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 #08: Adam (3)**

In this *shiur*, we will continue to expand our perspective on the story of Adam and the decreasing and increasing light. This time, our discussion will focus on the halakhic *sugya* within which the stories about Adam appear, and other sources from Eretz Yisrael.

**B. Beyond the boundaries of the story in the *Bavli* (continued)**

3. *Halakha* and *aggada* in the same passage

The story of Adam and the light appears, as noted previously, in a *sugya* that discusses pagan festivals. The background to the discussion is the first *mishna* in the tractate, which sets limits on contact between Jews and non-Jews around the times of these festivals:

For three days before the festivals of the gentiles, it is prohibited to conduct business with them; to lend [items] to them or borrow from them; to lend [money] to them or to borrow from them; to pay debts to them or to collect repayment of debts from them…. (*Mishna Avoda Zara* 1:1)

Without getting into the details of these *halakhot* or the reason for them, which are discussed in the Gemara, we can say in general that this law comes to distance Jews from non-Jewish festivals and to preclude any possible involvement in the non-Jews’ celebration of these occasions. Beyond the practical aspect of the *halakha*, which is designed to impose limitations, the spirit of the law also points clearly in the direction of higher walls and separation from anything do with these festivals.

In contrast, in our story about Adam, located in the *sugya* about the pagan festivals included in these limitations, we can sense a tendency in the opposite direction. The pagan festivals surrounding the winter solstice, established in response to the harsh, dark winter, are illuminated in the *sugya* in a light that identifies their original, positive source, their inner kernel of truth, and their response to a universal human need. This need originally found expression in the festival established by Adam for God. The *aggada* does go on to note that non-Jews adopted this festival and took it in a pagan direction, but it conveys a sense of identification with the simple, human feelings that are at the foundation of the festival, along with a sense of the bond connecting all of humanity via the personality of Adam, the father of all of mankind.

We also cannot ignore the hints in the story to the festival of Chanuka:[[1]](#footnote-1) the season of the year in which the story takes place; the centrality of the theme of light overcoming darkness; and the duration of the festivals – 8 days – which has no other justification, since historically, neither of the pagan festivals mentioned here (Saturnalia and Kalends) was exactly 8 days long. The allusions to Chanuka here offer something different from the classic Rabbinical framing of the holiday, which points to the historical background of the re-dedication of the Temple and the Hasmonean victory over the Greeks (*Bavli Shabbat* 21b and the “*Al ha-Nissim*” prayer, respectively). The emphasis here is instead on the illumination of darkness, and on the fact that there are parallels in this respect between Chanuka and other festivals established on these days, despite the differences between them (and these, too, are conspicuous). This is a rather radical statement on the part of *Chazal*, and it sits well with the fundamentally positive view created in this *aggada* towards the universal idea, appearing in different cultures, of lighting up the darkness of winter.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The *halakha* and the *aggada* would thus seem to be working here in opposite directions. The *halakha* seeks to maintain a distance from the non-Jewish festivals, limiting any contact with them. The *aggada* opens a door to a more positive view of them – or at least, of the underlying idea that inspires them. But there is no real contradiction here: the *halakha* and the *aggada* complement each other. On the practical level, the *halakha* creates boundaries and distance. But it is specifically these clear boundaries that allow us more freedom of thought, enabling us to consider the pagan festival from a different perspective and to identify the kernel of light and truth that it contains. This is a good example of the advantage of reading *halakha* and *aggada* together, viewing them as a complete whole that facilitates a richer and more complex discussion.

**The positive side of evil in *Chazal***

A basis for this complex perspective may be found in the more general view of evil that *Chazal* express in other sources, such as in another *midrash* that goes back to the beginning of the world:

In the teachings of R. Meir, they found it written: “And behold it was very good [*tov me’od*]” (*Bereishit* 1:31) – “And behold, death is good [*tov mavet*].” R. Shmuel bar Nachman said: I sat upon my grandfather’s shoulders and went up from my town to the village of Chanan, via Beit She’an, and I heard R. Shimon ben R. Lazer sitting and teaching, in the name of R. Meir, “And behold, it was very good [*tov me’od*]” – “And behold, death is good [*tov mavet*]”… (*Bereishit Rabba* 9:5)

R. Nachman…taught in the name of R. Shmuel bar Nachman: “Behold, it was very good” – this is the good inclination; “**And** behold, it was very good” – this is the evil inclination. Is the evil inclination then “very good”? How can this be? The answer is that were it not for the evil inclination, a person would not build a house, nor marry a wife, nor bear children. And thus Shlomo teaches, “[Again, I considered all labor and all excelling in work,] that it is a man's rivalry with his fellow” (*Kohelet* 4:4). (*Bereishit Rabba* 9:7)

Here too, the *midrash* expresses the idea that even evil – which may be death, or the evil inclination – is ultimately part of the goodness of Creation. It has a function in the world. Admittedly, the way in which it is manifest in the world means that it causes evil and pain, and therefore we have to engage in clarification and separation of the evil from the good. But fundamentally, even evil rests upon goodness that can be clarified and isolated.

