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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Talmudic *Aggadot***

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Shiur #19: *Aggadot* of the Early Second Temple Era (Part III)

# Introduction

# In this *shiur,* we will deal further with the passage from Tractate *Yoma* of the Babylonian Talmud that we have analyzed in the previous two *shiurim*: the eradication of the idolatrous inclination in the early Second Temple Era.

The aggadic section that we will examine below is from the opening of the Talmudic debate cited in the previous *shiurim* (especially *shiur* #17). It concerns a verse from *Nechemya* (8:6): “And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, ‘Amen! Amen!’ Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.”

“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].

Because this subject is broached, the *gemara* goes on to discuss the eradication of the idolatrous inclination. Afterwards, it returns to the discussion about the verse in *Nechemya*, citing the debate that occurred, according to the tradition that they received, in the Land of Israel:

In the West, this is how they taught it:

R. Giddal said: He magnified Him (*giddelo*) by pronouncing the Ineffable Name.

R. Matana said: He said, “The great, the mighty, and the awesome God.”

The interpretation of R. Matana seems to agree with what R. Yehoshua ben Levi said, for R. Yehoshua ben Levi said: Why were they called men of the Great Assembly? Because they restored the crown of yore.

[For] Moshe had come and said: “The great, the mighty, and the awesome God.”

Then Yirmeyahu came and said: Foreigners are crowing in His Sanctuary; where are, then, His awesome deeds? Hence he omitted “the awesome.”

Daniel came and said: Foreigners are enslaving his sons; where are His mighty deeds? Hence he omitted the word “the mighty.”

But [the men of the Great Assembly] came and said: On the contrary! Therein lie His mighty deeds: that He subdues His inclination, that He remains long-suffering to the wicked. Therein lie His awesome powers: for were it not for the fear of Him, how would one nation persist among the nations!

But how could [the earlier] Rabbis abolish something established by Moshe? R. Elazar said: Since they knew that the Holy One, blessed be He, insists on truth, so they would not ascribe false [things] to Him.

At the beginning of this passage, interpretations of Ezra’s words are cited, which according to tradition were stated in the Land of Israel. We dealt with the first interpretation, that of R. Giddal, in previous *shiurim* (see *shiur* #17). The second interpretation is a new one, and the *gemara* ties it to a different tradition that R. Yehoshua ben Levi cites – that the men of the Great Assembly (as represented by Ezra and the Levites; *Nechemia* 9:5) restored God's glory after Yirmeyahu and Daniel, due to the reasons cited in the narrative, diverged from the Mosaic terminology. The men of the Great Assembly restored Moshe’s coinage.

Let us explain this a bit. “The great, the mighty and the awesome God” is a phrase that is used both by Moshe in the Book of *Devarim* and the Levites in *Nechemya* 9. Yirmeyahu and Daniel use similar phrases, but each omits one of God’s attributes. *Chazal* in this *aggada* take note of these alterations, and they posit that there is a process at work. Beyond the words of each one of the speakers, *Chazal* generalize these words for the formula of prayer, as we shall see below in the Jerusalem Talmud. The *Amida*, the central prayer of every service, addresses God as, “The great, the mighty, and the awesome God.”

Before we engage in an analysis of this *aggada*, let us take a look at the parallel *aggada* in the Jerusalem Talmud. Then we will return to the Babylonian Talmud’s formulation.

**The *Aggada* in the Jerusalem Talmud**

This is how the Jerusalem Talmud presents the discussion (*Berakhot* 7:3, 11c; *Megilla* 3:7, 74c):

It is written, “And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God.” And how did he magnify Him? He magnified Him by invoking the divine name.

R. Matana said: He magnified Him with a blessing.

R. Simon said in the name of R. Yehoshua ben Levi: Why were they called the Men of the Great Assembly? Because they restored the greatness of yore.

R. Pinchas said: Moshe ordained the form of the prayer: “The great, the mighty, and the awesome God.”

Yirmeyahu said, “The great and the mighty God,” but he did not say awesome. Why did he call Him mighty? Because it is fitting to call mighty One who is able to witness the destruction of His Temple and keep silent. And why did he not call him awesome? Because awesome refers only to the Temple, as it says, “You, God, are awesome from your temples” (*Tehillim* 68:35).

