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 #13:**

**The Story of the Old Man Planting, and the Chassidic Attitude Towards Work (1)**

There is a well-known story in the Gemara about an old man who plants a tree even though he is unlikely to live long enough to enjoy its fruits. Similar stories exist in the folklore of many different nations, mainly because it touches on such universal human questions as acting for oneself as opposed to acting for others, or working for the present as opposed to building the future. *Chazal*, too, addressed these questions, and it is therefore natural to find them telling this story. Rabbinical literature contains a few different versions of the same basic story, and if we read them carefully, we find that they convey different messages.

In the best-known version, in which the dilemma appears in its classic form, an old man is busy planting trees despite his advanced age. In response to questioning, he states simply that just as people in previous generations exerted themselves and planted trees from which he has benefited in his life, so too, he is working for the sake of the generations to come, even if he himself will not live to enjoy their fruits:

[The Emperor] Hadrian, may his bones rot, was passing through those roads of Tiberias and he saw an old man digging holes in order to plant trees.

He said to him, “Old man, old man, how old are you today?”

He said to him, “A hundred years old.”

He said, “And you, at a hundred years old, are standing and digging holes in order to plant trees. Do you think you’ll be eating from them?”

He said, “If I merit it, I will eat [of them]; if not, then just as my forefathers labored for me, so I am laboring for my progeny.”

He said to him, “By your life – if you merit to eat of them, let me know.”

After some time, figs grew [on the tree]. He said, “The time has come to tell the king.”

What did he do? He filled a basket with figs and went up and stood at the gate to the palace.

They said to him, “What is your business [here]?”

He said to them, “Go and tell the king: the old Jew whom you once passed by wishes to greet you.”

[The king] said, “Let him in.”

When he came in, [the king] said to him, “What is your business?”

He answered, “I am the old man that you passed by while I was digging holes to plant trees. You told me that if I merited to eat of them, I should let you know. Behold, I have merited to eat of them, and these figs are from that produce.”

Then Hadrian said, “I command that you empty this basket and fill it with gold coins for him.”

They said to him, “You are giving all this honor to this old Jew?”

He said to them, “His Creator honored him; shall I not honor him?” (*Midrash Kohelet Rabba*, 2:20)

This version presents the issue of labor without any guarantee of personal benefit as a confrontation between the old man and the king. Unsurprisingly, the character representing someone who cannot imagine investing effort for the sake of others is the Emperor Hadrian, who suppressed the Bar Kokhba rebellion with such cruelty that the very mention of his name invokes the wish, “may his bones rot” – although in this story, he is not portrayed as especially cruel, but rather as self-absorbed and simply uncaring.

A lesser-known version of the story recounts a different initial dialogue between the old man and the Emperor (for the sake of brevity, we will skip the parts that are similar to the previous version):

Hadrian… saw an old man planting trees.

He said to him, “Old man, old man, had you toiled harder in your youth, you would not have to toil in your old age.”

He said to him, “I toiled in my youth, and I toil in my old age, and that which is pleasing to the Lord of the heavens, He has done.” …

He said to him, “By your life, old man, if these trees produce [fruit] in your lifetime…”

Eventually, the trees produced figs.... (*Vayikra Rabba*, 25:5)

Here, Hadrian expresses himself more rudely, accusing the old man of having been lazy in his youth, such that he is now forced to work hard in his old age. The old man’s response is surprising: I worked when I was young and I am working in my old age, too, and the Lord of the heavens has done as He pleases. I will elaborate on these words below.

The difference between the dialogues in the two *midrashim* is no coincidence; it relates to the broader context in which the story appears in each source.

The context in *Kohelet Rabba* is Kohelet’s expression of despair at the toil of this world – because the next generation, which will inherit the fruit of his labor, may frivolously cause it all to be wasted and lost:

I made for myself gardens and orchards and I planted trees of all kinds of fruit in them… And I hated all my labor which I labored under the sun, seeing that I must leave to the man who will be after me. And who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? But he will rule over all my labor which I labored and which I was wise under the sun; this, too is vanity. Therefore, I turned about to cause my heart to despair concerning all the labor which I labored under the sun. (*Kohelet* 2:5,18-20)

Immediately before our story of Hadrian and the old man, the *midrash* offers an interesting twist on these verses:

“Therefore, I turned about to cause my heart to despair concerning all the labor…” (2:20) – but I reconsidered and said, “Just as others labored for me, so I labor for others.” (*Kohelet Rabba* 2:20)

This *midrash* uses the word *saboti* (“I turned”) to interpret the verse in a way that turns it right around. In verses 18-19, Kohelet describes how, looking ruefully back from the vantage point of his advanced age, he regrets and despairs over all the labor he invested during his life, because he is now leaving it to his successor. But verse 20, according to the *midrash*, alludes to a turnaround (“I turned about” = “I reconsidered and said”), and he now sees the positive side of leaving the fruits of his labors for future generations: “Just as others labored for me, so I labor for others.” From here, the *midrash* goes on to recount the story of the old man who declares to Hadrian that even if he will have no benefit from the trees he is planting, others will benefit in the future from his labors – just as previous generations planted trees from which he has benefited in his lifetime.

The story in *Vayikra Rabba*, on the other hand, appears in the context of a discussion about the verses regarding the mitzva of *orla*:

And when you come into the land, and plant all types of trees for food, you shall regard its fruit as *orla*; three years shall it be *orla* for you; it shall not be eaten. (*Vayikra* 19:23)

As will be seen below, the dialogue in *Vayikra Rabba* is connected to a parable offered in connection with this verse.

