YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Rabbinic Tales: In the Talmud and in *Chassidut***

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**Shiur #01: Rabbinical Narratives and Chassidic Stories (1)**

R. Yaakov Yosef of Polonne, who served as the rabbi of Shargorod, was a renowned scholar who was sharp and meticulous in his character and comportment – and far removed from Chassidism. He once happened to be in a certain town where, upon arriving at the synagogue for morning prayers, he found the door locked. He waited for the worshippers to show up and then berated them crossly, asking why they had arrived late, causing him to stand there alone, waiting for a *minyan*. “Is it not proper to come to the synagogue on time?” he demanded. The worshippers tried to excuse their delay, explaining that a man had been standing in the town square, telling stories, and they had stopped to listen to him. The stranger was in fact the Ba'al Shem Tov, speaking to passers-by – unlearned, simple people – and teaching them about Divine service. R. Yaakov Yosef of Polonne was furious with this individual who had delayed the worshippers on their way to morning prayers, and he immediately set off to rebuke him. "How dare you keep the congregation from its prayers, telling stories instead!" he roared. The Ba'al Shem Tov gazed at him with his kindly eyes and answered, "Let me tell you a story.

I once climbed into a wagon that was hitched to three horses – one black, another white, and the third pink. I wanted to set off and I pulled at the reins, but the horses wouldn't move. I pulled harder, but they refused to budge. I kept trying, pulling with all my might, until a farmer came along and called to me, 'If you want the horses to leap and gallop forward, you have to ease up on the reins!'"

The Ba'al Shem Tov's words pierced R. Yaakov Yosef's heart and he became his loyal disciple.

The narrative above is based on Martin Buber's version of the story, as it appears in his *Ohr ha-Ganuz*.[[1]](#footnote-2) When one shares such a story, the “how” – the way in which it is told – is no less important than the “what” – the story itself. One has to know how to tell a story.

The title of this series might at first seem somewhat surprising: what does Talmudic literature have to do with Chassidic stories? The two bodies of narratives represent two completely different time periods, separated by many centuries. What sort of context would justify addressing them in juxtaposition? This is the question that I wish to address in this *shiur* and the next, as a general theoretical introduction to the series and explanation of its rationale. The rest of the *shiurim* will focus on the sources themselves.

In addressing our opening question, we might proceed from an interesting feature that the two periods share: these are two eras within the history of the development of Oral Law in which the narrative form occupies a central place.

Talmudic literature includes a vast narrative component, much of which is comprised of stories.[[2]](#footnote-3) A few stories appear in the Mishna,[[3]](#footnote-4) with a few more in the Tosefta[[4]](#footnote-5) and in *midrashei* *halakha*. Both the Bavli and Yerushalmi, along with *midrashei aggada*, of course, are full of stories. Most take the form of "*ma'asei chakhamim*" (stories of the Sages), whose heroes are the Sages of the Talmud. However, there are other stories, centered around other figures – whether human (kings, wizards, nomads, and others of various nations) or non-human.[[5]](#footnote-6)

Special mention should be made of the interweaving of aggadic material into halakhic works, since from a cultural point of view this is a unique phenomenon. The cultures among which *Chazal* lived and alongside which they were active (especially the Roman Empire, in Eretz Yisrael, and the Persian Empire, in Babylon) created books of religious or civic law and also created literature that parallels Jewish *aggada* (such as collections of stories and parables), but they offer no blended genre that can be compared to the combination of *aggada* and *halakha* in Talmudic literature.

At the other end of Jewish history, in the modern era, we find the Chassidic story. Chassidic stories occupy an important and central place in Chassidic literature as a whole. For example, Prof. Eli Yassif, a scholar of Jewish literature and folklore, has the following to say (in his book *Sippur ha-Am ha-Ivri*) about Chassidic narratives:

The stories that emerged from the Chassidic movement and environment form one of the largest and richest anthologies of stories ever to appear in the history of Jewish literature… Scholars of Chassidism in recent generations emphasize the centrality of the story in Chassidic culture….

