**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 #17:   
The Talmudic *Chassid* and the Stone-Clearer, and Chassidic Tales (3)**

We saw several stories and sources in the previous *shiurim* that address the concepts of acquisition, property, and ownership. We concluded the last *shiur* with the first part of R. Nachman's story about the *Baal Tefilla*, which recognizes different needs in this regard.

In another story, R. Nachman offers another interesting view of what a person can define as “his.” Here, the test lies in the result – an idea similar to the teaching of the *Mei Ha-Shiloach* that was quoted in the previous *shiur*, but with a twist in the manner of acquisition. This is the story of the jewel in the mud:

Once there was a poor man who made his living by digging clay and selling it.

One day, as he was digging, he found a jewel that was worth a great fortune. The clay-digger had no idea how much it was worth, so he went to a jeweler to have it valued.

The jeweler told him it was worth so much that there was no one in the entire country with enough money to buy it. He would have to travel to London, the metropolis. But being poor, the man did not have the money to make the journey. He went and sold everything he had, and then went from door to door to collect charity, until he had sufficient money to travel to the port.

He wanted to board a ship, but did not have enough money for the fare. He went to the captain and showed him the precious stone. The captain, setting his eyes upon the stone, took him for a wealthy man, and brought him aboard with great pomp and honor, awarding him a special first-class cabin and arranging every luxury for him, as for someone of high rank.

The cabin had a window overlooking the sea. [The clay-digger] would sit there rejoicing over the jewel and caressing it, especially at mealtimes, since joy and good spirits are helpful in aiding digestion.

One day, as he sat down to eat, with the jewel lying on the table so he could enjoy it, he was so tired that he fell asleep. Along came the cabin-boy and removed the tablecloth with all the crumbs – along with the jewel, since he had no idea that it was there – and shook it out into the sea. When the man woke up and realized what had happened, he nearly went out of his mind with anguish. What was he to do now? The captain was a thief who could kill him over the fare for the voyage.

So he pretended to be happy, as though nothing had happened. The captain had made a habit of coming to his cabin each day to talk to him, and when he came that day, he didn’t notice anything. The clay-digger made such a show of being happy that the captain saw no change. The captain said to him, “I see that you are a wise and honest man. I wish to buy a large quantity of grain to sell in London, to bring in a great profit. But I fear that people will say that I stole the money to buy the grain. How about if the purchase is made in your name? I will reward you well.” The poor man liked the idea, and so it was.

When they arrived in London, the captain died, leaving everything in the hands of the poor man. The value of the grain was worth many times more than the jewel.

When our Rabbi, of blessed memory, finished the story, he said: The jewel wasn’t really his; the proof of this is that he lost it. The grain was his, and the proof is that it remained with him. (*Kol Sippurei R. Nachman mi-Breslov*, 424-426).

There is much that can be said about this story, but for the purposes of our discussion, I wish to focus on the concluding remark: “When our Rabbi, of blessed memory, finished the story, he said: The jewel wasn’t really his; the proof of this is that he lost it. The grain was his, and the proof is that it remained with him.”

The story offers an interesting perspective on the question of when something “belongs” to a person and when it does not. As noted previously, we are not speaking here of formal, legal ownership, which is determined by the purchase or acquisition itself. The two possessions that come to the hero of the story – the jewel and the grain – are both formally his. We might also say that he exerts himself for each of them. Admittedly, in the beginning he was not actively, consciously searching for the jewel, but his discovery of it is the result of many years of hard work digging in the mud. The grain comes to him through a different sort of effort: the effort to maintain his joy and composure despite the loss of the jewel. The difference between these two types of effort is clear.

When R. Nachman asserts that “the jewel wasn’t really his,” he clearly does not mean this in the formal monetary or legal sense. The clay-digger did own the jewel, but the sudden and complete manner of its loss – just as it appeared suddenly (to borrow the metaphor from *Sefer Yona* 4:10, it “came up overnight and perished overnight”) – suggests that his inner connection to the jewel was essentially weak to start off with. At the same time, however, the jewel plays an important role in his life: it helps him set off on a journey.

This destitute man had been mired in mud, in all senses. His life was stuck, a closed circle. In order for change to enter his life, he needed to somehow take a step out of the mud, to break out of his routine. This is something that is usually beyond a person’s own powers, since whatever his current situation is, it is never merely a physical or financial situation; there is a psychological and mental component, too. Most people are mentally imprisoned within their current system of concepts and possibilities. They need a push from the outside to enable them to move – and this is exactly what the jewel does for the mud-digger. It catalyzes his entire adventure, leading to the eventual reward. But that is all the jewel is meant to do for him. It was never meant to be his.

The grain, on the other hand, *is* his, through a different type of connection. It does not come to him through circumstances that he experiences as accidental, like finding a jewel in the mud. It is the result of difficult, intensive inner work – maintaining real inner joy that radiates authenticity, despite the difficult situation in which he finds himself. This inner work earns him, first and foremost, the trust and esteem of the captain; therefore, the captain approaches him with the offer of partnership. When he “finds” the grain, he is already a different person from who he was previously, when he found the jewel. He has experienced a transformation, thanks to finding the jewel and then losing it. The meaning of the phrase “stayed with him” with regard to the grain is not just the practical fact of ownership. He has a permanent acquisition here that goes beyond the grain itself. The more significant acquisition is the inner fortitude he has developed through his faith. This is real, significant inner growth that he has worked hard for. His ultimate receiving of the grain is merely an expression of the inner strengths he has developed.

