**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 #21: The Story of Herod and More, and R. Nachman’s Story of the Seven Beggars**

The stories of R. Nachman of Breslav often feature a king. Conventional interpretations usually view the king in the story as symbolic of God, King of the world; we will return to this point later on.

In addition to their many midrashic parables about kings, which likewise clearly refer to God, *Chazal* also offer many different stories about mortal kings. Most are homiletical teachings about biblical kings, such as Shaul, David, or Chizkiyahu, or non-Jewish kings, and there are also stories about kings who were contemporaries of the Sages. Notable among these is the story about Herod, which is a relatively long and complex narrative; it is also one of the few places in all of rabbinic literature where he is mentioned. I presented an initial analysis of this story in a previous series of *shiurim*,[[1]](#footnote-1) but I wish to return to it now from a new and different perspective, inter alia, in light of some Chassidic sources.

The story appears at the beginning of *Massekhet Bava Batra* (3b – 4a):

1. Herod was the slave of the Hasmonean house,

2. and had set his eyes on a certain maiden [of that house].

3. One day he heard a Heavenly Voice say:

4. "Every slave that rebels now will succeed."

5. So he rose and killed all the members of his master's household,

6. but spared that maiden.

7. When she saw that he wanted to marry her,

8. she went up to the roof and cried out:

9. "Whoever comes and says, ‘I am from the Hasmonean house,’ is a slave,

10. since I alone am left of it,

11. and I am throwing myself down from this roof."

12. He preserved her body in honey for seven years.

13. Some say that he had intercourse with her;

14. some say he did not have intercourse with her.

15. According to those who say that he had intercourse with her, his reason for embalming her was to gratify his desires.

16. According to those who say that he did not have intercourse with her, his reason was so that people would say that he had married a king's daughter.

17. He said: "Who are they, who teach: 'From among your brethren you shall set up a king over you' ([*Devarim*17:15](https://www.sefaria.org/Deuteronomy.17.15?lang=he-en&utm_source=etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker))? The Rabbis!"

18. He therefore arose and killed all the Rabbis,

19. sparing, however, Bava ben Buta, that he might take counsel of him.

20. He placed on his head a garland of hedgehog bristles

21. and put out his eyes.

22. One day [Herod] came and sat before [Bava ben Buta] and said:

23. "See, sir, what this wicked slave [Herod] does."

24. "What do you want me to do to him?" replied Bava ben Buta.

25. [Herod] said: "I want you to curse him."

26. [Bava ben Buta] replied with the verse: "Even in your thoughts you should not curse a king" ([*Kohelet* 10:20](https://www.sefaria.org/Ecclesiastes.10.20?lang=he-en&utm_source=etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker)).

27. [Herod] said to him: "But this is no king."

28. [Bava ben Buta] replied: "Even though he be only a rich man,

29. it is written: 'And in your bedchamber do not curse the rich' ([*Kohelet* 10:20](https://www.sefaria.org/Ecclesiastes.10.20?lang=he-en&utm_source=etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker)).

30. And [even] be he no more than a prince,

31. it is written: 'A prince among your people you shall not curse' ([*Shemot* 22:27](https://www.sefaria.org/Exodus.22.27?lang=he-en&utm_source=etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker))."

32. [Herod] said to him: "This applies only to one who acts as one of 'your people,'

33. but this man does not act as one of your people."

34. He said: "I am afraid of him."

35. [Herod] said to him: "But there is nobody who can go and tell him, since you and I are sitting [alone]."

36. He replied: "It is written: 'For a bird of the heaven shall carry the voice and that which has wings shall tell the matter' ([*Kohelet* 10:20](https://www.sefaria.org/Ecclesiastes.10.20?lang=he-en&utm_source=etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker)).”

37. [Herod] then said: "I am Herod. Had I known that the Rabbis were so cautious, I would not have killed them.

38. Now, tell me what amends I can make."

39. [Bava ben Buta] replied: "He who extinguished the light of the world [i.e., Torah sages], as it is written: 'For the commandment is a light and the Torah a lamp' ([*Mishlei*](https://www.sefaria.org/Proverbs.6.23?lang=he-en&utm_source=etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker) [6:23](https://www.sefaria.org/Proverbs.6.23?lang=he-en&utm_source=etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker)),

40. should go and attend to the light of the world [the Temple], as it is written: 'And all the nations become enlightened by it' (Yeshayahu 2:2)."