First, let us consider how to understand the old man’s response in the version from *Vayikra Rabba*. We might understand that he labored in his youth but did not achieve success, and therefore he is forced to labor in his old age as well. This offers us a direction for understanding his concluding words: “And that which is pleasing to the Lord of the heavens, He has done”: the old man submits to God’s decision not to provide him with enough sustenance from the efforts of his youth, which would have allowed him to rest in his old age, and accepts the fact that he must now continue to labor for his needs. In this reading, we can identify with the old man’s acceptance of his fate, but the message is not a particularly inspiring one.

However, there is a different, more radical possibility. The old man’s response can be read as a loosening of the iron chain linking labor and its results. A person’s labor and toil in this world are not just a means of obtaining sustenance, but also have significance and standing in their own right. For this reason, he toils in his youth and also toils in his old age. This is true in the specific context of agricultural labor (where it is connected to *Parashat Bereishit*, and to the sanctity of Eretz Yisrael), but also in the broader context of work, with an emphasis on releasing labor from its lockstep with sustenance. Indeed, we often see instances in which the fruits or income from labor do not correspond directly to the difficulty of the work or to the time invested. There are many other factors that affect the outcome of one’s efforts. The question is whether it is of religious significance.

This reading, which sees the work itself as a matter of significance, is in fact alluded to in the preceding lines in the same *midrash*, as an introduction to the story of Hadrian and the old man:

“Who has put wisdom in the inward parts? Or who has given understanding to the rooster?” (*Iyov* 38:36):

Consider the hen: When her chicks are young, she gathers them together and puts them under her wing and warms them and grubs for them. But when they are grown, if one of them tries to get near her, she pecks at its head and said to it, “Go and grub in your own dunghill.”

Likewise, when *Am Yisrael* were in the wilderness for forty years, the manna would descend and the [water of the] well surged up, the quails were on hand, the clouds of glory surrounded them, and the pillar of cloud journeyed before them. Once they entered Eretz Yisrael, Moshe said to them, “Let each of you take his spade and go and plant trees: ‘When you come into the land, you shall plant…’ (*Vayikra* 19:23).”

Hadrian… saw an old man planting trees.

He said to him, “Old man, old man, had you toiled harder in your youth, you would not have to toil in your old age.” …[as above] (*Vayikra Rabba* 25:5)

This *midrash* reads *Vayikra* 19:23 in a different sense than its plain meaning. On the literal level, the words “and plant all types of trees for food…” are part of the conditional clause, “When you come into the land and plant….” But according to the midrashic reading, the condition is, “When you come into the land,” and the next words are already part of the command: “You shall plant all types of trees for food.” The first commandment is to plant, and then comes the prohibition of *orla*: “[In addition to the planting,] three years shall it be *orla* for you; it shall not be eaten….”

The reality of life in Eretz Yisrael is described here as a contrast to the period spent in the wilderness. In the wilderness, all the nation’s needs were taken care of by God, with no need for any effort on their part. In Eretz Yisrael, they are commanded to labor. Of course, this may be viewed as part of the specific goal of *yishuv ha-aretz* – settling the land – but the story of the old man and Hadrian which follows this interpretation of the verse provides a conceptual angle that emphasizes the value of labor – all types of labor – in its own right.

The old man declares, “I labored in my youth and I labor in my old age, and that which pleases the Lord of the heavens, He has done.” The story seems to take the *midrash* a step further: not only is there now a requirement to work, such that without labor there will be nothing to eat, but the story actually separates labor, as an endeavor in its own right, from its result.

This reading of the story is reinforced by the connection to the mitzva of *orla*, and may even imbue this mitzva with new significance. During the first three years of growing fruit, one tends to the tree but may not benefit from the fruit. The prohibition against eating the fruit of the first three years creates a separation between the labor and the fruits. Admittedly, this is not meant to be permanent. The Torah wants people to be able to eat the fruit of their labors; that is the normal way of things. But it is preceded by a short period during which the individual learns to view his labor as something that stands on its own, not just as a means to an end. Similarly, according to the above reading of the story, the old man’s words recognize the possibility of severing the idea of labor from its result.

But what is the deeper meaning of the statement, “I labored in my youth and I labor in my old age, and that which is pleasing to the Lord of the heavens, He has done”? Where does this idea bring us? What religious movement is a person performing when he says, “That which is pleasing to the Lord of the heavens, He has done”? This is a typically concise formulation by *Chazal*; I feel that additional elaboration is necessary to understand the statement, delve into it, and grasp its religious message.

The relationship between labor and its fruits, or sustenance, is a subject that is treated extensively in *Chassidut*, and in the next *shiur*, we will examine a Chassidic story that connects to the idea of separating labor from its results. Through Chassidic sources and Chassidic language, we will try to develop and deepen our understanding of the old man’s statement.

But first, we will conclude this *shiur* with the story’s humorous conclusion:

His neighbor’s wife was a wicked woman.

She said to her husband, “You good-for-nothing! Look, the king obviously loves figs and exchanges them for gold coins!”

So the man filled a box with figs and presented himself before the palace.

They said to him, “What is your business here?”

He told them, “I heard that the king likes figs and exchanges them for gold coins.” They went inside and told the king, “There’s an old man standing at the gate of the palace with a full box of figs. We asked him as to his business and he said, ‘I heard that the king likes figs and exchanges them for gold coins.’”

The king said, “I order you to place him at the gate of the palace, and everyone who enters or leaves should throw [some of the figs] in his face.”

When evening came, they released him and he went home. He said to his wife, “All this ‘glory’ is thanks to you.”

She said to him, “Be grateful that those were figs and not *etrogim*, and that they were ripe and not hard!”

[Translated by Kaeren Fish]