A great many of these stories are tales of *Tzaddikim* that portray various Chassidic figures. One of the earliest and best known of these anthologies is *Shivchei ha-Besht* (*In Praise of the Ba’al Shem Tov*), which includes many of the stories told about the Ba'al Shem Tov and traditions ascribed to him. These narratives parallel the "stories of the Sages" from Talmudic literature and the two bodies of stories share many similarities. (There are also differences, in terms of their nature, focus, and of course language, but those are not our main interest in this series.)

However, Chassidic literature also includes stories of a completely different sort. For instance, there are the many "*sippurei ma'asiyot*" of R. Nachman of Breslav,[[6]](#footnote-7) involving a wide array of real and imaginary characters – including kings and their subjects, children, animals, and other creatures (anthropomorphized animals, creatures, plants, or inanimate objects).

Admittedly, Jewish literature from after the Talmudic period (i.e., after the *Amoraim*) and before the modern era also includes stories and anthologies. For instance, there are the narratives that appear in halakhic works, such as the story of R. Amnon of Mainz and his liturgical jewel, “*U-netaneh Tokef*,” which appears in *Ohr Zaru'a*, and works such as *Sefer Chassidim*. Such stories appear with greater frequency toward the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern era.[[7]](#footnote-8) However, the volume of these stories comes nowhere near the abundance of the Chassidic period, and they do not occupy as central a place in the works of the rabbinical leadership or leading scholars. In his book about Chassidic stories, Dr. Avisar Har-Shefi writes:

After a lengthy period in which stories were given little attention, not only were they now the subject of intense renewed interest, but they were restored to the forefront [of religious literature] and recognized as an inseparable element of Divine service. This restoration of stories to center stage and the interest in them also had a major impact on modern Hebrew literature. Indeed, Ahad Ha’am described Chassidic tales as ‘ethnic [or ‘authentic’] Hebrew literature’ and as a foundation of modern Hebrew literature.”[[8]](#footnote-9)

As noted, the two periods that we will be examining differ in many respects. However, they share an interesting common denominator: during both periods, the spiritual leadership viewed stories as an important tool for conveying religious and spiritual messages. What is behind the central status of stories during both eras?

The period of *Chazal* lies in the distant past. We have no close acquaintance with the figures who were active at the time – neither the Sages themselves (the *Tannaim* and *Amoraim*) nor the redactors of the various works in which their teachings are enshrined. Their attribution of importance to stories is known to us mainly from the ubiquitous presence of stories in these works. It is difficult to know what it was that motivated them to award stories in particular, and the narrative form in general, such a central place in the literature they created. Furthermore, *Chazal*, as we know, formulated very few explicit and distinct reflexive statements explaining their work methods. However, we may offer hypotheses, and it is possible that comparing the two periods in question can be particularly instructive with regard to the period of *Chazal*.

The era of Chassidism is closer to our time. The centrality of the Chassidic story, in all its various forms, is clear throughout this period, and it is easier for us to posit reasons for this, owing to our closer acquaintance with the personalities and ways of thinking of the main figures who were active at the time, who speak to us, inter alia, via their teachings that have been passed down to us.

A number of views have been proposed as to the central function of the story in *Chassidut*.[[9]](#footnote-10) Some are deeply connected to the teachings of *Chassidut*, with a greater or lesser degree of relevance to the period of *Chazal*. For example, some scholars point to a connection between the centrality of stories in *Chassidut* and the movement’s mystical aspect, such that details in the plots of the stories – even seemingly mundane conversations – are perceived as having a deeper level that conveys mystical elements.[[10]](#footnote-11) Furthermore, the stories can be understood as a means of introducing a movement of religious ecstasy within the earthly reality.[[11]](#footnote-12)

From a different perspective, Har-Shefi notes the connection between the specific personality of the Ba’al Shem Tov and the important place that stories occupy in the movement he founded. In addressing the how and why of the emergence of Chassidic stories, he writes:

It all started with the personality of the Ba’al Shem Tov, which bore the features of what we might call a “narrative personality” – in other words, someone who perceives the world and gives it meaning through this medium, and whose worldview is shaped through stories no less than through conceptual abstraction. A personality of this type will also prefer to express itself and its worldview through stories, rather than through direct, literal means.