Daniel said, “O Lord, the great and awesome.” And why did he not call Him mighty? Because when we, His children, are [in captivity] in chains, how can we call Him mighty? And why did he call Him awesome? It is fitting to call Him awesome because of the awesome deeds He did [to save] us in the fiery furnace.

And when the Men of the Great Assembly arose, they restored the greatness of yore: “The great and the mighty and the awesome God.”

But do men of flesh and blood have the authority to place a limit on such things [as the praise of God]? Said R. Yitzhak ben Elazar: The prophets know that God is always true and they do not try to flatter [Him].

This formulation of the *aggada* appears somewhat unfinished, while that in the Babylonian Talmud is far more polished.[[1]](#footnote-1) Due to this distinction, it appears that the original version is the one in the Jerusalem Talmud,[[2]](#footnote-2) while the Babylonian Talmud presents the *aggada* in a more orderly manner, which thus appears to be a reworking of the earlier version in the Jerusalem Talmud or a similar tradition. We will therefore analyze the version in the Jerusalem Talmud first.

The Jerusalem Talmud tells us that Yirmeyahu and Daniel deviated from Moshe’s formula. The former does refer to God as mighty, and the Jerusalem Talmud explains his choice, which may seem questionable in light of the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem, including the incineration of God’s House. However, Yirmeyahu’s decision is justified by the restraint expressed in God’s allowing His Temple to be destroyed by the Babylonians, following the Heavenly decree. Nevertheless, “awesome” is a term that Yirmeyahu eschews, and the reasoning is intriguing. It is not that God’s acts are any less awe-inspiring amidst the Destruction of Jerusalem, but rather that the terminology demands that the Temple be standing — or, to be more precise, that God be present and revealed within the Temple: “You, God, are awesome from your temples” (*Tehillim* 68:35). Since the Temple lies in ruin, “awesome” is a term that must be shelved, as it reflects a bygone reality.

However, Daniel does use the term “awesome.” He interprets the term differently, as the miracles wrought for him and his companions in the fiery furnace are acts that inspire awe. There is a consensus that “awesome” relates to a certain aspect of God’s presence in the world. Yirmeyahu explains that this is contingent on geography, that God must be present in the Temple, and perhaps that the world must experience God as in the Temple. Daniel, on the other hand, believes that the term may be applied to wonders, supernatural events that concretize God’s presence in the world at large.

Still, Daniel does omit the term “mighty,” as he sees it as inappropriate so long as God’s children, the Israelites, are in chains. This seems to be another point of contention between him and Yirmeyahu. The latter sees “might” in restraint as well; thus, when God holds Himself back, as it were, and lets Nevukhadnetzar’s legions raze His House, this is an expression of might. Daniel rejects this idea; restraint and unresponsiveness are not mighty, in his view. For Daniel, a mighty reaction must be an aggressive act by God to defend His children from their oppressors.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In the view of the Jerusalem Talmud, the men of the Great Assembly “restored the greatness of yore.” This expression is more understandable than the Babylonian Talmud’s version, “They restored the crown of yore.” Greatness, after all, is tied directly to Moshe’s phrase: “The great, the mighty, and the awesome God.” The men of the Great Assembly restore, as it were, the title of “the great” to its place among its boon companions, “the mighty and the awesome.”

The act of the men of the Great Assembly is not explained here. The Jerusalem Talmud attempts to understand the audacity of Yirmeyahu and Daniel. How could human beings decided what adjectives are applicable to God, dismissing those titles they reject? The answer is extremely powerful: Those imbued with the Holy Spirit know that God is truthful and values unvarnished honesty; this is why they describe the theological reality as they experience it, without flattery.

Yirmeyahu feels that without the Temple, God’s presence in the world can no longer objectively be called “awesome.” Thus, he can no longer refer to “the awesome God.” On the other hand, Yirmeyahu feels the might of God despite the Destruction of Jerusalem — he senses the restraint of God that allows foreigners to trample and demolish His House. Daniel feels it differently, and his authentic religious feelings are expressed through his prayer. Daniel feels the awe of God’s intervention, the miraculous expression of His continued Presence, which saves Daniel and his companions from the fiery furnace. However, in his experience, God’s might is nowhere to be seen, as His children are downtrodden and enslaved. “The prophets”[[4]](#footnote-4) express themselves in an authentic manner.

