YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

**By Rav Dr. Yonatan Feintuch**

**Shiur #10: The Parable of the Merchant’s Wife,**

**and the Story of R. Chiya bar Ashi and His Wife (1)**

This *shiur* will follow a different order from the previous ones: we will first look at the Chassidic story, and then consider it in dialogue with a Rabbinical narrative featuring similar themes. As noted in the introduction to this series, the Baal Shem Tov told stories of different types, including many “*sippurei tzaddikim*.” One of his stories that does not belong to that genre is the parable of the merchant’s wife. It is recorded in his name by his disciple, R. Yaakov Yosef of Polnoe (also known as the “*Toldot*,” in reference to the title of his book, *Toldot Yaakov Yosef*, in which he cites many of the Baal Shem Tov’s teachings):

It seems to me that I heard from my teacher a parable about a merchant who was at sea, and the sea was growing increasingly stormy, to the point where there was a danger to life, and the merchant prayed that he would be saved, in the merit of his modest wife. There was an idolatrous pagan there who was puzzled by the merchant praying in his wife’s merit. And [the merchant] told him that she was indeed worthy of immense praise.

The pagan said, “I will go and tempt her; what do you want as a sign [as proof I was with her]?” He answered that [his wife] wore an expensive ring, and if [the pagan] brought it, then he would know. They also agreed on a penalty: whichever of them lost [the bet] would hand over his merchandise to the other.

Off [the pagan] went to tempt the wife, but he could not get anywhere near her. He went and returned several times, telling her that he had a secret [message] for her from her husband, but she paid no attention to him. Eventually he paid her handmaid to steal the ring from her, using various schemes and plots that he made, and he was successful. He then brought the ring, which was the sign, to her husband, and took his merchandise from him. [The merchant] returned home on the [now-]empty ship. When the wife heard that her husband was on the way, she dressed herself up and went out to meet him with words of endearment and love that had always prevailed between them, but he couldn’t take it in. She wondered [at this], having no idea what had changed in his love and affection for her. He went home with her, but his heart was not with her.

The matter led him to banish her on a ship that sailed with no captain; there was only the husband, who changed his appearance and his manner of speech, pretending that he alone, a sailor, was [left of] the ship’s personnel. The wife spent a few days on the ship with no food or drink, and she pleaded with this sailor to give her some food to keep her alive, and he said, “If you kiss me then I will give you” – and so she did, under duress; afterwards he demanded intimate relations.

When the ship finally reached shore, she jumped overboard to head for dry land where she could seek food. She found two trees: whoever ate of one of them became leprous, and whoever ate of the other was cured of leprosy. She took of this [latter] fruit in her bag and went to the royal palace, dressed as a man. There they were in need of this cure, and she provided it, and they gave her great reward.

When she returned home and found her husband, she raged at him for having banished her from her home, onto a ship with a grotesque sailor whom she had to kiss and other hateful acts, so starved was she. The husband rejoiced in his heart at her great outcry and her modesty. He investigated and it was discovered that the pagan had lied about her and stolen her ring. The matter came to light, and [the husband] gave him his just desserts. (R. Yaakov Yosef of Polnoe, *Toldot Yaakov Yosef*, Jerusalem 5733, II, *Parashat Devarim*)

The story recounts how a merchant makes a sort of wager with a pagan concerning his wife’s modesty and faithfulness. The non-Jew is unsuccessful in seducing the wife or causing her to sin, and so he steals her ring and presents it to the husband. The merchant believes him and snubs his wife. He then goes on to “punish” her, or submit her to another test, by disguising himself as a (presumably non-Jewish) sailor, “taking her captive” on a ship and forcing her to submit to him and to betray her husband, as it were. Thereafter she returns home (after an episode where it is she who disguises herself, as a man, and heals the king of his illness); she expresses outrage to her husband – which reaffirms her faithfulness to him – and the story ends with their reunification and punishment for the. pagan villain.

This story was not invented by the Baal Shem Tov out of nowhere. Rather, it would appear to be based on a popular folk story that appears over and over in world culture.[[1]](#footnote-1) Borrowing stories from world literature and adapting them to a Jewish context is nothing new in *Chassidut* (nor, in fact, in *Chazal’s* teachings). As we know, many of R. Nachman’s stories are based on popular folk tales. However, some have expressed surprise that the Baal Shem Tov would choose to adopt a story that touches on such lowly themes of seduction and sexuality.[[2]](#footnote-2) I believe that the explanation of the story may serve to clarify this question.

Various different interpretations have been offered. The scope of this *shiur* does not allow for attention to every detail of the story and its meanings;[[3]](#footnote-3) I will address just some of the points in it that connect with the narrative we will examine later, from the Gemara.

