**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 #22: The Story of Herod and More, and R. Nachman’s Story of the Seven Beggars (2)**

The previous *shiur* recounted a Talmudic story of Herod, as well as the first part of R. Nachman’s “Story of the Seven Beggars.” A significant question arises from the story of Herod that pertains to the realm of identity: Can there be real, significant transitions of status and of identity? How are they carried out? What factors influence their chances of success, and what is the yardstick for measuring such success? Is the new status simply a functional place that a person manages to occupy, one way or another, or is there some other, more profound, internal yardstick? In this *shiur*, I wish to address other aspects of the existential significance of this issue, which finds radical expression in the story of Herod but also has interesting importance for our own, “regular” lives.

The above questions, and the tension that is such a strong presence in the story of Herod and in his molding as “king” vs. “slave,” also recall another story of R. Nachman: “The Story of the Exchanged Children.” It too is a lengthy story, and we will not be able to discuss all of it, but there are some points that shed an interesting light on the story of Herod. The story begins as follows:

There was once a king who had a maid in his palace who attended the queen…. The queen gave birth, and this maid also gave birth at the same time. Then the midwife went and switched the babies around, to see what would happen and how things would turn out. She took the king's son and put him beside the maid, and she placed the maid's son beside the queen.

As time went on, these children began to grow. The "king's son" (the one who grew up with the king because they thought he was the king's son) was helped to rise from level to level, becoming ever greater until he was a most important personage. The "maid's son" (who was really the king's son, but he grew up with the maid) was raised in the servant's house.

The two boys learned together in the same school. The king's true son, who was known as the "maid's son,” was naturally drawn to royal behavior even though he grew up in the servant's house. Conversely, the maid's true son, who was called "the king's son,” was naturally drawn to a different kind of behavior unlike that of royalty. But having grown up in the king's palace, he was forced to conduct himself royally because that was how he was raised.

## **The motif of switched children and its representation in reality**

R. Nachman, as is his custom, bases his plot on a popular folk tale. This basic plot appears in many versions, one of them being Mark Twain’s “The Prince and the Pauper.”[[1]](#footnote-2) In *Chayei Moharan*, we also read about a historical event that is part of the background to R. Nachman’s story:

Rabbi Naphtali told him what he heard then about the French war that was raging at that time. And then in that conversation we were astounded and astonished over the enormity of [Napoleon's] rise, that he had risen suddenly to such heights, for in the beginning he had been a simple servant and he became emperor. And we talked with him regarding this matter. He spoke up and said, “Who knows what kind of soul he has, for it could be that he was interchanged, for so it is in the Halls of Exchange – that sometimes the souls are interchanged,” etc. And afterwards he began to relate that such an occurrence had once taken place, that once a queen gave birth and at the same time etc. and he told the whole “Story of the Exchanged Children.” (*Chayei Moharan*, *Sichot ha-Shayakhim le-Sippurei Ma’asiyot* 61a).

The historical narrative in the background is the historical rise of Napoleon, who was not born to nobility, but eventually became Emperor of France. R. Nachman suggests that perhaps his soul was “exchanged,” and he was born to a simple family but was in truth worthy of the crown. When we make the connection between R. Nachman’s attitude towards historical reality – of which Napoleon is just one small example – and the fictional “Story of the Exchanged Children,” we can understand that the story is a sort of allegory for some more profound phenomenon that exists in reality. In reality, of course, children are not usually exchanged between families at birth. However, as R. Nachman sees it, sometimes it happens that a person is born with a soul whose potential is vastly at odds with the environment in which he grows up. Such a person, with the proper work, can undergo a process that will lead him to places that are very far removed – inwardly or outwardly – from his surroundings and the nature of his upbringing. This story, too, illuminates some points of the story of Herod, which is also ultimately a story of identity relating to a king. We will return to this later, but already now we can ask ourselves whether Herod was indeed born with the potential for royalty and whether the transition that he undergoes, setting aside the shocking, violent manner in which it happens, is indeed the true realization of that potential. Or – does he jump to a position that he is not meant to occupy, such that it is no coincidence that the path to his new status is one of murderous violence, expressing the fact that he is in fact “forcing” reality in a way that is not suited to the root of his soul?

**The motif of arbitrariness and change**

Coming back to the “Story of the Exchanged Children,” it is a tale about an exchange of identities and an exploration of identities. The story starts off in a world that is well-ordered, in which identity and status seem clear and fixed, but it soon becomes apparent that these can slip out of grasp, and in a most random fashion. Rav Shagar[[2]](#footnote-3) notes this arbitrariness: the midwife decides to play with reality, with no specific purpose or plan of action other than simple curiosity or amusement – in other words, randomly: “Then the midwife went and switched the babies around, to see what would happen and how things would turn out.” She does not act out of some moral or social motive (such as combatting social gaps or creating an even playing field for different social strata), but simply switches the babies, waiting to see what will happen. Of course, there is something shocking about the act itself; it is a rather cruel experiment on human subjects. However, the midwife is not the focus of the story. Because of her act, the point of departure for each of the two main characters – the prince and the son of the handmaid – on their respective life journeys is irregular and unexpected, and quite different from where they should have or would have started off within the regular social order.