However, aside from the statement about authenticity, in this *aggada* the Jerusalem Talmud draws no other distinctions, more generalized or more specific, between “the prophets” and the men of the Great Assembly. The positon of the former is not fully unified and the position of the latter is not explained at all. As we stated above, this indicates a more raw and unfinished version of the narrative.

**The *Aggada* in the Babylonian Talmud**

On the other hand, in the Babylonian Talmud, things are put in order and the distinction between “the prophets” and the men of the Great Assembly is sharper. First of all, the position of the latter is explicated. Second, “the prophets” present a simple, unified position. “The mighty” and “the awesome” are appellations that they are incapable of using in the current situation. Yirmeyahu is present in Jerusalem when the Babylonians breach its walls, and perhaps he is a personal witness to other interlopers roaming over the Temple Mount after the Destruction. He feels that awe is objectively absent if “foreigners are crowing in His sanctuary,” a place concerning which the Torah declares that, in normal times, any unauthorized entry deserves the death penalty. Where is the awe, the reverence, the fear of God if the very presence of such intruders — certainly ones who openly exhibit such contempt in their behavior — should engender immediate capital punishment? Daniel, who lives in Babylonia, feels that there is no might as long as the Jews are subjugated, so he does not use the appellation “the mighty.”

The Babylonian Talmud, much like the Jerusalem Talmud, explains the position of “the prophets” as based on the conception of God as the embodiment of truth. God expects those who pray to Him to do so honestly, and so they cannot be disingenuous in how they address Him.

In contrast to “the prophets,” the men of the Great Assembly take a different position. They say “the mighty” and “the awesome,” and they explain that, in their eyes, these attributes are expressed even while the Land of Israel is in ruins and the People of Israel are in exile. The might of God is expressed through His restraint, “subduing His inclination,” as it were, to borrow Ben Zoma’s phrase from Tractate *Avot* (4:1): “Who is mighty? One who subdues one’s inclination.” God is long-suffering, showing patience to sinners: “Therein lie His mighty deeds that He subdues His inclination, that He remains long-suffering to the wicked.” This too is might. This is a creative, uncommon interpretation, tying “mighty,” which is generally associated with the Attribute of Justice, to “long-suffering,” which is one of the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy. Indeed, if we consider Ben Zoma’s words in their entirety, we find that they already include this interpretative paradox:

Who is mighty? One who subdues one’s inclination, as it is written (*Mishlei* 16:32), “Better to be long-suffering than be mighty, one who rules one’s spirit than one who conquers a city.”

This concept of God subduing His inclination also connects back to the preceding *aggada*, that of the idolatrous inclination and the “sinful” (sexual) inclination. In that tale, the men of the Great Assembly are the ones who defeat the idolatrous inclination and are at least partially victorious against the “sinful” inclination. In this tale, the men of the Great Assembly praise God for subduing His inclination, His angry response to the provocation of the enemy. These may be two sides of the same coin. In the previous *shiurim*, we raised the idea that eradicating the idolatrous inclination precipitates a degree of distance from God; this may include the lack of an immediate reaction to the heathen invasion in our tale, i.e. subduing His inclination to respond precipitously to the insult of the invaders who desecrate His House and His children. Together, these *aggadot* create a more complete picture of the transition from the First Temple to the Second Temple, along with all of the changes and developments occurring at the beginning of the Second Temple Era.

There is some awe as well. This is also something of a paraphrase of a line from Tractate *Avot* (3:2):

R. Chanina, Deputy of the Priests, would say: Pray for the welfare of the government; for were it not for the fear (*mora*) of it, one would swallow one’s neighbor alive.

The Babylonian Talmud phrases it slightly differently: “Therein lie His awesome powers: for were it not for the fear of Him, how would one nation persist among the nations!” God may rightly be called “awesome” (*nora*) because the fear (*mora*) of Him strengthens the world, preventing one nation from being swallowed by its neighbor. The emphasis in this case is on the Jewish nation in particular, which persists and survives in exile as a people, without being assimilated and swallowed up.

