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 #06: Adam (1)**

There is a well-known *midrash* about Adam and the first winter he experienced, in the year he was created:

Rav Chanan bar Rava said: ‘Kalenda’ falls eight days after the solstice; ‘Satarnura’ falls eight days before the solstice. This is hinted to in the verse, “From behind and in front You have encompassed me…” (*Tehillim* 139:5).

The Sages taught: When Adam saw that the days were becoming progressively shorter, he said, “Woe is me! Perhaps it is because I sinned that the world is becoming dark around me, and returning to chaos and void. And this is the death that is imposed upon me by heaven.”[[1]](#footnote-1) He decided to spend eight days in fasting [and prayer].

Once he saw the solstice of Tevet [winter solstice] and saw that the days [that followed it] were becoming progressively longer, he said, “This is the way of the world.” He went and made a festival for eight days. The next year, he observed both [periods of eight days] as festivals. He established them for the sake of heaven, while [the Romans] established them for idolatry. (*Avoda Zara* 8a)

The background to this *aggada* is a teaching of Rav Chanan bar Rava about two Roman pagan festivals, Kalendae Januirae and Saturnalia,[[2]](#footnote-2) which fall just before and just after the winter solstice. The winter solstice is the point at which the progression of shorter days and longer nights is reversed; the days start to get longer and the nights shorter. On the Gregorian calendar, the winter solstice usually falls around the 21st of December. But according to the Julian calendar that was in use at the time of *Chazal* (having been introduced by Julius Caesar on January 1st, 45 BC) it fell on the 25th of December. (At the time of the Mishna, this date was not yet celebrated by the Christians as Christmas.)

The Mishna mentions these two festivals in Chapter 1 of *Avoda* *Zara*, among a list of pagan festivals to which particular *halakhot* apply. (We will consider the halakhic aspect later.) Following Rav Chanan bar Rava’s teaching, which establishes the calendar dates of these festivals, the Gemara cites the *beraita* with the story of Adam. This *aggada* asserts that the pagan festivals of Kalendae Januirae and Saturnalia actually have their roots much further back in history than the Romans: Adam observed these days as festivals to God, but with the passage of time, they were adopted by pagans and redirected to their own gods.

**A. The story**

The story is about the experience of Adam’s first year of life (based on the tradition that Adam was created in Tishrei, as the Gemara notes immediately after the story). Autumn passes and winter arrives. The days grow progressively shorter, it becomes darker and colder, and Adam feels unprotected and anxious. He begins to feel guilty and fears the end of the world. After he was created, God had warned him that if he ate of the tree in the midst of the Garden, he would be punished with death (*Bereishit* 2:16). Adam has remained alive so far despite having eaten the fruit, but the threat of annihilation, it seems, continues to haunt his consciousness. Now he fears that this punishment is gradually being realized. The beginning of Creation, and the emergence of the world from its state of chaos and void, came with the creation of light; it therefore makes sense that Adam understands the gradual disappearance of light as an indication that “the world is becoming dark around me, and returning to chaos and void.”

It is true that the Torah says nothing about what Adam thinks during his first winter. In fact, it tells us very little about his life after the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. However, it appears that the feelings described in the story have been – and continue to be – experienced by many people, certainly in the ancient world and even in modern times. The dark, cold winter amplifies feelings of anxiety and depression. This story is not just a description of the feelings and actions of a specific historical character. Adam, the progenitor of all of humanity, represents the collective, universal human experience. To borrow the term coined by psychoanalyst Carl Jung, we might refer to it as the collective unconscious.

This is Adam’s first year, and hence we might compare it to the experience of an infant. One of the early experiences of an infant is that when something is taken from him (the mother, food), he has no way of understanding that the removal is temporary and that the desired object may return. As the infant sees it, the object has disappeared forever. It seems that this is how *Chazal* imagined Adam’s experience of the disappearance of the light. We shall return to this image later on.

**A different perspective on the experience of transition to winter**

At the other end of the long arc of Jewish history, R. Gershon Chanokh Henikh Leiner (grandson of the *Mei ha-Shiloach*) also addresses the sense of anxiety arising from the transition from summer to winter, in a Chassidic teaching in his work *Sod Yesharim*:

“God, O Lord, the might of my salvation; You shall protect my head on the day of battle (*nashek*)” (*Tehillim* 140:8). The Yerushalmi explains, “‘on the day of *nashek*’ – the day when the worlds meet [literally, ‘kiss’]; the summer ends and the winter begins…”

Meaning, when the seasons change, it seems that there is a void, which the human consciousness cannot grasp, as explained above… (*Sod Yesharim*, *Shabbat Chol ha-Mo’ed Sukkot* 22)

At that time, extra protection is needed, for when one season gives way to another, then the [Divine] “attire” changes from ruling by one attribute to another, and enters from one boundary into another… (Ibid. 21)