**The idea of “elevating evil” in *Chassidut***

The above idea, expressed by *Chazal* through the discourse between *halakha* and *aggada*, is elaborated on more explicitly in *Chassidut*. *Chassidut* is full of sources that address the themes of unifying all forces and phenomena in the world and attributing them all to God. We shall look at just a few of them, which also relate to the idea of the *halakha* and *aggada*, and we will see how greatly the language of *Chassidut* contributes to our study of the *sugya* in the Gemara.

Our saintly teacher taught: “How fair and how pleasant you are, O love, with delights!” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 7:7) – The attribute of desire is imbued in man, and he is obligated to use it for his bodily needs. And if he has knowledge and faith that this attribute comes from a lofty source, then this physical feeling will contribute also in the intellectual sphere. For one who has no sense of desire and love is less than a donkey. For one cannot commence any Divine service without the power of desire and the evil inclination, which has to be transformed into the joy of Torah study, to study Torah with a fiery love, a Divine flame, and to pray with every fiber of his being.

This may be compared to a king’s son, whose heart and intellect were closed to any piece of wisdom. Once, the king saw that he had engaged a harlot, and was glad, since [this proved] that he had a sense of desire. [The king] was shrewd and ordered the harlot not to accept [the son] until he had learned some wisdom – and the son did so, owing to his desire for the harlot, and afterward, he petitioned her. She told him that she would not accept him until he learned greater wisdom that than, and so he did - until he learned all wisdoms and became truly wise. Then he said to himself, “What is a king’s son doing with a harlot? Better that he marry a king’s daughter.” (R. Yitzchak Eisik Safrin, *Notzar Chessed* on *Massekhet Avot*, Lvov 5616, 42b)

R. Yitzchak Eisik Safrin, the Admor of Komarna, is very bold here. He points to the power and energy of the evil inclination as something that can and must be channeled for holiness. The evil inclination can “awaken” someone who is “asleep,” so that he will have some degree of vitality, following which it is possible to channel that vitality in good directions. But without vitality, even if someone stays far from sin, he will not achieve holiness and a state of cleaving to God.

R. Nachman of Breslev, in teaching #8 in *Likkutei Moharan*, talks about the *tzaddik*, who is able to encounter evil people and lowly, wild places, and to “”elevate them” – in other words, to isolate their good aspect, their positive source. What gives the *tzaddik* the ability to do this freely and properly is his connection to *halakha*:

To achieve this – to distinguish, separate, and eliminate the bad from the good – one must engage in Torah and prayer. The Torah study needs to delve into the depths of *halakha* — in other words, study of the *poskim*. For both good and evil have a hold on the Torah: they are attached through the aspects of forbidden and permitted, impure and pure, kosher and unkosher, which appear in the Torah. And as long as one does not clarify the law, he is a mixture of good and bad, and is therefore incapable of separating and eliminating the bad from the good. This reflects the verse ([*Mishlei* 11:27](file:///C:\Proverbs.11.27)), “He who seeks bad, it will come to him.” Only once he delves into and clarifies the *halakha*, and determines what is forbidden and what is permissible and so on – in other words, by studying the *poskim* – can he separate the good from the bad… (*Likkutei Moharan Kama* 8,6)[[3]](#footnote-3)

R. Nachman explains here how the clear framework that exists in *halakha* gives a *tzaddik* the freedom to be able to come into contact with evil and evildoers. Behind this statement lies the awareness that within evil, too, there is a positive root; all that is neccessary, even with things that look like evil, is to separate the good part from the evil. The same idea arises from our *sugya* in the Gemara, which teaches that even the pagan festivals have a positive source and it can be clarified by looking all the way back to Adam. The connection between the firm halakhic framework and the philosophical freedom to consider things from a different, more open perspective can bring about the desired clarification.

**C. Parallels to the *Bavli* in Eretz Yisrael**

The *Bavli* offers two stories about Adam and light. Both, it turns out, have parallels in earlier sources from Eretz Yisrael.