The first interpretation offered for the story is brought by R. Yaakov Yosef of Polnoe himself, in the name of the Baal Shem Tov, immediately after the story:

And the meaning of the parable is clear [as an allusion] regarding all matters pertaining to this world, since the time of the Destruction of the Temple and until the coming of Mashiach, may he come speedily in our days, Amen. For my teacher performed an *aliyat neshama* [ascent of the soul] and saw how [the angel] Michael, the great defender of Israel, pleaded Israel’s cause – that every one of their [seeming] sins is actually a virtue. For whenever they engage in forging statues, or other matters of liability, it is all for the purposes of arranging a marriage with a learned scholar, or for the purposes of charity, and so on; they have no choice. The modest wife is the Divine Presence, as hinted to in the verse “a woman of valor is her husband’s crown” (*Mishlei* 12:4). Satan was jealous and said, “Now [they are faithful to You, because] they have a Temple and sacrifices, but if You wish to test them – destroy the Temple and I shall seduce them, as it were.”

And the stealing of the ring by means of the maidservant alludes to the fate of the two he-goats [taken on Yom Kippur] – one for God, and the other for Azazel – and because of sin, it comes out on the left side, etc., and the Temple was destroyed, and as Ramban teaches in this regard, etc.. And his banishing of her on the ship is, as it were, that the blessed God disguises Himself with the Holy Name Sael, etc. And this is the secret of the Divine Presence expressing its outrage to the blessed God – how the Divine Presence was forced, and so on, and then it becomes clear that he had lied about her, and then “the Lord has a sacrifice in Batzra” (*Yeshayahu* 34:6)…

This interpretation explains the story as referring to the Holy One, blessed be He and the Divine Presence / Israel. The characters in the story represent God (the merchant), the Divine Presence/Israel (the wife), and Satan (the pagan from the beginning of the story). This interpretation employs kabbalistic concepts, so a brief background (which will necessarily be somewhat simplistic, without getting into too much depth or detail) is in order, for those unfamiliar with these concepts.

At the foundation of the story and the interpretation, for the Baal Shem Tov and the *Toldot*, is the kabbalistic notion – and the Chassidic perspectives based on it – that God at His source is Infinite and subsumes all forces, but His Divinity is revealed and expressed in this world in different and disparate ways. Among these, in kabbalistic terms, are:

1. The *Shekhina* (Divine Presence) – the *sefira* of Malkhut, which is the lowest of the *sefirot*.[[4]](#footnote-4) This is the manifestation or revelation of Divinity within this world (Divine “immanence”), within everything: “There is no place that is devoid of Him.” At the same time, it is concealed and hidden in the world, not usually revealed. This is also sometimes identified with *Knesset Yisrael*, which is its central representation.
2. The Holy One, blessed be He – the presentation of a power or representation of Divinity which is above or outside of this world (“transcendence”); hence, it is also “higher” and is not limited by the boundaries and limitations that define a physical, material world.

Another point that is part of this kabbalistic system is that ideally, there should exist a connection (“unification”) between these different manifestations or expressions of Divinity, and when this connection is there, abundant goodness flows from Divinity into the world. This is because the manifestation of *Malkhut* exists within the world, while the manifestation of “the Holy One, blessed be He” is in a higher place, outside of the world, connected to the source of Divine abundance. Thus, when there is a connection and unification, the abundance “flows” to the world. A state of separation or disconnect between the different manifestations or forces within Divinity will cause a break in the flow of abundance to the world, and this finds expression in different types of difficulty, sorrow, and exile.

Repair of the difficulties in this world can happen when there is a reunification between the *Shekhina*, or *Knesset* *Yisrael*, and the Holy One, blessed be He (the usual kabbalistic formula is “unification of the Holy One, blessed be He, and His *Shekhina*”), which are compared to a loving couple.

The effect goes in both directions. The unification/harmony between the Holy One, blessed be He and the *Shekhina/Malkhut* exists, inter alia, when the state of the world is one of observance of God’s commandments and positive action, or a strengthening of the influence of Divinity in the world and a weakening of the forces of evil, and so on.

The above will suffice as an introduction; of course, it is possible and worthwhile to broaden knowledge of these concepts by consulting sources that explain them in greater detail and depth.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In the story, according to the interpretation cited in the *Toldot*, Satan tries through all sorts of schemes to cause the wife – the *Shekhina*/Israel – to betray the husband and sin. To use the kabbalistic terms set forth above, he seeks to bring about a separation between the *Shekhina/Knesset* *Yisrael* and the Holy One, blessed be He. But the “wife” remains faithful and withstands the test to the best of her ability. When Satan finds that he is not succeeding, he steals the woman’s ring.

