YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Talmudic *Aggadot***

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Shiur #17: *Aggadot* of the Early Second Temple Era (Part I)

# In the next *shiurim,* we will return to an issue that we raised when discussing the *aggada* of the elderly planter, in which Choni the Circler sleeps for seventy years. In our discussion there, we saw that the reader encounters two perspectives when considering the two versions of the tale, one in the Jerusalem Talmud and one in the Babylonian Talmud. The former presents the world of the Temple, as represented by Choni. This is a universe of intimacy with the divine, accompanied by stunning clarity and miraculous experiences. In contrast, the Babylonian Talmud’s world is quite different; it is the world of the *beit midrash*. Just as the Jerusalem Talmud describes Choni’s visits to the Temple, before his slumber and after it, the Babylonian Talmud’s universe, centered around the *beit midrash*, presents two different eras of Torah scholarship, the one preceding Choni’s nap and the one following it.

Before Choni goes to sleep, the *beit midrash* has some miraculous aspects, somewhat recalling the Temple, particularly as it is described in the story in the Jerusalem Talmud. Just as the Jerusalem Talmud describes that Choni’s entrance fills the Courtyard with divine light, the Babylonian Talmud portrays Choni as enlightening the assembly by settling all open questions.

The terminology utilized by the Babylonian Talmud emphasizes this parallelism. The statement of the scholars in the *beit midrash*, “The law is as clear to us as in the days of Choni the Circler,” literally means, “The law has been illuminated,” or “The law has been enlightened.”

However, when Choni returns seventy years later, something has changed. As we have seen, he overhears the sages saying that the law in the *beit midrash* is as illuminated as in his days in the *beit midrash*, before his long sleep. The restoration of this brightness to the *beit midrash* has two possible explanations.

One explanation is that Choni’s entrance causes all of the outstanding questions to be resolved in a miraculous manner, of their own accord. Choni’s problem later in the story is that the scholars cannot identify him and refuse to believe that he is who he says he is – the man who settles all questions. Choni is not recognized for his greatness.

However, there is another possibility to explain the scholars’ statement. With Choni’s absence from the *beit midrash*, the scholars have had to learn how to deal with their questions on their own. In fact, this is precisely what they did, developing their own skills of interpretation and study. According to this explanation, when Choni returns to the *beit midrash* after seventy years, the essential problem is not that they cannot identify him, but that he is no longer needed. The law shines as bright and clear for these scholars as in Choni’s days, but this is not the result of his entrance into the *beit midrash*, but rather the result of the process which occurred in his absence, which he learns about only when he comes back to the *beit midrash*.

Indeed, the language of the narrative is quite precise. When the story describes the return of Choni to the *beit midrash*, it uses a very specific term: “He then repaired (*azal*) to the *beit midrash.”* This stands in distinction to the term used earlier to describe his entry into the *beit midrash*.[[1]](#footnote-1)

It may be that Choni hears this while he is standing outside. Choni represents a reality of closeness to the Divine Presence, of receiving answers from God in an immediate and crystal-clear manner, akin to the era of the prophets of the First Temple. Apparently, in this period, Torah study was focused mainly on transmitting traditions received from Sinai. There was no need for creative and interpretive scholarship. However, after the end of the Prophetic Era, and even more so after the disappearance of the Divine Presence with the Destruction of the Second Temple, the world changed irrevocably, especially due to the absence of the unequivocal and unambiguous Word of God. This required the scholars to develop the ways of studying the Oral Torah. Indeed, the *Tanna’im* and their successors deal with interpreting the Written Torah by employing *midrash halakha*, and they develop the Oral Torah.

Choni represents the earlier period. As Yona Fraenkel explains, the narrative in the Jerusalem Talmud describes something of a symbiotic relationship between him and the Temple. In the Babylonian Talmud’s narrative, his presence provides in the *beit midrash* something of the reality of the Temple. However, when he returns after seventy years, the reality is different. The presence of Choni has lost its magic, since the scholars in the *beit midrash* have become accustomed to the new reality and they contend with it using new tools — tools of wisdom, not of prophecy.