1. The Midrash Rabba Parallel

We shall start with the second story from the *sugya* in the *Bavli*. This story has an ancient parallel in *Midrash Bereishit Rabba*, and in the *Yerushalmi*. Here is the version that appears in *Bereishit Rabba*:[[4]](#footnote-4)

When the sun set at the end of Shabbat, the darkness began to settle in. Adam was afraid: “’Surely darkness shall bruise/envelop me *(yeshufeini)…*’ ([*Tehillim* 139:11](file:///C:\Psalms.139.11)) – perhaps the one of whom it is said, ‘He shall strike you *(yeshufcha)* at your head’ ([*Bereishit* 3:15](file:///C:\Genesis.3.15)) [i.e., the serpent] will come to attack me?” What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He prepared two flints for him, and [Adam] struck them against each other and light came forth, whereupon he blessed upon it, as it is written, “The night was light for me” ([*Tehillim* 139:11](file:///C:\Psalms.139.11)). (*Bereishit Rabba* 11:2)

According to this *midrash*, the first night in Adam’s life is *Motzaei Shabbat*. The light that illuminated the world when Adam was created continued to shine throughout the entire Shabbat (see the *midrash* *ad loc*.), and at the end of that period comes his first experience of darkness. In this *midrash* too, as in the story in the Gemara, the experience of darkness is presented as difficult and distressing. Of all the verses in *Tanakh* that deal with darkness, the *midrash* chooses the verse from *Tehillim*, "Surely darkness shall bruise/envelop me,” and goes on to develop the association that arises as soon as we encounter this verse from *Parashat Bereishit*: the verse “he shall strike/bruise your head [and you shall bruise his heel]” (*Bereishit* 3:15), describing the enmity that will exist between man and the serpent. We might deliberate about whether Adam fears that very serpent from the Garden of Eden, that was destined to “bruise his heel,” will come and attack him under the cover of darkness, or whether perhaps the bite of the snake here is merely a metaphor, and what he actually fears is the darkness itself, which he imagines as “biting.” (Perhaps the metaphor of the bite is also related to the cold of winter, which we know can sometimes truly feel “biting.”)

The *midrash* heaps onto man’s encounter with the darkness a great load of anxiety and guilt, for his fear of the “bite” of the snake (or of the darkness itself) is connected to his sin in the Garden of Eden. Here, in the second part of the story, the *midrash* also interprets the second half of the verse from *Tehillim*, “And the night was light for me,” as describing the discovery of the solution – the creation of fire – right then in the night.

What is new in this midrashic story is that the second part of the *midrash* tells a story of human activity; human partnership in Creation. The Divine light, “made by God’s hands” (*ma’asei Elokeinu*), has limits placed on it, and man responds with light of his own (*ma’asei enosh*).[[5]](#footnote-5) The partnership is also emphasized in the manner in which it happens: God prepares the materials for him. The human light is admittedly small and dim in comparison with the Divine light. Nevertheless, it shines in the night and gives him light. The verse would thus seem to be read as: And [in the night, the] light was for me – i.e., came to help me.

On the other hand, this *midrash* contains less of the element of loneliness, and less of the loneliness–communication spectrum, that seem so central to the story in the *Bavli*. Adam in the *midrash* is mainly facing the threat of death; there is no mention of the challenges of an unresponsive, deaf, and mute Nature, of “the way of the world,” or of a search for the Creator out of existential loneliness. The connection between God and Adam in the *midrash* is not located in the essential connection and communication between them, but in their cooperation in creating fire, which is ultimately man’s creation. Thus, the *midrash* tells a different story from the *Bavli* regarding both the psychological and the practical position to which the darkness brings Adam.

This comparison emphasizes the theme of the *Bavli*. The *Bavli*, in the parallel story, deals less with human activity and human independence, or with his practical partnership with God. These *could* have been appropriate reactions to the situation of “the way of the world”: God distances Himself from the scene and remains concealed behind Nature and its automatic, mechanical operations, leaving man with freedom to create and to make – to imitate his Creator. All this is embodied in the creation of fire in the *midrash*. But the *Bavli* chooses to emphasize a different aspect: the harshness of the lack of God’s presence; the loneliness and man’s need for connection and dialogue. His response to this need is his prayer and the festivals that he establishes, or the sacrifice, as ways of creating dialogue and connection with the Creator. Even though it is not really two-way communication, but rather emerges only from Adam, it seems to fulfill – at least partially – the function of contact.

In the next *shiur*, I will broaden the perspective to another story from Eretz Yisrael that parallels the first and also parallels the story in the *Bavli* about the winter.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

1. For further reading see the article by Rav Y. Bin-Nun, “*Yom Yisud Heikhal Hashem*”, *Megadim* 12 (5751), pp. 90-91. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The disagreement between the School of Shammai and the School of Hillel regarding the order of lighting on Chanuka may also be related to the gradual disappearance of light during the days leading up to the winter solstice, and its gradual reappearance during the days following, as noted by Rav Y. Bin-Nun, ibid., p. 91, note 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See also the interpretation of this teaching by Rav Shagar, in his *Peirush le-Likkutei Moharan*, part I, pp. 104-109. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The parallel in the *Yerushalmi* is found in *Massekhet Berakhot* chapter 8 *halakha* 6, 12b. The context in the *Yerushalmi* is the *berakhot* of Havdala, specifically “…*borei me’orei ha-eish*.” In *Bereishit Rabba*, the context is the story of the Creation. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The terms in parentheses and the explanation are based on the liturgical poem from Shacharit on Yom Kippur – *Ma’asei Elokeinu*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)