The Baal Shem Tov views the ring as being connected to the mystery of the fate of the two he-goats on Yom Kippur. According to a kabbalistic interpretation that appears in Ramban’s commentary on the Torah, the he-goat banished to Azazel on Yom Kippur is a sort of appeasement gift offered to Satan to keep him away and stop him from prosecuting, such that there will be no separation between Israel and God. But here, Satan undermines this gift, and exploits the procedure of the gift to find a breach through which he might separate between Israel and God by causing the lot to fall on the left side.

Both the story and the interpretation given by the *Toldot* are difficult to accept on the simple level, and require further explanation. The section below is based on an interesting interpretation of the story offered by Dr. Tzippy Kaufman *z”l*[[6]](#footnote-6) (with a few additions), and I invoke it here because it leads to an interesting discourse with the Rabbinical narrative that we will be discussing.

**The motif of disguise**

One of the central elements in the interpretation of the story is the repeated motif of disguise. At first the pagan disguises himself, in order to try to tempt the woman; in the second part of the story, it is the husband who disguises himself, as a foreign sailor, and “captures” the woman, holding her alone on the ship. Finally, the woman herself wears a disguise when she brings healing to the sick king.

The third act of the story, where the husband, disguised as a sailor, seizes the woman on the ship and causes her to engage in intimate relations with him, recalls a story from *Massekhet Kiddushin* about the wife of R. Chiya bar Ashi, in which his wife disguises herself and seduces her husband so he will engage in relations with her. I mention this analogy at this early stage so that we can keep it in mind, even though the story itself, and the significance of the connection between the two narratives, will be discussed only later.

Let us first consider the story of the merchant’s wife on its own, without the explanation of what the characters represent. This is a story about the relations between husband and wife, which undergo development over the course of the story. In the beginning, their relationship seems positive. Later, when the woman comes out to greet her husband, we hear that there had indeed always been love and affection between them. However, there is also a certain element of distance between them, because while the husband appreciates her and greatly values her faithfulness towards him, we don’t hear in his words at this stage any clear expression of affection or even connection. In addition, his willingness to make her the subject of a bet raises some questions about the quality of their relationship at this stage. On the other hand, as Kaufman writes, the moment that the pagan questions her faithfulness, the husband’s certainty in this regard is also undermined, and perhaps this is part of what creates the distance between them.

In the next act, the pagan steals the woman’s ring and creates a false impression of unfaithfulness on her part. The husband is apparently now completely alienated from his wife, and he sends her on a voyage on a ship with a foreign sailor – but it is actually himself, in disguise. This voyage seems, at first glance, meant as a punishment or a test for the wife, but the idea of a journey together with her may also be viewed as creating a situation of closeness.

The woman proves her faithfulness by her steadfastness on the ship, even though in the end, overcome by her hunger and thirst, she yields to the “sailor.” Her faithfulness is expressed once again when she rages against her husband, upon reaching home, for having left her in a situation where she was forced to submit to the sailor against her will. The relations between the couple are then restored to their former glory, however, and the husband punishes the rascal for deceiving him.

**Interpretation of the *Toldot***

Let us now move on to the interpretation that the *Toldot* offers immediately after recounting the story. The marital relationship portrayed in the story is an analogy for the relationship between the Holy One, blessed be He and the *Shekhina/Knesset Yisrael*. This relationship is challenged in the story – just as it is in Tanakh and over the course of history – and include periods of alienation and periods of closeness. Some of the adversity is caused by the existence of Satan, the demonic entity that tries to introduce friction between the parties and separate them. This comes as no surprise. What is more interesting and surprising in this interpretation, as Kaufman points out, is that while the Satan succeeds in sowing discord, the blame in the story is laid mainly at the feet of the husband – in other words, as it were, of the Holy One, blessed be He. The woman, representing *Knesset Yisrael*, is portrayed in a positive light throughout the story: she is faithful, withstands tests to the best of her ability, and desires only her husband. Admittedly, when we consider the entities behind the representations, there is a hint to the possibility of a degree of sin on the part of the woman, who plays into the hands of Satan. Paradoxically, the connection that is forged with Satan by sending the goat to him leads to complications, even though the original initiative of the sending unquestionably comes from God, and therefore the responsibility rests mainly with Him. Indeed, the husband – God, in the story – is presented as allowing Satan to sabotage and harm the marital relationship, causing *Knesset Yisrael* much suffering and tribulation – only to discover that *Knesset Yisrael* was in fact faithful to Him all along, and the “mistake,” as it were, was His own. This is a very significant statement in Israel’s defense on the part of the Baal Shem Tov. It is also an extremist position, because it completely ignores the responsibility and sins of *Knesset Yisrael*. The Baal Shem Tov does not deny the existence of sins, but rather explains, in the wake of the “ascents of the soul” that he undertook, that it is possible to judge the nation favorably and view their sins as having been prompted by positive motivations. The responsibility, then, transfers to God, as it were.