In this *shiur*, we will study a different *aggada*, which relates directly to the transition from the First Temple to the Second Temple.

**Ezra: The Cry and the Crisis**

The Babylonian Talmud in Tractate *Yoma* (69b) addresses the public Torah reading on Yom Kippur as described in the *mishna* (*Yoma* 7:1). The Talmudic discussion cites a verse from *Nechemya* that touches on the same theme:

He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women, and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Scroll of the Torah. (*Nechemya* 8:3)

Since this verse is mentioned, the *gemara* cites another verse that appears later in the same chapter, and an aggadic discussion about it is then cited:[[2]](#footnote-2)

“And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God.”

What does “great” imply?

R. Yosef said in the name of Rav: He magnified Him by [pronouncing] the Ineffable Name.

R. Giddal said: [He recited,] “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting even to everlasting” (*Divrei Ha-Yamim I* 16).

Abbayei said to R. Dimi: But perhaps it means that he magnified Him by [pronouncing] the Ineffable Name?

He answered: One does not pronounce the Ineffable Name outside [the limits of the Temple].

But is it indeed forbidden? Is it not written: “And Ezra the scribe stood upon a pulpit of wood, which they had made for the purpose […and Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God]” (*Nechemya* 8:4) — and R. Giddal said: He magnified Him by [pronouncing] the Ineffable Name?

That was a decision in an emergency.

“And [they] shouted to the Lord God with a great voice.”

This passage raises many questions. Abbayei’s question to R. Dimi is unclear, because in the dispute which precedes his question, R. Yosef already cites the idea that “he magnified Him by pronouncing the Ineffable Name.” Furthermore, after the dialogue between Abbayei and R. Dimi, the *gemara* asks a question from the same chapter in *Nechemya*, which is part of the same story about Ezra.[[3]](#footnote-3) R. Giddal explains that “he magnified Him (*giddelo*) by pronouncing the Ineffable Name,” which seems to contradict the view cited earlier in his name, in which he challenged Rav’s statement that “he magnified Him by pronouncing the Ineffable Name.” Earlier, R. Giddal explained that this refers to the formula used by Ezra in *Divrei Ha-Yamim I* 16: “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting even to everlasting.”

The next citation also raises some problems, as no such verse exists in Scripture. There is a similar verse in the next chapter (*Nechemya* 9:4), however:

And they shouted with a great voice to the Lord their God.

Examination of reliable manuscripts leads us to a more understandable formulation of this passage. Here is the passage (with some minor modifications), along with its continuation:[[4]](#footnote-4)

**A**

“And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God.” What did he say?

R. Yosef said: “Blessed is the Blessed One.”

R. Matana said: “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting even to everlasting.”

Abbayei said to R. Dimi: But perhaps it means that he magnified Him by [pronouncing] the Ineffable Name?

He answered: One does not pronounce the Ineffable Name outside [the limits of the Temple].

But is it forbidden?

Is it not written: “And Ezra the scribe stood upon a pulpit of wood, which they had made for the purpose […and Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God]” — and R. Yehuda said in the name of Rav: He magnified Him by [pronouncing] the Ineffable Name?

That was a decision in an emergency as it says, “And they shouted with a great voice to the Lord their God.”

What did they shout? R. Yehuda said — some say it was R. Yonatan — that they cried: Woe, woe, it is the idolatrous inclination, who has destroyed the Sanctuary, burnt the Temple, killed all the righteous, driven all Israel into exile, and is still dancing around among us! You have surely given him to us so that we may receive reward through him. We want neither him, nor reward through him!

Thereupon a tablet fell down from heaven for them, whereupon the word “Truth” was inscribed. R. Chanina said: One may learn therefrom that the seal of the Holy One, blessed be He, is truth.

