**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 #25: The Story of Rav Sheshet and the Heretic (*Berakhot* 58a) (2)**

This *shiur* will continue our discussion of the story of the blind Rav Sheshet and the heretic who scoffed at his coming to “see” the king.

**"[Full] jugs go to the river; where do empty ones go?”**

As I noted in the previous *shiur*, it would seem that the story could have conveyed its message even if the Sage confronting the heretic were physically sound. After all, his advantage in the episode lies not in what might have been an enhanced sense of hearing developed to compensate for his lack of sight, but rather in his proficiency in Torah and his ability to understand and navigate this world according to its teachings. Indeed, the Gemara and other Rabbinic sources contain a great many stories about encounters between various Sages and heretics. We might suggest that the story simply recounts the event as it happened – and it happened to involve Rav Sheshet, who was blind. But familiarity with the narrative genre of the Babylonian Talmud suggests otherwise. In the previous *shiur*, I addressed the physical and symbolic significance of blindness as allowing the subject to "bypass" external trappings and appearances, and to sense the inner essence of things. The heretic misses this; his perception remains fixed on the external level.[[1]](#footnote-1) Perhaps this is what Rav Sheshet is referring to in his first response to him: "Come and see that I know more than you." I have already noted the seemingly ironic use of the verb "see": "You'll *see*, because you possess the sense of sight, which I lack; but nevertheless, I *know* more, and I will experience the king better, or more fully, or more accurately, than you." As noted, it may be that it is specifically R. Sheshet's blindness, which conceals from him the outer aspect of royalty (and of reality in general) in his everyday experience, that allows him to be more attentive to its inner, quieter movement. He has a more profound experience of the king passing by. The heretic experiences only the outward spectacle of the royal procession, while Rav Sheshet, inspired with the insight that "human royalty is like heavenly royalty,” actually experiences a sort of Divine revelation, over which he pronounces the blessing.

I wish to delve further into the fact that it is specifically Rav Sheshet, with his physical challenge, who is at the center of the story, and to examine it from the perspective of disability in general. I believe that this angle is introduced with the heretic's brazen and disrespectful opening question: "[Intact] jugs go to the river; where do broken ones go?" The heretic enlists this popular idiom as a way of distinguishing between himself – an "intact" vessel with good reason to go to the river, since it can be filled with water and carry it – and R. Sheshet, who is a "broken vessel" – disabled and deficient. The idea behind the analogy is that the heretic, who is physically sound, will be able to see the king and experience the splendor of the royal entourage passing through the town, while Rav Sheshet will not. Rav Sheshet ends up proving that not only does his physical "deficiency" not prevent him from experiencing the procession via his senses, but it can even give him an advantage.

To use the concepts invoked by the heretic's opening question, we might also say that the story offers an unusual perspective regarding broken or deficient vessels, as opposed to whole, complete ones. This point relates to the broader question of completeness or deficiency in the world, which has arisen in previous *shiurim* – for instance, in the story about the moon. We will address this question further through additional excerpts from R. Nachman's Story of Seven Beggars.

**R. Nachman's Seven Beggars**

The “Story of the Seven Beggars” is a lengthy text; we will focus only on small sections of it. The framework of the story concerns two orphans, a boy and a girl, who become lost in the forest. There, they encounter seven different beggars, each suffering from a different physical handicap: one is blind, another deaf, etc. These seven characters help the children survive, until they become part of a large group of beggars, who decide to arrange a wedding for the boy and girl. During the seven days of celebration, each of the seven beggars they met in the forest makes an appearance, tells the story of his disability, and blesses the couple.

R. Nachman places at center stage seven characters who exist on the periphery of "real" human society. Their poverty and their disabilities cause them to be relegated to the margins. These are people from whom others keep their distance and with whom they feel uncomfortable dealing directly.