*Chazal* also offer a form of this idea:

R. Elazar said: Eliyahu spoke accusingly towards God, as it is written: “You have turned their hearts backward” (*Melakhim* I 18:37). R. Shmuel bar Rav Yitzchak said: From where do we know that the Holy One, blessed be He, ultimately conceded to Eliyahu [that he was correct]? As it is written (*Mikha* 4:6), “[I will assemble the lame, and I will gather those who are abandoned and] those with whom I have dealt in wickedness.” [Rashi: I caused them [to sin], for I created the evil inclination.]

R. Chama, son of R. Chanina, said: Were it not for the following three verses, the enemies of Israel [a euphemism for *Am Yisrael*] would have no leg to stand on. One is, “those with whom I have dealt in wickedness.” The next is, “Behold, like clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in My hand, house of Israel” (*Yirmiyahu* 18:6). The third is, “I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and I will give you a heart of flesh” (*Yechezkel* 36:26). (*Berakhot* 31b-32a)

In the *midrash* presented here, Eliyahu tells God that He is responsible for Israel’s sins, since He “turned their hearts backwards.” The verse cited from *Mikha* suggests that God accepts this argument: “I have dealt in wickedness.” This *midrash*, or another like it, might have been the basis for the Baal Shem Tov’s way of thinking in his parable.

However, as Kaufman writes, beyond providing an interpretation of history that removes much of *Am Yisrael*’s responsibility for its wrongdoings, there is another important point in the story, which relates to the central motif of disguise. The function of the disguise is not only as a technical means of setting up an effective test, but also something more fundamental. It is profoundly related to a central element of the Chassidic/kabbalistic worldview underlying the story: that Divinity/the *Shekhina* is present in everything in the world – both good and evil – but it is hidden, “disguised.” Every encounter with something that appears to be good, or neutral, or even evil, is an encounter with Divinity wrapped in different layers that conceal it. Thus, the entire world is a disguise.

When the story reveals this technique of disguise, it reveals at the same time the Divine presence in the world and in reality. Revelation of God’s hiddenness in the world includes a statement about exile itself, which is merely an illusion of disconnect between *Knesset Yisrael* and God. In fact, the connection exists, in exile just as at the time of the Temple, but it is hidden. The “hiding of God’s face” is not the absence of His face. His face is present and close, but covered and concealed. Its exposure – the revelation of the secret – recreates the intimacy.

Thus, when the woman in the story is banished from her home, it may be viewed as paralleling the exile of *Knesset Yisrael* at the time of the Destruction. The woman finds herself secluded with an ostensible foreign sailor – but in fact she is on a voyage with her husband, who is in disguise. Precisely in this place that seems like exile, under the costume, she is actually “at home,” sharing the closest intimacy with him.

The creation of the explanation of the story, which connects human personalities – the husband, the wife, and the villain who seeks to separate them – with metaphysical entities, follows a model that is frequently adopted by *Chazal*.[[7]](#footnote-7) Many Rabbinical parables compare God to a king and *Knesset Yisrael* to a wife; sometimes Satan also makes an appearance, trying to drive a wedge between them. Aside from the clear connection to all such rabbinical parables, I would like to point out another, more surprising connection to a story about R. Chiya bar Ashi and his wife. That will be the focus of the next *shiur*.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

1. A similar story appears, for example, in Decameron, an Italian collection of short stories dating to the 14th century. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Yosef Dan, *Ha-Sippur ha-Chassidi*, Jerusalem 5735, p. 45. For further reading, see the articles by Rav Shagar and Dr. Barukh Kahana in *Ha-Baal Shem Tov: Ha-Ish she-Ba* *Min ha-Ya’ar*, 5777. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. However, see the article by Tzippy Kaufman, “*Ha-Shekhina Ha-Mitchapeset: Perek be-Teologia Ba’ashtanit*,” *Da’at* 78 (5775), pp. 151-170. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For more about the *sefirot*, see the VBM series by Rav Itamar Eldar, “*Mavo le-Eser ha-Sefirot*.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See n. 4 (above). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See above, n. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Kaufman, ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)