Still, we may ask about the position of the men of the Great Assembly: What about the attribute of truth? The contention of “the prophets” is a powerful one: God wants truth, and to pray one must approach Him without prevarication. On the other hand, the position of the men of the Great Assembly raises a corresponding question: Why didn’t “the prophets” think of this creative interpretive approach to justify continuing to call God “the mighty and the awesome God”? This question only grows stronger when we consider the fact that in the Jerusalem Talmud’s version, Yirmeyahu must use the Great Assembly’s justification to continue referring to God as “the mighty”! As stated above, only in the Babylonian Talmud is the distinction between Yirmeyahu and Daniel on one side and the men of the Great Assembly on the other so sharp.

In my view, we may understand the distinction between the various positons according to the Babylonian Talmud on two planes. One is the historical plane, which separates the differing views. Yirmeyahu and Daniel live through the era of the Destruction of the First Temple; they personally witness the horrors of dispossession and exile, with all of the haunting images, the anguish, the helplessness. In the valley of death, amid the ashes of the Temple and the exultant invaders, the experience is so powerful and totally overwhelming that speaking of God as awesome and mighty seems fundamentally disingenuous, even if theoretically these terms might have been understood in a more esoteric way. However, the men of the Great Assembly belong to a different generation. For them, the story of the Destruction of Jerusalem is a matter of historical record, not personal experience; some of its ramifications are still felt, but not quite as painfully or as powerfully. Generally speaking, the era of the Great Assembly is a period of rebuilding, of the Return to Zion and the construction of the Second Temple. They have a different perspective.[[5]](#footnote-5) From their point of view, reinterpreting might and awe is feasible, and it is not fundamentally dishonest.

The second plane is tied to the chronology of the Torah’s development, as we have mentioned in previous *shiurim*. The first part of the *aggada* delves into the distinction between the First Temple and the Second Temple. The First Temple Era is a period of prophecy, of direct communication with God. The singular truth is transmitted from God to the prophets, and they give it over to the Jewish People. The very concept of truth in this era is far more dominant and monolithic. This is, therefore, the central concept for “the prophets.” There is one truth, and through it they experience reality. The one truth in their reality is that of destruction and exile, in which God does not reveal Himself in the attributes of might and awesomeness, but rather conceals these aspects of the Divine.

The men of the Great Assembly belong to a new era, a reality that they create. Prophecy is gone,[[6]](#footnote-6) and naturally the concept of truth loses its unified character.

The Oral Torah develops, and the essence of its meaning is interpreting the Written Torah. Interpretation is a process of creation and creativity, subject to dispute, and this is because it is a human tool, not a divine one. Naturally, a singular and exclusive truth no longer stands in the center, because without prophecy, there is no way to reach such a truth. Interpretation is what stands at the center of the Jewish People’s spiritual experience during the Second Temple. The human creativity in Torah in that period, which is performed by *Chazal*, perhaps guided by the Holy Spirit, differs vastly from prophecy; this is a reality defined by a multiplicity of opinions. The men of the Great Assembly in their prayers use the act of interpretation in a very creative manner, as we saw above. This is their role; they do not fulfill the function of prophets. Their activity is in the domain of wisdom, not prophecy. As regards this, even if the Sages stand amidst the awful reality of the Destruction, they can still refer to “the mighty and the awesome God” because of their creative interpretation, as this is how they stand before God, wholly unlike the positon of the prophets.

**The Tablet of Truth**

This allows us to return to an interesting line in the first *aggada* and reinterpret it. The *aggada* of destroying the idolatrous inclination begins with a lament about the destruction it has caused. The *gemara* then tells us:

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.

This tablet comes from Heaven, which means that it is intended to express something occurring in Heaven or being transmitted from Heaven. It may be that this action is not meant to charge those on earth to search for the truth, but rather the opposite. Absolute Truth has been cast down, as it no longer stands in the center, as an exclusive matter, when the world has reoriented itself around the axis of study, creativity, and debate.