Considering this idea more broadly, we realize that R. Nachman is speaking to some extent about all of us. Each of us is born into a very specific setting, but unlike ancient times, when the circumstances of one’s birth defined much of the path that one’s life would take, for most people today there is a great deal of room to shift or “exchange” one’s circumstances.

This has a number of ramifications. First is the fact that on the practical level, there are more possibilities open to all of us, although we each still face various limitations and the possibilities are not endless. Every person, regardless of his origins, can think about achieving bigger and better things for himself in all sorts of spheres; he can set off on a journey of self-discovery and make profound and significant changes in his life. On the other hand, someone who aims high will have to build himself by himself, more so than in the past, without relying on the privileges that some people enjoyed in the past simply by virtue of their lineage.

**The motif of existential doubt and confusion**

Another ramification pertains to the internal, psychic level, in the context of another interesting point about the midwife. In R. Nachman’s story, the midwife reveals her mischief to someone else, and the rumor starts spreading:

Now the midwife… went and told someone the secret of how she had switched the children. "Every friend has a friend," and naturally enough, the secret passed from one person to another until everyone was whispering about how the king's son had been exchanged.

It was impossible for anyone to talk about it openly in case the king found out. It was quite impossible to let the king find out. What could he do? There was no solution. It was impossible to give credence to a mere rumor; it might be false. In any case, how could they switch the two sons back into their proper positions? They therefore could not reveal the matter to the king. Yet people continued talking about it among themselves.

Since it is a mere rumor, it sows doubt and confusion, and this doubt and confusion cannot be resolved, as R. Nachman himself states. There is no way of ascertaining the truth, and there is no practical action that can be taken in light of the rumor: “In any case, how could they switch the two sons back?”[[3]](#footnote-4)

Ultimately, of course, the rumor reaches the boys:

One day, somebody revealed the secret to the "king's son,” telling him that people were saying he had been switched.

"But you cannot investigate this," said the man who told him the secret. "It would be beneath your dignity. You therefore cannot go into the matter at all. I am only telling you this in case there is a conspiracy against you one day that might gain strength because of this rumor. People will say they want to take the king's son as king – the one they say is the king's true son. You will have to think about how to deal with him and see how to remove him."…

The "king's son" began making trouble for the servant who was regarded as the father of the other son, although in fact he was his own true father. The "king's son" made every kind of trouble for him, one after the other, in order to force him to flee, together with his son.

As long as the king was alive, his "son" did not have much power, yet was still able to cause him troubles. Eventually, the king became old and died, and the "king's son,” who was the maid's true son, took over the kingdom. He then caused even more trouble for the servant who was regarded as the "father" of the other son….

The servant realized that it was because of this matter that the king was causing him troubles … and he explained the whole story to his "son" (who was in reality the [former] king's true son). He told him that he had great compassion for him.

"Either way: If you are my son, I certainly have compassion for you. And if you are the king's true son, you deserve even greater compassion, because he wants to remove you completely, heaven forbid. For this reason, you have no option but to move away from here." …

The doubt aroused by the rumor causes each of the sons to set off on a journey of discovery. The son of the maidservant feels threatened and acts to remove the king’s true son, so that he will not be a threat to the throne. However, this does not give him the peace of mind that he seeks, and he ends up wandering far away. The king’s true son, who is also banished from his “family,” finds it difficult at first to come to terms with his situation; he is bitter and depressed, and resorts to drink. Eventually, he takes himself in hand and accepts work as a cattle driver. When two of the cattle disappear deep into the forest, he chases after them, and here begin his adventures in the uninhabited depths of the forest. During his travels, he meets up with the son of the maidservant, who has also become lost in the same forest, and after a series of strange experiences, they return to civilization, each now cognizant and accepting of his original, true identity.

This part of the story, too, reflects something of the general human condition. As noted, there are many opportunities open to people for personal development over the course of their lives, and it is not always easy to know the right direction to take. When it comes to choosing what to do, some people have a degree of intuition to rely on, but many others remain mired in doubt and have to learn to live with that doubt and uncertainty. There are people who have doubt gnawing at them all the time, which can be a very difficult experience. This, too, recalls the description of Herod in the Talmudic story: although he initiates a great change in his life, it seems that doubt continues to plague him. There are two other possibilities for dealing with this doubt – other than becoming mired in endless, circular questions. One option is to live a wholehearted life of blissful ignorance – which is becoming an increasingly non-viable possibility in our world. The other is to accept the doubt, the incomplete nature of what we are able to know and be certain of, and to live our lives, with our choices and whatever happens to us, with equanimity.