In his story, R. Nachman challenges this attitude. He challenges the conventional Western idea of completeness. Physical completeness and the ubiquitous Western ideal of beauty – especially prominent in the world of advertising, but also elsewhere – are deeply rooted in our culture. We are all influenced by these ideas, whether consciously or unconsciously. R. Nachman courageously speaks out against them. He asks us to take a good, long, honest look at these handicapped beggars, as difficult as it may be, and to see the beauty that exists in them, too, even if it is not as immediately apparent to the external eye. He also expects us to acknowledge the advantages that these disabilities bring with them, despite our initial negative perception of them.

I believe that R. Nachman also wants to say something about the majority of society – those who seemingly do not suffer from any handicap. The beggars in the story have various physical disabilities, which are immediately manifest to any outside observer. Encountering people who have some deformity or impairment is disconcerting because of the fear it awakens in us of being similarly disfigured – but that is not the only reason. Another reason for this discomfort is that the encounter holds up a mirror to the general imperfection of humanity, and the deficient parts of ourselves which we prefer to ignore and forget about. We prefer to think of ourselves as whole and complete – or at least as being capable of achieving completion. To some extent, the relegation of the handicapped and disabled to the margins of society arises from the fear of looking squarely at our own flaws and imperfections, which may not be physical or externally apparent, but are rather internal, psychological, or spiritual deficiencies.

We can already see how this relates to the story of Rav Sheshet, in which this Sage – the "broken" vessel, who should seemingly remain on the sidelines and not join everyone else to recite the blessing over seeing the king – turns out to be more "complete" in certain respects. In a similar vein, early on in his story, R. Nachman addresses the limitations of regular sight: the aversion to the disabled beggars is nourished first and foremost by an aversion to their appearance – the imperfect, broken appearance that captures attention and overshadows whatever other qualities they may have.

In a *shiur* at the beginning of this series, focusing on the *midrash* about the moon, I discussed the relationship between completeness and deficiency, and the advantages of deficiency, or a consciousness of deficiency, in allowing a person to continue moving, seeking, and advancing. The focus on beggars gives rise to similar thoughts. The Yiddish word that R. Nachman uses for "beggars" is *betlers*, from the word *betten*, meaning “request.” The beggars beg, request: they are constantly seeking something. This recalls the verse from *Tehillim* (27:8): "On Your behalf, my heart says, 'Seek My presence [literally, face].' Your presence, O Lord, I will seek." This sentiment is in contrast with people who are "complete" and possess all that they think they need, who are sometimes so smug and self-satisfied that they are stuck in place, seek nothing further, and experience no growth.

The story of Rav Sheshet serves to reinforce this insight. Rav Sheshet is a "broken,” imperfect vessel – like many elements in this world, but in his case, the deficiency is more readily apparent. Rav Sheshet exemplifies how such a "broken vessel" may nevertheless contain much, despite – or perhaps because of – the deficiency. This is not a romanticized view of disability; the idea is not to forget or disregard the enormous pain that it entails. Someone who is blind, or has some other handicap, experiences difficulties that others cannot appreciate. The difficulty is not solved, and the pain remains, even if we are aware of the advantageous aspects of the disability. Indeed, the story does not ignore this reality. R. Sheshet's blindness is clearly limiting and painful – as we understand from the opening of the story: "Everyone went out to welcome the king; Rav Sheshet went out with them." He needs the help of those around him in order to be able to go out to the king.[[2]](#footnote-2) His disability not only burdens him but also invites the scorn of the heretic – and perhaps of other people, too. But he is capable of making the best of his situation and using his deficiency as an advantage that sharpens his inner hearing.

We might also suggest that it is R. Sheshet's complex and challenging inner reality that prompts him to recite the blessing over the non-Jewish king and the phenomenon of his royalty, which is likewise not altogether "light."

**On blindness – R. Nachman's blind beggar**

In the previous *shiur*, we looked at an excerpt from the monologue of the deaf beggar, which relates to the story of R. Sheshet and to the important role the sense of hearing plays in it. We will now look at an excerpt from the monologue of a different character – the blind beggar – which sheds its own new light on the story of Rav Sheshet.