41. Some report that [Bava ben Buta] answered him thus: "He who blinded the eye of the world, as it is written: 'If it be done unwittingly by the eyes of the congregation' ([*Bamidbar*](https://www.sefaria.org/Numbers.15.24?lang=he-en&utm_source=etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker)[15:24](https://www.sefaria.org/Numbers.15.24?lang=he-en&utm_source=etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker)),

42. should go and attend to the eye of the world, [the Temple], as it is written: 'I will profane My sanctuary, the pride of your power, the delight of your eyes' ([*Yechezkel*](https://www.sefaria.org/Ezekiel.24.21?lang=he-en&utm_source=etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker) [24:21](https://www.sefaria.org/Ezekiel.24.21?lang=he-en&utm_source=etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker))."

43. [Herod] replied: "I am afraid of the kingdom [of Rome]."

44. [Bava ben Buta] said: "Send an envoy, and let him take a year on the way and stay in Rome a year and take a year coming back, and in the meantime you can pull down the Temple and rebuild it."

45. [Herod] did so.

46. He received the following message [from Rome]: "If you have not yet pulled it down, do not do so; if you have pulled it down, do not rebuild it;

47. if you have pulled it down and already rebuilt it, you are one of those wicked servants who do first and ask permission afterwards.

48. [Even] if your sword is upon you, your book [i.e., genealogy] is here; [we know] you are neither a reikha nor the son of a reikha,

49. but Herod the slave who has made himself a freedman.”

50. What is the meaning of reikha? It means royalty, as it is written: "I am this day rakh and anointed king" ([II *Shmuel* 3:39](https://www.sefaria.org/II_Samuel.3.39?lang=he-en&utm_source=etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker)).

51. Or one might derive the meaning from this verse: "And they cried before him [Yosef], *Avrekh*" ([*Bereishit* 41:43](https://www.sefaria.org/Genesis.41.43?lang=he-en&utm_source=etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker)).

52. It used to be said: He who has not seen the Temple of Herod has never seen a beautiful building.

53. Of what did he build it? Rabba said: Of yellow and white marble.

53. Some say: Of blue, yellow, and white marble.

54. Alternate rows [of the stones] projected an edge and drew in an edge, so as to receive [and hold] cement.

55. He thought to cover it with gold, but the Rabbis advised him not to, since it was more beautiful as it was, looking like the waves of the sea.

**The subject of the story**

What is the subject of this lengthy narrative? Actually, there seem to be several subjects.

For many generations, this Talmudic story was regarded as a historical (or close to historical) account, describing how Herod came to rebuild the Second Temple in such magnificent style. The story also includes the idea that Herod undertook this task as a sort of test to atone for having killed the Sages. There are also other subjects. However, this narrative, which would appear to have been written in Babylonia hundreds of years after Herod’s death (and which has no earlier parallels in the rabbinic literature of Eretz Yisrael), does not seem to have a historical purpose. We will discuss its literary design and various themes in the next few *shiurim*. As noted above, I have already presented a basic literary analysis of the story elsewhere. One of the central points arising from that analysis was the tension surrounding the question of the legitimacy of Herod’s reign. A considerable part of the literary design highlights this issue of legitimacy – or, to put it differently, the question of whether Herod succeeded in changing his status from slave to king. Here I will offer a reading of the story in light of part of R. Nachman’s *Story of the Seven Beggars* and other sources, showing how all of these illuminate new aspects of *Chazal*’s story.

*The Story of the Seven Beggars* is a long epic comprising a number of parts. We will focus here mainly on the first part, which describes a king who decided to bequeath the kingdom to his son during his own lifetime. This in itself is an innovative idea, since kings usually remained on their thrones until death:

It once happened that there was a king who had an only son, and the king decided to hand over the kingdom to his son, during his lifetime. He made a huge feast – and certainly, anytime that a king holds a feast, it is a time of great rejoicing, and especially now that he was handing the kingdom over to his son, in his lifetime. All the ministers of the kingdom and all the nobility were invited, and there was tremendous joy at the feast.

Also the people of the land were very excited that the king was handing over the monarchy, for this was also a very great honor for the king himself. There were all kinds of entertainment at the ball: choirs, comedians, and so on, and an atmosphere of complete happiness.