R. Gershon also addresses the feelings a person experiences with the shift to winter – the same universal human feelings that transcend cultures and eras. He connects the sense of helplessness that accompanies the transition between seasons less to the diminishing physical light and more to changes in the preparation and conduct that each season demands – materially, physically, and psychologically. Even in the world of modern technology, in which we are far better protected and usually feel much less existential uncertainty in the face of changing seasons, it still affects us. Each season lasts a few months, and we become used to the feelings and challenges associated with each: body temperature, clothing, the appliances we use, and even our mood. The transitional seasons (autumn and spring) are not always helpful in this regard, since they are often characterized by wild swings from one extreme to the other. When the season changes, we are forced to give up the habits of the previous season, but we have not yet accustomed ourselves to the new one. For instance, at the end of summer, it can be difficult to give up sandals and light clothing, which we can put on quickly with no advance preparation. It takes time to get into the routine of boots and coats, gloves and scarves. It also takes a while to get used to heating the house again, and making sure that children are warmly dressed before they go outside. Although most of us would dismiss the thought, as long as we don’t yet feel “at home” in winter, there is a hint of insecurity and anxiety. Ultimately, we will relearn our winter habits, and we will enjoy curling up under a warm blanket with a cup of tea. But it takes time. The gap and the instability that we feel at the beginning of the transition to a new season is the “void” referred to above.

**The nature of the festivals established by man**

Let us return to the story of Adam. The opening description, with the sense of anxiety and the fasting, is quite understandable. But from this point onward, the story gives rise to some questions. After the days start getting longer again, Adam celebrates a holiday for eight days. What exactly is he celebrating? What is the nature and the content of his celebration? Unquestionably, he is greatly relieved when he understands that his fears were unfounded, that he is not going to die, and that the world is not returning to chaos and void. On the other hand, it is clear from the story that what he is celebrating is not the acceptance of his prayers and his fasting, since, contrary to what we might expect, that is not what happened. The story tells us that he discovers that the change of seasons is “the way of the world.” The lengthening of the days would have happened with him or without him. So is he celebrating only the relief, the physical improvement, or is there some religious element to it? It is merely a burst of joy at the release of tension, or has Adam learned something new in terms of his relations with the Creator?

The story goes on to describe what happened the next year, and this too raises some questions. Why does Adam establish two sets of festive days the next year? Why is it not enough to commemorate the days of relief and celebration after the “turnaround,” as when a person is saved from some danger or finds the solution to a threatening problem? For instance, when a person recovers from a serious illness, he will typically celebrate in the years to come on the day when he is declared “disease free” – not the day when he is told of his illness. Why does Adam celebrate the days that he spent mired in distress and anxiety, fasting and praying?[[3]](#footnote-3)

Let us start with the first question. Indeed, in this story, Adam does not discover prayer as a means of changing reality or fate, since here, the reality changes, as it were, on its own. The changeover of seasons is “the way of the world.” Perhaps we might understand Adam’s holiday as the celebration of nature and its wonders, which have now been revealed to him. The cyclical turn of the seasons may be viewed as a positive, confidence-building phenomenon that is worthy of rejoicing over and giving thanks for. We will consider the cycle of nature in greater depth further on. But in any case, this still fails to answer the second question: Why did Adam make a festival not only for the eight days of celebration after the solstice, but also for the preceding eight days of fear and fasting?

The fact that *Chazal* choose to attribute to Adam the insight regarding “the way of the world” is interesting in and of itself, and not a trivial matter. An understanding of nature as a system that conducts itself in accordance with a fixed cycle, rather than by divine intervention, was not very common in ancient times. At the time of *Chazal* and during the Middle Ages, this view was maintained mainly by philosophers. The common culture viewed the forces of nature as performing the wishes of God, or pagan gods, such that in order to be protected from these forces, man had to keep his covenant with God (in Judaism), or to appease the gods through prayer, sacrifice, etc. This worldview is the background to many of the pagan festivals mentioned in *Massekhet Avoda Zara*. In the story of Adam, *Chazal* counter this perception with a different one: a view of nature as acting in accordance with a set cycle, without Divine intervention.

The discovery of “the way of the world” does not lead Adam to adopt an atheistic worldview, as happened to a large portion of humanity in the modern period with the advances of science. Had this been his conclusion, he would have carried on with his life without marking the days around the solstice in any special way in the years to come. Just as the seasons follow “the way of the world,” he too would now follow his own way, treating these days just like any other. But Adam does mark these days, and he celebrates them “as festivals,” “for the sake of Heaven.” The very act of setting aside certain days and marking them as “festivals” is a religious move at its essence.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The festival that Adam commemorates from the second year onward is similar to – and also different from – the days that he spent fasting in the first year. They are similar in that they express a religious reaction to events, but that reaction is different. The sense of standing before God that they express, and the dialogue with Him, have undergone a change. During the days of fasting and prayer in the first year, the focus and orientation of the prayer – and of Adam’s stance before God in general – is the search for a practical answer to a specific need or request. What he seeks is a change in the reality of the world. But what is Adam’s intention in establishing a festival on these days in later years?