They ordered a fast of three days and three nights, whereupon he was surrendered to them. He came forth from the Holy of Holies like a fiery lion-cub. Thereupon, the Prophet said to Israel: About this one it is written: “This is wickedness.”

As they took hold of him, a hair of his beard fell out, he raised his voice and it went four hundred parasangs.

Then they said: How shall we act? Shall we kill him? He may raise his voice and destroy the world! The Prophet said unto them: Cast him into a leaden pot, closing its opening with lead, because lead absorbs the voice. Then they kindled a fire beneath it and incinerated it, as it is said: “And he said: ‘This is wickedness.’ And he cast her down into the midst of the measure, and he cast the weight of lead upon the mouth thereof.”

**B**

They said: Since this is a time of grace, let us pray for mercy concerning the sinful inclination. They prayed for mercy, and he was handed over to them. They imprisoned him for three days, then looked in the whole land of Israel for a fresh egg for a sick person and could not find it.

They wondered: Shall we beg for half-mercy? But Heaven does not grant half-measures!

So they put out his eyes and let him go. It helped inasmuch as he no more entices men to commit incest.

In this section, the *gemara* ultimately accepts the explanation that Ezra pronounced the Ineffable Name, even though he was outside the Temple grounds, because this was “a decision in an emergency” *(hora’at sha’a).* This *hora’at sha’a* responds to a special case of difficult crisis, expressed, according to the *gemara*, through the mighty shout the Jews let loose towards God. This *midrash* in the *gemara* makes an exegetical link between Ezra’s blessing, proclaimed at the assembly of the Jewish community on Rosh Hashana (*Nechemya* 8:2-6), and the shout they voice in the assembly after Sukkot (ibid. 9:1-4).

Indeed, the assembly after Sukkot is a continuation of the assembly at Rosh Hashana, which is cut short because it veers in a lugubrious direction that is inimical to the festival atmosphere which should reign (ibid. 8:9-10). The difficult emotions of repentance and crying out to God are delayed until after the festival season, according to the simple meaning of the text.

Still, what is the great crisis?

If we read the text in the chapters surrounding the event we are dealing with, we arrive at the following picture: The returnees to Zion arrive in the Land of Israel in relatively few number, both in terms of population or in terms of their finances. In addition, the returnees find a non-Jewish population that has benefited greatly from the absence of the Jews; these non-Jews have no intention of letting the Jews resettle their country and rebuild their kingdom. The non-Jews harass the returnees to Zion, both directly and indirectly, appealing to the Persian authorities, slandering the returnees, and petitioning the king to put a stop to the reconstruction of Jerusalem (*Ezra* 4-6; *Nechemya* 3:33, 6:19).

The crisis described in these verses is primarily physical or political. However, the *aggada* before us flips the script, reinterpreting the nature of the crisis. According to this approach, the crisis is spiritual or theological in nature. The outcry is about the idolatrous inclination, which the Jews of the early Second Temple Era feel is overwhelming them. During the First Temple Era, this very temptation conquered the people, sowing the seeds of destruction for Jerusalem and the Temple. Now, as both are being rebuilt, the Jews who have returned from Babylonia feel the powerful passion overtaking them, imperiling the Second Temple as well!

This outcry, shout, or scream (*ze’aka*) in *Nechemya* 9 has many analogues throughout *Tanakh*. *Ze’aka* recalls first and foremost the outcry of the Israelites in Egypt (*Shemot* 2:23). However, the far more significant analogy would be in the Book of *Shoftim*, in which *ze’aka* constantly recurs, describing the vicious circle of pre-monarchial Israel: The Jews sin, God hands them over to their enemies, the Jews turn back to God with a *ze’aka*, and He sends a savior to rescue them.

Indeed, this parallel is impossible to ignore if we consider the speech or prayer of the Levites in *Nechemya* 9. Its structure immediately recalls the vicious circle of *Shoftim*: God again and again exercises compassion upon the Israelites, but Israel again and again abandons His service to worship false gods. God therefore hands the Israelites over to their enemies, but answers their prayers when they cry out to him (v. 28 makes *ze’aka* a transitive verb). The cycle is immutable. In the conclusion of the speech (*Nechemya* 9:36-37), the contemporary crisis of the Jews in the Land of Israel is described as retribution for their sins, a corrupt legacy of their forebears.