In the midst of the celebration, the king stood up and said to his son, "Since I am an astrologer, I can see that in the future you are going to lose the monarchy, and when that happens, I want you to be very careful not to fall into depression. Rather, you must remain happy, and when you are happy, I, too, will be happy. Even if you become depressed, I will still be happy that you are no longer king. For if you cannot remain happy despite losing the kingship, you will not have been worthy of being king. But if you do manage to remain happy, then I will be very happy indeed.

The prince took complete control over the kingdom, appointing ministers and nobility and military officers…

The first contrast between this story and the Talmudic story of Herod, which is manifest right from the outset, is the description of the multitude of participants at the king’s celebration, and the atmosphere of great joy. Herod, in contrast, stands alone. He is not surrounded by loyal and admiring ministers, nobility, and military men. His aloneness is conspicuous, and of course it is fundamentally connected to his behavior: in order to occupy the throne, he murdered those around him, and those who are left alive keep their distance from him. There is no joy in the story of Herod; it is a somber account.

In R. Nachman’s story, the joy arises inter alia from the togetherness; the sense of connection that radiates in the story between the common people and their king, and among the people themselves. The background to these relations is not stated, but it flows in part from the central movement of the king in the story, which is diametrically opposed to Herod’s movement. In R. Nachman’s story, the king is not trying to hold onto his kingdom by force (although it would seem to be his by inheritance, by right), but the opposite: he wants to loosen his grasp and hand it over. Later on, in the king’s words to his son, we see that this desire is not a matter of coincidence; it is in fact the test of true royalty: “Even if you become depressed, I will still be happy that you are no longer king. For if you cannot remain happy despite losing the kingship (*malkhut*), you will not have been worthy of being king.” Paradoxically, it is the readiness to let go of the throne, rather than grasping at it, that proves the king worthy of his role.

This point is related to another concept that appears often in R. Nachman’s teachings, based on the kabbalistic concept of the ten *Sefirot*. The *Sefirot* are different expressions and manifestations of Divinity in the world, or different ways in which Divinity acts in the world; a sort of breakdown of the Divine Infinity that encompasses all manifestations, qualities, and powers. The lowest of the *Sefirot* is *Malkhut*. Kabbalistic and Chassidic teachings make frequent reference to the central quality of this *sefira*: “It has nothing of its own.” I once heard Rav Itamar Eldar utilize the image of a pipe in this context. A real king perceives himself as a pipe connecting the heavens – Divinity – to earth and man. A good pipe is one that is empty, that contains nothing of its own; this allows for optimal flow from one end to the other. The *Sefira* of *Malkhut* is God’s pipe, as it were, through which He bestows abundance on the world. In light of this, according to R. Nachman, the same image can be used to represent the ideal human kingship.

Let us now return to the Talmudic story of Herod. As noted, this story is one of very few references to Herod in all of rabbinic literature. It appears in the *Bavli* hundreds of years and hundreds of kilometers removed from the life and times of the historical Herod. Hence, it is not surprising that more than making a historical statement, the story conveys more conceptual and spiritual messages. One of the main conceptual themes of the story is Herod’s kingship – and kingship in general.

If we bear in mind the messages of R. Nachman’s story about *Malkhut* – kingship, the literary molding of the story of Herod, which highlights this topic, comes into sharper focus. The root “*m-l-kh*” is repeated over and over in the story, along with its opposite – the root “*e-v-d*.” Together, these two roots create a tension that oscillates along the axis between the two opposites. Herod himself is always on this axis. He transforms himself from slave (*eved*) to king (*melekh*) by taking the kingdom by force. Seemingly, he has managed to “switch sides,” from belonging to the slave camp to belonging to the royal camp.

But what becomes apparent as the story continues is that this transition is not a simple matter. Becoming king is not a mere formality. Royalty means more than just a title, more than occupying the throne, and more than the power to impose orders on subjects. The transition is a far more significant one, dependent on additional factors. One of these, we might say, in light of R. Nachman’s story, is a certain self-perception on the part of the king.