R. Nachman encourages this sort of inner growth and teaches us about the positive results that can come of it. However, in the first part of the story, he also encourages something else: jumping at opportunity, even if it is not exactly suited to one’s inner essence. Sometimes a person identifies an opportunity for change but is hesitant to embark on the new experience because he is not sure whether it aligns with his dreams and abilities. R. Nachman, who is generally in favor of movement and renewal in life, encourages such experiences, even if they are not exactly right for us. At the same time, he makes us aware that such opportunities may bring achievements that are only transient, if they are in fact not right for us – like the jewel, which is ultimately lost so the mud-digger cannot benefit from its monetary value. In R. Nachman’s view, it is still worth grabbing such opportunities because a person who makes a change in his life – even if it is not in the precise direction that he seeks – sets off on a journey, and the journey may bring him to new junctures where can choose paths better suited to him.

Let us bring these concepts back with us to the *chassid* and the *mesakkel*, and re-read that story. As mentioned at the outset, the *mesakkel* is not only inconsiderate in dumping the rocks from his field in the public domain. He lacks a deeper understanding of the concepts of belonging and ownership, of what truly belongs to him and what does not. The field turns out to be his only temporarily, and in a certain sense, it offers him an opportunity – some might say a test. If he had passed the test, it might have led him to the next stage, where he could have acquired something more genuine and also more lasting.

**The wheel of fortune**

In conclusion, let us go back to the sources in *Chazal* relating to the perception of ownership of money. The Gemara relates the following *midrash* regarding *tzedaka*:

It was taught in a *beraita*: Rabbi Elazar ha-Kappar says: A person should always seek Divine mercy with regard to this state [i.e., poverty], for if he does not end up there, his son will, and if his son does not, then his grandson will, as it is stated: “[You shall surely give to him, and your heart shall not be grieved when you give to him, for it is on account of this thing [*biglal ha-davar ha-zeh*] that the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all your endeavors” (*Devarim* 15:10). Concerning this verse, the school of Rabbi Yishmael taught: [The word *biglal* hints to the word *galgal* – a wheel:] a wheel [of fortune] turns in the world…

R. Chiya said to his wife: When a poor person comes [to the door], be quick to give him bread, so that others will be quick to give to your children. She said to him: Are you then cursing [your own children]? He said to her: It is written, “for it is on account of this thing that the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all your endeavors.” Concerning this verse, the school of Rabbi Yishmael taught: [The word *biglal* hints to the word *galgal* – a wheel:] a wheel [of fortune] turns in the world. (*Shabbat* 151b)

The verse that is quoted here comes from the commandment of *tzedaka*. *Chazal* understand the word *biglal* – “on account of” – as hinting to the wheel (*galgal*) of fortune. This *midrash* imbues *tzedaka* with new meaning: in addition to showing compassion for the destitute, which is certainly part of one’s motivation, one must also take into consideration that those who are destitute today may become wealthy at some later time, and vice versa. The same attitude that one would wish others to show to his descendants if they were to become destitute – and it is reasonable to posit that sometime, in some future generation, this may happen – is how one should treat the destitute of one’s own generation.

I believe that several layers of meaning are to be found in this teaching. First of all, it motivates a person to show generosity out of concern for his family’s future. There is recognition here of the psychological difficulty of parting with one’s money, and the need to engage a person’s utilitarian instincts to this end. *Chazal’s* message goes beyond this level of motivation for giving *tzedaka*, however, and expresses a broader view of society and of time: The wheel of fortune turns the destitute beggar into a permanent fixture of society, a reality that the members of society must always keep in mind. The charity that everyone is thereby driven to give provides support for whoever happens to be needy at the time.

But it seems that there is something even deeper. The consciousness of the “wheel of fortune” is precisely the message that arises from the story of the *chassid* and the *mesakkel*. There is a wheel of fortune that turns in the world, and therefore what I possess right now will be lost later on – if not by me, then by my descendants. The wheel symbolizes movement, and movement is related to temporality. My money and my property are in my possession temporarily, even if it does not feel that way. Their connection to me is weaker than it seems. This consciousness can help me to part more easily with some of my money for the benefit of the poor. The concept is not self-evident; it goes against the simple human instinct that sees that which I have earned by my own hard work as mine. What we have here is a different view, that changes my consciousness and eases my hold on my money and my property. This is a more primal movement, that comes before the stage of thinking about the poor person and his distress.

Among the *Chassidim*, there were those who took this consciousness to the extreme. One of them would seem to be R. Fishele, who appeared in *shiur* no. 14, and concerning whom R. Simcha Bunim said, “he has no concept of money at all, and all the money in the world means nothing to him.” But others, as we have seen, embraced a more moderate position, that does not scorn money but does ease our tight hold on it, motivated by a different view of ownership of property and money in the world.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)