In this sense, this *aggada* may be tied to the previous *aggada* — and not merely in a technical or associate sense, as it appears at first glance. These two *aggadot* deal with the transition between the First Temple Era and the Second Temple Era, a significant transition both spiritually and religiously. The Jewish People’s standing and stance in relationship to God changes with this transition, and the two *aggadot* illuminate different sides of this transition.

The broad context of the *sugya* is important here. In the *mishna*, the context is the public Torah reading by the High Priest on Yom Kippur. This reading is not mentioned in the passage of the Yom Kippur service,[[7]](#footnote-7) but it is quite similar to the ceremony that Ezra presides over. Ezra himself is a priest, and in the eighth chapter of the Book of *Nechemya*, as we have seen in previous *shiurim*, there is a pubic Torah reading:

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… Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, “Amen! Amen!” Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. The Levites… instructed the people in the Torah while the people were standing there. They read from the Scroll of the Torah of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.

This Torah reading is not merely a reading; interpretation is an essential part, and this is the genesis of the Oral Torah that will characterize the Second Temple.

Although the High Priest reads the text of the Torah on Yom Kippur, without delving into interpretation, the fact that the *sugya* that deals with his reading cites the reading by Ezra and the Levites ties the ceremonies together. This reading itself is an innovation (*chiddush*), as the Written Torah never commands the High Priest to fit this into his very busy schedule on the holiest of days. This is an innovation of the Oral Torah within the Yom Kippur service, stressing the new character of God’s service in the Second Temple and the revolutionary way of interacting with Him.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, beyond the content that we have discussed up until this point, we must stress the methodological aspect. Elsewhere in the Babylonian Talmud,[[8]](#footnote-8) the story of the eradication of the idolatrous inclination is cited in another context. Indeed, the continuation of the *aggada*, analyzing the different approaches of “the prophets” and the men of the Great Assembly, is not included there. The fact that Tractate *Yoma* juxtaposes them emphasizes a certain interpretation of them, as they are read one after the other: the shared motif of the spiritual transition from the First Temple to the Second Temple.

Translated by Yoseif Bloch

1. For example, the Babylonian Talmud adds a line to tie the words of R. Matana to the words of R. Yehoshua ben Levi. The claims of Yirmeyahu and Daniel are more uniformly and simply presented in the Babylonian Talmud as well, as we shall see below. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Jerusalem Talmud, of course, precedes the Babylonian Talmud chronologically as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It is possible to view the distinction as less inherent, explaining that it emanates from the differences between the realities each is familiar with. Yirmeyahu sees the destruction of the Temple and perceives it as restraint on God’s part expressing might; Daniel, in contrast, who is located in Babylonia and witnesses the experience of the Jews in exile and their harsh situation, feels that such restraint in the face of the Jewish People’s state of crisis cannot be defined as might. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is the term the Jerusalem Talmud uses, although Daniel himself is not regarded as a Prophet in the usual sense; his book, like *Ezra*-*Nechemya*, is part of the Writings (*Ketuvim*). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. R. Tamir Granot develops this explanation in his *shiur* on this *aggada*’s relationship to the Holocaust, available in the VBM’s archive. R. Granot equates this to the view of Holocaust survivors who lived through the camps as compared to that of late generations. We contemporary Jews hear of the Holocaust and are horrified, but we also see the reality of the Jewish People’s return to the Land of Israel, with all that entails. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Although there are some prophets at the very beginning of the Second Temple Era, they are holdovers; overall, the Second Temple is characterized by a lack of prophecy. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Vayikra* 16 details the service of Yom Kippur, while *Vayikra* 23:26-32 mentions it among the other holidays. The High Priest reads both, according to *mishna* *Yoma* 7:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In *Sanhedrin* 64a, this story is cited to challenge the following statement (ibid. 63b): “R. Yehuda said in Rav’s name: The Israelites knew that the idols were nonentities, but they engaged in idolatry only that they might openly satisfy their illicit lusts.” The lament at the beginning of the *aggada* seems to indicate a deeper connection to the idolatrous inclination; however, the *gemara* responds that although originally the Jews knew that idols were powerless, they had become addicted to paganism over the course of the First Temple Era. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)