7) In particular, it is notable that the central theme of the story, shaped by its content and literary structure, has no connection to the main *sugya*.

On the other hand, we have seen that this narrative does indeed have significant connection to a different, broader context: other tractates throughout *Seder* *Nezikin* in the Babylonian Talmud. These tractates contain other stories that, in various ways, touch on similar points as our narrative. When we consider these links, we see before us an assortment of stories, as it were, which together create a compelling and complete picture of a certain question. Revealing this array of stories teaches us about the fascinating phenomenon of narrative in the Babylonian Talmud: stories in different places may be connected, and an intertextual reading of these stories has great significance. Together, these stories create a rich and full portrait of a given topic.

Translated by Yoseif Bloch

1. The law addressed in the story of R. Yannai is connected to Mishna *Bava Batra* 2:14 (27b in the Babylonian Talmud):

   If a tree overhangs a public thoroughfare, the branches must be cut down enough to allow a camel to pass underneath with its rider.

   R. Yehuda says that it must be enough for a camel laden with flax or bundles of vine-rods.

   R. Shimon says that all trees must be trimmed as far as the plumb-line, due to concerns of impurity [being conveyed by the overhanging branches].

   Since this *mishna* discusses trimming a tree that extends into the public domain in order to allow the passage of passersby, it directly recalls the halakhic debate of *Bava Metzia* 107b, which discusses cutting down trees on the riverbank in order to allow the bargemen to make their way through the public domain. This is the discussion that immediately precedes the story of Rabba bar R. Huna, so that the connection between the story of Rabba bar R. Huna and that of R. Yannai is neither circumstantial nor surprising. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This dialogue between R. Ada bar Ahava and R. Huna has its own parallel in the Babylonian Talmud, in Tractate *Nazir* 57b.

   R. Huna said, “One who rounds a minor’s head is liable.”

   R. Ada bar Ahava said to R. Huna, “Then who shaves your [children's heads]?”

   He replied, “Chuba.”

   “Is Chuba prepared to bury her children?”

   It was related that during the whole lifetime of R. Ada bar Ahava, none of R. Huna’s children born to Chuba remained alive.

   Seeing that both hold that rounding the whole head is [in violation of the biblical prohibition of] rounding, wherein do they differ?

   R. Huna holds that “You shall not round the corners of your heads, neither shall you mar the corners of your beard” [signifies] that to whomsoever marring is applicable, rounding is applicable, and since marring does not apply to women, rounding, too, does not apply to them.

   R. Ada bar Ahava, on the other hand, holds that both the haircutter and the one whose hair is cut are included [in the prohibition], the one who cuts being compared to the one whose hair is cut. Thus, wherever the one who is rounded is guilty, the one who rounds is also guilty. Hence, since a minor is not punishable and so is not liable, one who rounds the head of a minor is also not liable.

   The case there is even more similar to the stories we are discussing here, because this is a law propounded by R. Huna himself (while R. Ada bar Ahava demurs). R. Huna maintains that “one who rounds a minor’s head is liable,” and it ultimately becomes clear that his own children have precisely such a haircut. This makes the question much more powerful: How can a sage rule one way, yet his own household act in another way? R. Huna responds that his wife is the barber, solving the halakhic problem. However, Rav Ada refuses to accept this explanation and pronounces an imprecation. This seems strange, as the *gemara* itself explains that R. Ada argues with R. Huna’s halakhic position; R. Ada maintains that the fact that Chuba is the one who shaves her boys’ heads means nothing, as there simply is no biblical prohibition for rounding the head of a minor by shaving his head. Even were R. Huna to do it himself, there would be no violation of the biblical prohibition of *Vayikra* 19:27! Thus, we must suggest a simpler approach: What bothers R. Ada is the appearance of impropriety on the part of R. Huna. The same halakhic authority who holds that one is liable by Torah law for shaving a minor’s head seems to fail the standard of “*hitkosheshu va-koshu*.”

   It is difficult to determine with certainty the relationship between the parallel *sugyot* in *Bava Kama* and in *Nazir*. Nevertheless, it is somewhat reasonable to say that the original story is in *Nazir*, with similar motifs being exported to *Bava Kama*. This is because the elements of the story in *Nazir* fit together in a more concrete way. The curse condemning Chuba to bury her children directly connects to R. Huna’s ruling about minors and R. Ada’s indictment of Chuba for shaving their heads (according to the ruling of her husband). On the other hand, the *Bava Kama* story has no link between the curse against Chuba and the act of raising small cattle.

   We have not addressed the question of the editing of the *sugya* in *Nazir* and the *sugya* in *Bava Kama*, in terms of which predates the other. We have merely raised the issue of this story about R. Huna and R. Ada bar Ahava in order to determine which story is the original and which is a reworking of the source material. The question of the relationship between the *sugyot* — or indeed, between the tractates — as they appear now before us is a separate and broader question whose place is not here.

   If, indeed, the *sugya* in *Nazir* is the original, it appears that the redactors of the *sugya* in *Bava Kama* imported this case (not necessarily from the *sugya* in *Nazir*, but perhaps from some common source with which the editors of both *sugyot* were familiar). The redactors of *Bava Kama* reworked the specifics of the narrative so that it might accommodate the issue there, that of raising small cattle in Babylonia. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The same is true of the description which parallels that of *Bava Kama*, in *Nazir* 57b. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. E.g. *Berakhot* 20a, *Ta’anit* 20b (cf. Jerusalem Talmud, *Ta’anit* 3:11, 67a). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The same appears in the parallel in *Nazir*; see supra fn. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. To the best of my knowledge, these are the only places in either Talmud in which a phrase such as, “What about **yours (*didakh***)?” appears in this sense. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Indeed, it may be that there is a connection of content between the story and the *mishna*, as it too deals, to a certain extent, with the question of to what extent the formal fulfillment of a law or duty is significant when the failure to fulfill it does not hurt anyone (i.e. when one leases a field to plant one species and plants another, the Tanna’im argue as to whether the prohibition to alter is absolute or it should be evaluated based on the impact of this alteration on the field). In this story, on the other hand, the sages argue as to whether failing to cut down one’s trees as required by rabbinical enactment is meaningful when there is no practical significance. It may be that we can also link R. Chisda’s words to the story, as Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel’s view is explained citing the verse in *Tzefanya*: “The remainder of Israel will commit no iniquity…” This verse appears in the chapter adjacent to the verse cited by Rabba bar R. Nachman, “*hitkosheshu va-koshu*.” However, without an explicit literary link between the narrative and the *mishna*, it is difficult to support such an idea. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)