The story does not elaborate on the content of the festival. However, it seems to me that it expresses a search for a different sort of stance or dialogue with God, which Adam viewed, in light of his new insights, as a value in and of itself – even without obtaining a specific practical outcome. Perhaps he discovered the very ability to turn to God out of distress or joy, and to share feelings with Him – as David declares, “I pour out before Him my speech; my distress I recite before Him” (*Tehillim* 142:3).

Nature follows its course. As noted above, this cyclical regularity can provide a sense of security and stability. Perhaps Adam thanks God for having created the world this way. On the other hand, this fixed, regular system is blind and alienating; God is hidden in it. *Chassidut* teaches that the word *olam* (world) is derived from *he’elem* (hiddenness). Within his life in this natural system, Adam now finds that God is an address for sharing his distress, his fears, and his joys – even if it will not ‘help’ in the sense of changing the external reality. What does change is the internal reality. The connection with God is not a means for protection, but rather a value in and of itself.

We may now return to our first question and understand better Adam’s establishment of the dual festival for future years. When connection and communication with God are themselves at the center, they find expression – albeit in different ways – in both periods: the first eight days, spent in fasting and prayer out of distress, and the second eight days, devoted to joyful thanksgiving. Both states are part of the connection with God, and thus if it is this connection itself that is being celebrated, then both periods are equally worthy.

**An internal process**

In view of the above, we might point to a literary connection between the outer framework of this story and its internal content. The outer framework talks about the change or transition between seasons, which is the context in which the human drama takes place. This framework draws our attention to a different, more covert and personal transition: the change, transition, or development in man’s religious stance and position. When *Chazal* place in Adam’s mouth this new insight about nature, and attribute to him the establishment of festivals in the wake of that insight, they are telling us the story of this inner transition.

We might view the process that man undergoes in the story as a sort of maturation. The earlier and more basic stage, like childhood, is the stage where prayer – the connection with God – is intended to achieve concrete fulfillment of a need. This is a relatively immature connection, like that between parents and their young children who appeal to them continuously out of need and expect to receive something. We might even compare it to infancy, the stage where a baby has no sense of any distinction between himself and the rest of the world. The entire world revolves around him.

The later stage is one of greater maturity. Adam learns that things follow “the way of the world.” This means, first and foremost, that the world does not revolve around him. This also gives rise to a different sort of connection that he is able to develop with his Creator: a connection that is less “object-dependent,” and in which man seeks the connection for its own sake. Even more so, perhaps, he ‘gives’ or ‘makes room’ for God in his time and in his heart. Most importantly, he is no longer seeking the concrete realization of something other than the connection itself. It is God that he seeks.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that this happens in the story through a movement of joy and thanksgiving – which is different from fasting and supplication. The latter comes more easily to us. Let us consider once again the infant, who, immediately upon birth, knows how to cry and demand what he needs. The sense of joy and thanksgiving is less immediate and inborn; it requires a certain level of maturity. And here it seems that we are not talking about simple thanksgiving for something – which would still refer back to fulfillment of a need, which is a more utilitarian orientation. Maybe it is more than that: a sharing of the joy, the joyful experience, with God. In other words, the connection itself. This is a far more developed and mature type of connection. The attainment of this sort of connection is the development that takes place in the story: the development of Adam and his relations with God.

Thus far, we have read the story within a narrow context. In the following *shiurim*, we will expand the perspective beyond the boundaries of the story itself, to other parts of the Talmudic passage as well as parallel sources.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

1. There are slight variations on this line among the different manuscripts. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Kalends* or *Calends* is the name the [Romans](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient_Rome) gave to the first day of every month. In our case, *Chazal* are talking about the first day of the first month of the year – *Kalendae Januirae*, i.e., January 1st. As the Gemara explains, this festival began immediately after the winter solstice and lasted for eight days. Saturnalia was a holiday in honor of the [god](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Roman_deities) [Saturn](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saturn_%28mythology%29), held on December 17th of the [Julian calendar](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julian_calendar) and later expanded with general revelry through to December 23rd – i.e., ending just prior to the winter solstice. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. We might make reference here to the verse from *Zekharia* 8:19, foretelling that the fasts over the Destruction will in the future be celebrated as days of rejoicing. But this “turnaround,” too, is strange and demands some explanation. Perhaps the elaboration below regarding Adam may also shed light on the verse from *Zekharia*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In a completely and purely secular society, there is no such concept as “sanctity of time” and there are few festivals. The atheistic model of the Soviet Union comes to mind. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)