This description of the Ba’al Shem Tov’s special personality, and its impact on the status of Chassidic stories, does not necessarily apply to Rabbinical literature, where we lack familiarity with the individual figures and their personalities. We cannot say with certainty that a certain rabbi among the Talmudic Sages had a “narrative personality.” However, further on, Har-Shefi broadens the perspective and shows that the issue of stories is not just a matter of the inclination of the personality of the Ba’al Shem Tov as an individual, but may be detected in important elements of his teachings that were passed on to some of his disciples and that characterize major areas of Chassidism in general: “The place of the story in the Ba’al Shem Tov’s personality is closely bound up with other aspects of his personality, which became central aspects of the Chassidic movement.”

Which aspects are referred to here? The first is the attitude towards the physical world. The Ba’al Shem Tov does not reject the physical world; on the contrary, he displays a positive attitude toward it and its material aspects:

The vitality of the Ba’al Shem Tov; his personality – involved and active on the physical level of reality, with its center of gravity there rather than in the world of abstraction and speculation – and his inner closeness to material reality and his highlighting of it as critical for the spiritual level, are all closely connected to the fact that stories have such a significant presence in his world, and the fact that the narrative form is a central aspect of his personality, to the extent that his very worldview is consolidated and expressed by means of stories.

Har-Shefi demonstrates this by means of some of the Ba’al Shem Tov’s stories. The following example offers another version (different from the one presented in the introduction to this *shiur*) of how R. Yaakov Yosef of Polonne became a disciple of the Ba'al Shem Tov:

I heard from the famous, saintly and wise Rabbi of Polonne, who was the head of the *Beit Din* in Sharigrad, that he heard that the Ba’al Shem Tov was coming to visit Mahliv. He said to himself, “I’ll go too” – but he wasn’t yet a *Chassid*. He set out on his journey and, upon arriving on Friday morning before the morning prayers, found the Ba’al Shem Tov smoking a pipe. He found this most surprising. Afterwards, during the prayers, he wept greatly, “such as I have never wept before, and I understood that this weeping did not come from me. Afterwards, the Ba’al Shem Tov journeyed to the Holy Land, and I was desolate until his return. Then I began journeying to him, and I spent some time with him. And the Ba’al Shem Tov said that I needed upliftment.” (*Shivchei ha-Besht* [Rubenstein edition], p. 99)

In this story we see how a simple, physical act like smoking a pipe occupies the Ba’al Shem Tov, makes an impression on R. Yaakov Yosef, and is considered worthy of mention. In a different story, which describes the first meeting between the Ba’al Shem Tov and the Maggid of Mezeritch, we learn that the first words the Ba’al Shem Tov directed to the Maggid had to do with food for his horses. Here, too, the Ba’al Shem Tov sees the simple, mundane, everyday reality as worthy of being the focus of discussion. Even the practical material aspects of the world are full of meaning and deserving of attention and stories.

More generally, stories, by their very nature, reverberate with the physical, material level of reality: the events they describe generally take place in an ordinary, material setting and include descriptions of the physical world. They are therefore more useful and appropriate than abstract writing for conveying insights about this level of reality.

**The Narrative Medium**

Thus far, we have discussed the content of the stories – that which they come to describe. However, thought should also be given to the medium itself and its advantages. On one hand, as noted, some scholars have viewed the story as a means by which spiritual messages can be conveyed to a broad audience. But based on various stories and parables of the Ba’al Shem Tov, Har-Shefi concludes that the story is more than just a simple or more "lighthearted" approach for imparting messages to the masses. By virtue of its special qualities, the story is part of the Ba’al Shem Tov’s inner discourse, too. Indeed, when a person tells a story to someone else, or even to himself – when he experiences something of his life or of the world as a story – then he engages on several levels simultaneously: the external, physical-sensory level, along with other, more internal levels of meaning. This is possible because different details in the story have additional, deeper, symbolic or spiritual meanings.