In Herod’s case, doubt gives him no rest. We might ask why: What are the reasons for his unease; what are the questions that plague him? How does Herod’s journey look? In short, what sort of new insights arise in our minds with regard to the story of Herod, in light of our (rather minimal and superficial) reading of the “Story of the Exchanged Children”? We will come back to these questions in the next *shiur*. First, let us turn our attention to one final point concerning the story of the two sons.

**The king’s son and the handmaid’s son as shifting identities within a person**

The king’s true son, banished by the son of the handmaid (who now occupies the throne) and aware of the questions that are the reason for his banishment, reacts at first by sinking into depression, despair, and empty hedonism:

This son (who was the king’s true son) felt very bad indeed about having been driven from his own country for nothing.

"Why do I deserve to be banished?" he asked himself. "If I am the king's son, I certainly don't deserve it. And even if I am not the king's son, I still don't deserve to have to flee for no reason. What sin did I commit?"

He felt very bad about it. He started drinking and visiting the brothel. He wanted to spend the rest of his days getting drunk and following his heart's desires after having been banished for nothing.

His depression comes in the wake of the realization that he is not in the place where he should be. Instead of being in the palace and enjoying the conditions appropriate to his true status, he has been living like a commoner – and now even less than that – because he has been unjustly banished.

Some scholars have proposed viewing the son of the king and the son of the handmaid in the story as two aspects within every individual.[[4]](#footnote-5) R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi, founder of Chabad and author of the *Tanya*, talks about the two parts of the psyche – the “Godly soul” and the “animalistic soul” – that animate each of us (except, perhaps, for a tiny number of truly exceptional individuals, and it is even questionable whether such people exist at all). On the basis of this duality that is always a given, even someone who might conventionally be regarded as a great *tzaddik* is referred to in the *Tanya* as a *beinoni* (intermediate person). Over the course of a person’s life, there is a constant struggle between the two aspects of his psyche. His job is to have the “Godly soul” emerge victorious, to do good, and to live a life of spiritual awareness and service of God, rather than focusing on his own impulses and desires and the material world.

But the *Ba’al Ha-Tanya* also says something else about the Godly soul. Its source is in Divinity, and therefore its existence in this material world, within a physical body, in close proximity to the animalistic soul, is a kind of exile. The Godly soul is in constant distress. In Chabad sources, this distress is expressed, inter alia, in the portrayal of a soul crying out – “Woe!” – as it descends into the body.

*Chazal* adopt a similar view in the following *midrash*:

“[All the labor of man is for his mouth,] and yet the appetite is not filled” (*Kohelet* 6:7)… What might this be compared to? To a commoner who married a princess. Even if he offers her everything in the world, it’s not worth anything to her. Why? Because she is a princess. So it is with the soul: [even] if you give it all the world’s delicacies, they are worthless to it. Why? Because it comes from the upper worlds. (*Kohelet Rabba* 6:6)

We might view the difficult, bitter questions, voiced by the king’s true son in R. Nachman’s story, as questions of the Godly soul that is forced to descend to this world and to live in these lowly, material surroundings, while its real place is in the upper world, at its Divine source. During the time spent in this world, within a physical body, the Godly soul will go through periods when it forgets its origins and comes to think that the material world is all there is, and it might become mired in that level of existence. This decline is represented in the story by the descent of the king’s son into hedonism and depression. But there is always a spark that will remain, that wants more out of life. If it has the strength, it will journey and explore in order to discover its original identity and to give it expression and space. In the end, that authentic core – the Godly soul – will come to lead the person, instead of the animalistic soul.

The importance of this perspective on the “Story of the Exchanged Children,” when projected back onto our lives and our reality, is that the struggle of identities that rages within a person is not necessarily waged between two distinct possible identities, only one of which is real. Rather, it may be a war between identities that are both true and real – each of them embodying a partial truth that is part of the person’s personality. The human personality is complex; it contains more than just one identity. A person may often find himself torn between the different identities comprising his personality; sometimes there is a “higher” personality and a “lower” one, and he experiences ups and downs. The relationship between them is dynamic and constantly mobile.

This, too, makes for an interesting prism through which to view the story of Herod, and we will do that in the next *shiur*.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

1. First published in 1881, it seems reasonable to assume that Twain’s novel was a reworking of a folk tale that he heard. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. See his *shiurim* on this story on the website of Yeshivat Siach Yitzchak, [here](https://siach.org.il/category/%d7%a0%d7%95%d7%a9%d7%90%d7%99%d7%9d/%d7%97%d7%a1%d7%99%d7%93%d7%95%d7%aa/%d7%94%d7%a8%d7%91-%d7%a9%d7%92%d7%a8-%d7%9e%d7%9c%d7%9a-%d7%95%d7%a9%d7%a4%d7%97%d7%94/). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Rav Shagar also discusses this doubt at length (ibid.). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Rav Shagar, too, proposes this view in his aforementioned series. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)