In the full speech of chapter 9, through the link created to the narratives of the Book of *Shoftim*, the sin of idolatry and the inability to control it acquire vast and challenging dimensions. This, apparently, is the basis of the *midrash* in the *gemara*.

The *midrash* continues and tells us that the *ze’aka* of the Jews is heard, and there is a response from Heaven, a tablet on which the word “Truth” is written. Moreover, the idolatrous inclination is given over to them. It takes physical form as a fiery lion-cub leaving the Holy of Holies; all that is needed is to seize and to destroy him.

How does one go about destroying an inclination? This information comes, in the narrative, from the prophet Zekharya. His book is quoted and explained by the *midrash* as addressing this evil inclination and how to dispose of it. Here as well, the simple meaning of the verses indicates that there is a crisis of a political or physical nature due to the harassment by non-Jews. Nevertheless, the *midrash* reorients this challenge and sets it in the realm of the spiritual.

The Jews confine the Idolatrous Inclination to a sealed *dud* (vat), lest its screams arouse Heavenly pity. Ultimately, they incinerate it.

Now, realizing that it as an era of good feelings, the Jews hope to take advantage of this hour of goodwill to deal with another passion bedeviling them: the sinful inclination, i.e. lust. This entity as well ensnared many during the First Temple Era, and illicit relations are listed as one of the three cardinal sins responsible for the First Destruction.

However, this entity is not so easily disposed of, as the absence of lust in the world means no procreation or reproduction. Lust is a foundation of the world’s existence, and thus eliminating it entirely is a lost cause.

What is the meaning of this narrative? Why does the *gemara* describe the inclinations as animalistic, demonic, a threat to be caged?

We can shine some light on this description of eliminating an inclination by analyzing a parallel motif found elsewhere in Tractate *Yoma*.

Two pages before the *sugya* that we are discussing (67b), we find an interesting explanation of the famous scapegoat, the goat sent to Azazel, to the desert on Yom Kippur:

The School of R. Yishmael taught: Azazel — because it atones for the matter of Uzza and Azael.

This is a mystifying sentence. Who is Uzza? Who is Azael? What did they do? Why do we atone for it on Yom Kippur?

To understand this, we must open what the Talmud calls “external scripture,” the works written by Jews during the Second Temple Era. In the First Book of *Chanokh*,[[5]](#footnote-5) we find the following:

Moreover, Azazel taught men to make swords, knives, shields, breastplates, the fabrication of mirrors, and the workmanship of bracelets and ornaments, the use of paint, the beautifying of the eyebrows, the use ofstones of every valuable and select kind, and all sorts of dyes, so that the world became altered.

Impiety increased; fornication multiplied; and they transgressed and corrupted all their ways. (I *Chanokh* 8:1-2)

Again the Lord said to Raphael: Bind Azazel hand and foot; cast him into darkness; and opening the desert which is in Dudael, cast him in there.

Throw upon him hurled and pointed stones, covering him with darkness;

There shall he remain forever; cover his face, that he may not see the light.

And in the great day of judgment let him be cast into the fire. (Ibid. 10:4-5.)

Then Chanokh, passing on, said to Azazel: You shalt not obtain peace. A great sentence is gone forth against you. He shall bind you;

Neither shall relief, mercy, and supplication be yours, on account of the oppression which you have taught;

And on account of every act of blasphemy, tyranny, and sin, which you have discovered to the children of men. (Ibid. 13:1-2)

These quotes indicate that Azazel, one of “the sons of God” described in the end of *Parashat Bereishit* as playing a pivotal role in the downfall of humankind, causes humankind to sin and corrupts it. God commands the angel Raphael to throw him into an opening in the desert which is called Dudael, and to cover him with stones so that he will be unable to escape or ever see the light of day again. Ultimately, he is to be cast into the flames and cease to exist forever. This is quite reminiscent of the description of destroying the idolatrous inclination, who is placed in a container known as a *dud*, which is then sealed. A fire is then kindled beneath the *dud*. Thus, Azazel’s actions are akin to those of the idolatrous inclination, seducing and persuading human beings to engage in sinful behavior.