I believe that this way of looking at stories is relevant to *Chazal's* narratives too. Many of their stories bring the physical world and nature into the *beit midrash*; this represents a choice on their part to address these aspects of reality by including stories within their teachings. When *Chazal* choose not only to set down practical laws or to discuss abstract ideas, but also to tell stories comprising many “mundane” details drawn from daily life, we see that they attach value to these aspects. *Chazal*’s use of stories to convey messages, like the Ba’al Shem Tov’s, indicates the potential they attribute to the elements that they mention and the various levels of thought and imagination that the stories give rise to, beyond abstract thinking. I believe that the integration of stories within the discussions and debates in both the Bavli and the Yerushalmi shows that for *Chazal*, too, the narrative form was more than just a convenient way of conveying messages to the unlearned masses. They were interested in the form itself, and held the narrative genre, and the content with which they imbued it, in high regard.

This point leads us to a second significant aspect of Chassidic thought, drawn from Kabbala: the principle of Divinity that maintains, “The entire world is full of His glory” – or, in a different formulation, “There is no place that is devoid of Him.” This view, which is central to *Chassidut*, had a major influence on how the Ba’al Shem Tov experienced reality. The significance of the concept that "the entire world is full of His glory" is that Divinity is not only transcendental; it is also immanent and present, in some way, within every part of the world and reality. Admittedly, it is not openly visible to all, and this approach therefore assumes reality is comprised of different layers, beyond the superficial outer layer that is most immediately accessible to human senses. I shall not elaborate here on this idea; there are many sources that may be consulted for further reading. However, I believe that this perspective is also related to the centrality of stories. Stories, more than other genres for teaching Torah, reflect not only reality itself but also the existence of the many layers of which it is comprised. Stories do not merely provide an external, factual, “objective” description of reality, but help us to look deeply into it and to question it, to discover the secrets concealed behind its outer “shells.” One might also suggest, in this context, that a good story contains a secret. The Israeli poet Zelda writes:

I wish to understand the desire of the infant in the story… This need – that along with the physical world there exist also a world of play, of make-believe, in which things change; in which a little boy is a father, a little girl – a mother, and a chair – a car; a world that hints to all of life's possibilities and all the promise of the physical world, and also to that which lies beyond the revealed reality."

Stories are therefore useful as a model for looking at reality in a different way, perceiving and sensing that “there is no place devoid of Him” even in a world that to regular eyes reveals only its outer material, mundane, seemingly random façade.

It is interesting to discover that R. Yaakov Yosef of Polonne – who, following the events recounted in the stories above, became the Ba'al Shem Tov's leading disciple and the documenter of many of his teachings after his death – illustrates the two principles mentioned above by means of a story from *Chazal* – the story of R. Shimon bar Yochai and the cave:

And [concerning] the matter which I wrote about above (*Parashat Chayei Sara*, *siman* 2), that at first [R. Shimon bar Yochai and his son] were of the view that a person can be considered as engaging in Divine service only when he is engaged in Torah [study], prayer, fasting, weeping, and so on, and therefore when they saw people who were not engaged in such [activities], they became angry and said, “They are setting aside eternal life and engaging in temporal life,” and brought wrath upon the world –

Until a Divine voice emerged and they returned to the cave, and sensed that this was meant to teach them a truer path – the path of mercy, where “Divine service” refers to every detail of human activity, where a person recognizes that the blessed God is to be found there, too, and where someone with understanding is able to perform unifications even while in discussion with his friend.[[12]](#footnote-13)

This teaching expresses a more inclusive and less dichotomous view of the world, with all its levels of mundaneness, as well as an assertion that Divinity is to be found in these layers, too – all via the story of R. Shimon bar Yochai, who was ordered to return to the cave in order to learn to accept the world with this perspective.

Again, one might discuss the concept of concealed layers of reality in the abstract, but a good story is more effective, since it makes reality a presence in a more direct, unmediated way, while at the same time peeling back its layers. It describes reality from an external perspective, but also conveys more mystical, spiritual insights about reality and the forces active within it.