Indeed, the story of Herod, from beginning to end, questions and undermines his legitimacy as king. This questioning is expressed by different voices throughout the story, such as the Hasmonean girl who speaks out before committing suicide, or the great irony and biting criticism of the Roman authorities: “If your sword is upon you, your book [i.e., genealogy] is here” – meaning, you did indeed become king, by power of the sword, but in our eyes there is no change in your status from that which appears in your recorded genealogy – the status of a slave. Even in Herod’s own thoughts, there are “voices” that undermine his legitimacy. For instance, the question placed in the mouth of the Sages is in fact a question in his own mind, which he attributes to the Sages (“He said: ‘Who are they, who teach: “From among your brethren you shall set up a king over you” ([Devarim](https://www.sefaria.org/Deuteronomy.17.15?lang=he-en&utm_source=etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker) [17:15](https://www.sefaria.org/Deuteronomy.17.15?lang=he-en&utm_source=etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker))? The Rabbis!’”) Further on in the story, he arrives at the conclusion that this voice was not necessary actually something he heard in reality. While it is quite reasonable to assume that the Sages had reservations regarding Herod – and we will come back to their position later on – the story chooses to present this questioning first and foremost as an inner voice within Herod himself. In the dialogue with Bava ben Buta, too, in which Herod pretends to be a regular citizen, he gives expression to the inner voice that questions his own legitimacy.

The verses cited by Bava ben Buta serve to reinforce the undermining of Herod’s status. They are drawn from Chapter 10 of *Kohelet*, and if we look at them in context, we find the adjacent verses: “I have seen slaves upon horses, and princes walking as slaves upon the earth”… “Happy are you, O land, when your king is a free man…” (verses 7, 17). When these verses are read against the background of the story of Herod, the irony comes into sharp relief: the more forcefully and aggressively Herod tries to reinforce his power, the more questions accumulate around his legitimacy. R. Nachman’s story is the antithetical response to a situation where the more determinedly and desperately a king grasps at his throne, the more it slips out of his hands.

We might compare the story’s ironic view of Herod’s kingship with another very critical and ironic view of human kingship, in the Book of *Esther*. The text is full of disdain for Achashverosh, portraying him as a puppet king who is controlled by his ministers and his wife, via his royal ring. On the surface, he seems to enjoy great honor and power, but ultimately everyone undermines his reign and he is alone.

Interestingly, R. Nachman speaks in one of his teachings about the nobility of Mordechai, whose name he interprets, following *Chazal*’s example, as derived from *mor dror* (myrrh), the word *dror* meaning freedom. He also mentions a verse from Chapter 10 of *Kohelet*, which is found in proximity to the verse cited in the Talmudic story of Herod:

A person should not make use of his aspect of *malkhut* for his own personal gratification and needs. His aspect of *malkhut* should not be like a slave for him, to satisfy his desires. Rather, the aspect of *malkhut* should be the aspect of a free man, as it is written (*Kohelet* 10), “Happy are you, O land, whose king is a free man….” Your own *malkhut* should be a “free man”; you should not use it for your own gratification.

And this is the aspect of Mordechai, of “*mar dror*” (*Chullin* 139b): The authority (*marut*) – i.e., *malkhut* – should have *dror*, freedom. One should not use it for personal gratification and need, but rather [only] for the blessed God, as it is written (*Ovadia* 1), “And the kingship (*malkhut*) shall be unto God.”

*Malkhut* that serves the king’s ego is defined here as slave-like. This is an interesting midrashic reading of the verse, “And kingship shall be unto God”: the *malkhut* of each and every person is true kingship if it is “unto God.”

It turns out, then, that it is an exceedingly complex task to be a king and still be free, not subjugated to the power that kingship bestows. We might explain that Herod is not free – not only in the sense that he was born a slave, but also because he is enslaved to his own kingship. In his own eyes, without the kingship he has nothing and is worth nothing; if his kingdom is taken from him, nothing will remain. R. Nachman’s story holds up a mirror to Herod, showing a king who yields the throne willingly, thereby demonstrating for his son and his subjects a model of a king who is not subjugated to his kingship, and whose joy is not dependent on his kingdom.

I noted earlier the atmosphere of joy that is given special emphasis in the story; this is no coincidence. R. Nachman’s story shifts the focus from kingship as an end, to joy as an end. Joy is presented as real and genuine when it is not dependent on any external factor. Royal status, and all the royal accoutrements, manners, and accompanying power, are regarded as a type of joy that flows from an external source. If the joy is true joy, springing from within, from the person himself and who and what he is, it is not affected by ascending the throne or losing the throne.

We see here how the Chassidic story equips us with more explicit words and insights, opening up deeper meanings behind the ideas contained in *Chazal’s* stories and sharpening our attention to the different voices expressed in them, and their meanings.

In the next *shiur*, we will look at further points relating to the story of Herod, in light of additional sources.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

1. <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/talmud/studies-gemara/midrash-and-aggada/aggada-concerning-herod-and-its-meaning>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)