Elsewhere in the Book of *Chanokh*, there is another description that is an intriguing parallel to our narrative, a description found in the Baylonian Talmud recalls the Jews crying out to God over the evil inclination:

Then they said to their Lord, the King: You areLord of lords, God of gods, King of kings. The throne of your glory is forever and ever, and forever and ever is your name sanctified and glorified. You are blessed and glorified.

You have made all things; you possess power over all things; and all things are open and manifest before you. You behold all things, and nothing can be concealed from you.

You have seen what Azazel has done, how he has taught every species of iniquity upon earth, and has disclosed to the world all the secret things which are done in the heavens…

The women likewise have brought forth giants.

Thus has the whole earth been filled with blood and with iniquity.

And now behold the souls of those who are dead, cry out.

And complain even to the gate of heaven.

Their groaning ascends; nor can they escape from the unrighteousness which is committed on earth. (Ibid. 9:4-10)

Thus, it appears that the Babylonian Talmud relies here on an ancient tradition that was maintained among the Jewish People, perhaps in different version, of the evil forces in the world and their destruction by God or God’s emissaries in the proper time. However, we must note that while the Book of *Chanokh* sees all of these events as concrete occurrences, we may read the narrative in the Babylonian Talmud as an allegorical or symbolic tale that does not describe any event in reality, but rather uses the story of a creature such as the evil inclination of idolatry and what is done with it as a symbol of a spiritual process happening among the Jewish People of that era.

**Parallels in the Real World**

What, then, is the significance of the story of the elimination of the idolatrous inclination? What are its ramifications?

On the one hand, this is a positive development, as the Jewish People now no longer have to deal with this inclination and the risk of destruction it produces. Indeed, the Second Temple Era is not characterized by the sin of idolatry, except for the brief episode of Hellenism encroaching on Jewish society. However the Hellenizing Jews do not seem to have represented the masses, but rather only certain classes.[[6]](#footnote-6)

On the other hand, the description of the idolatrous inclination as a fiery lion-cub leaving the Holy of Holies is quite intriguing. This description indicates that before it departs, the idolatrous inclination resides in the Holy of Holies. Apparently, this indicates that with destruction of the idolatrous inclination, something of the service of God changes as well. The idolatrous inclination is negative because serving other gods is a cardinal sin, but the inclination itself does express a certain theological yearning or passion, as indicated by the fact that the lion-cub is made of fire. That passion burned bright among the Jewish people previously. This yearning is sometimes directed to idolatry, but it could also be directed to the service of God. Service of God also includes this passion — or, to use the metaphor of the narrative, this fire and burning. Apparently, when the idolatrous inclination is eliminated, the same sort of passion for God’s service is also lost, from the Second Temple Era and onward.

In the next *shiur*, we will consider additional sources in the literature of *Chazal* in which the imperfect status of the Second Temple Era, as compared to the First Temple Era, is expressed.

Translated by Yoseif Bloch

1. “For whenever he came to the *beit midrash*, he would settle for the scholars any difficulty that they had.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This also appears elsewhere in the Babylonian Talmud, in *Sanhedrin* 64a. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is verse 4 of the same chapter as the opening verse of this sugya, *Nechemya* 8:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Based on the Munich manuscript, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Goldschmidt produced a translation and commentary of the Book of *Chanokh*, printed in Berlin in 1892. We follow its layout. [The spelling of Azazel differs slightly: עזאזל in the Torah, עזזאל in *Chanokh.*] [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This is the distinct impression left by the Books of *Maccabees*, but this is not the forum to explore this phenomenon. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)