Rabbinical literature stretches over a very long period of time, and was created by different Sages at different times and in different places. It is not monolithic; we certainly cannot assert that an idea such as "there is no place devoid of Him" – in the sense that it is embraced by *Chassidut* – was widely accepted by the Sages in their time. However, returning to the point with which I introduced the discussion: the common characteristic of ubiquitous use of stories as part of the religious oeuvre represents a very strong connection between the teachings of *Chazal* and those of *Chassidut*. Taking this connection into account, we might allow some measure of projection from *Chassidut* onto *Chazal*. It is reasonable to posit that when *Chazal* chose to tell stories, it was because they sensed the same possibilities in stories that *Chassidut* would later embrace: the contemplation of the world, life, and nature; the ability of a story to speak the language of the soul, and not just the language of action; the different sort of communication a story creates with listeners; and the power of a story to reveal more intimate, concealed aspects of reality and to expose something of its secrets.

In view of all of the above, what I seek to do in this series is to bring the Chassidic story (sometimes with the aid of Chassidic teachings) into an encounter with Rabbinical narratives. As noted, the assumption from which this approach proceeds is that a storyteller speaks a certain language – a language that connects body and soul, matter and spirit; the language of the heart. While *Chazal* themselves do not explicitly express this language to the same extent that *Chassidut* uses it in its teachings, *Chazal* too, in telling stories, deal with man, the soul, and the world, and therefore the more detailed and explicit language that we find in Chassidic teachings can sometimes offer a new perspective on Rabbinical narratives.

In some of the instances we shall discuss, the connection between Rabbinical and Chassidic materials is relatively clear and direct. There are Chassidic sources that actually respond to Rabbinical tales, or that follow in their footsteps. Sometimes the connection is less readily apparent, and sometimes the stories merely deal with similar motifs, but a Chassidic teaching may sometimes open a new way of thinking about a Rabbinical source, or may illuminate it in a new light which I feel touches on an essential and genuine message. Even when there is no apparent deliberate or conscious connection between the ancient and newer sources, I believe that Rabbinical narratives were a significant source of inspiration for the Chassidic masters and their disciples in their storytelling. It therefore seems to me that allowing our thoughts to oscillate between Chassidic stories and Rabbinical narratives can give rise to productive insights.

I introduced our discussion about the place of stories in Rabbinical literature and in *Chassidut* with a question as to the nature of stories and the common denominator linking *Chazal*’s stories and those found in Chassidic writings. The next *shiur* will continue this introduction and examine a few points on the theoretical level of the encounter between Rabbinical narratives and Chassidic stories.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

1. Tel Aviv 5775, p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. The present series will focus on *sippurei aggada* and not on other *aggadic* genres, which include conceptual teachings, *aggadic*-conceptual interpretations of biblical verses, idioms, parables, etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Classic examples include the story of Choni Ha-Me'agel in *Massekhet Ta'anit* 3:8 and the story of Rabban Gamliel and R. Yehoshua in *Massekhet Rosh Ha-shana* 2:8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. For example, two stories from Tosefta *Kippurim* (*Yoma*), one involving the Sadducee and the incense (chapter 1, *halakha* 8), and the other recounting how a Kohen stabbed his fellow *Kohen* as they raced towards the altar (chapter 1, *halakha* 12). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Classic examples include the story of Alexander the Great and the king of Katzia (Yerushalmi *Bava Metzia*, 2:8c) and the story of the diminishment of the moon (*Chullin* 60a). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. See the complete collection of his stories published by Tzvi Mark, *Kol Sippurei R. Nachman mi-Breslav: Ha-Ma'asiyot, ha-Sippurim ha-Sodiim, ha-Chalomot, ve-ha-Chezyonot*, Jerusalem 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. From the 15th century onward. For example, the Yiddish anthology *Mayseh Bukh*, with stories about the early *chassidim* of Ashkenaz (not to be confused with the later Chassidic movement)]. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. A. Har-Shefi, *Ha-Sippur Ha-Po’el – Iyyunim Chadashim ba-Sippur ha-Chassidi*, Ramat-Gan, 5782, p.11. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. As set forth by Har-Shefi, ibid., p. 8. The references below to other opinions are based on his summary. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Ron Waks, *Yichud be-Dibbur*, p. 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Yoav Elstein, *Ha-Ekstaza ve-ha-Sippur ha-Chassidi*, pp. 10-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. R. Yaakov Yosef of Polonne, *Toldot Yaakov Yosef*, *Parashat Vayetze*, *ot* 5, p. 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)