The blind beggar declares:

“You think that I am blind – I am not blind at all.” He merely appears blind, for he does not glimpse at the world at all, because all the time of the entire world doesn't count as even the blink of an eye to him, therefore no glimpse of the world is relevant to him…

The blind beggar explains that his blindness is not a limitation of his sight, but rather the opposite. His blindness hides for him what everyone else is used to seeing: this world and all its goings-on. We usually see the external, material layer of the world – the surface. Within that outer shell, however, is an inner existence of which we are largely unaware, and most of which we miss, because the external picture is more captivating.

When we meet people, we typically encounter their external façade: the clothes they are wearing, their facial appearance, the sound of their voice. All of this is an outer wrapping that we need to somehow penetrate. Sometimes, closing our eyes – being “blind” – can help in this regard.

To take a different example: sometimes a person has to close his eyes in order to be able to open them and see other things that aren’t immediately manifest to him. If we walk along a certain road on a regular basis, and try to pay attention to which things catch our eye and which we miss, we find that in general, it is the same things that we notice each time, and the same things that we ignore. If we want to see something different, we need to consciously turn away from the usual points of interest and look for other things.

In *Likkutei Moharan Kama* (65), R. Nachman talks about a form of seeing that is achieved by closing one’s eyes. He starts off by describing how a person shuts his eyes when he is in pain, and that we sometimes squint – squeezing our eyes almost closed – in order to see further. He connects these two phenomena symbolically, suggesting that closing our eyes allows us to ignore the immediate sensation of pain and to see that which lies beyond it – the purpose of the pain, which may be positive.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Another detail that appears further on in the blind beggar’s monologue is his description of himself as a combination of old man and baby:

I am very old and I am yet altogether young, and have not yet begun living at all — but I am still very old.

Seemingly, old age and infanthood are opposites, but they have much in common. Both, in a sense, are “outside of time” and are disconnected from the rat-race of this world. They both embody a filtering of the self from the many external “shells” that we involve ourselves with throughout our lives. The infant has not yet encountered all this; he is more authentic in his desires, having no calculations of planning, viability, or other extraneous considerations that influence our decisions. He is more immediately in touch with his psyche. The old man, on the other hand, likely has all this behind him. He is already finished with the rat-race; he is no longer part of the constant pursuit of money, honor, and other external goals, and is ready to accept who and what he is and to return to his roots, looking inwards rather than outwards. At this stage, he is able to “zoom out” and to look at the pursuits of this world from a bird’s eye view; he also sees what is behind all of it.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The blind beggar’s story also includes a sort of mythological figure, the “great eagle,” who tells people to go back to their inner wellsprings. Thus, for example, we sometimes find elderly people who, liberated from the external forces that motivated them throughout their lives, allow themselves to start over – like newborns, unfettered by what they have become over the years – or simply to live in the present, without constantly chasing after anything. Not everyone who reaches old age succeeds in achieving this stage; many people remain chained within the model or image that they created for themselves. But there is at least the possibility of a certain flexibility at the stage where the usual pursuits are no longer one’s primary occupation. This beggar’s blindness similarly allows him to ignore the usual clamor and to connect with the truth that lies behind that which distracts other people from the inner essence of things.

There is something harsh about this statement that R. Nachman makes through the blind beggar, because it negates to a considerable extent most of our everyday experience – which, admittedly, is consumed with pursuits that involve a lot of external “shells” and coverings, far from the real essence, but which is ultimately life as we live it. This is what a person has to deal with for most of his life; he may do so with a greater or lesser degree of success, but it is what occupies him. The blind beggar’s statement seems to undermine all activity and initiative in the world, much of which is motivated by external factors but nevertheless serves to advance the world and develop it. The same can be said of the contrast between blindness and sight. The message may be read, however, as an extreme formulation designed to provoke thought. One need not embrace it wholly and literally; it can be incorporated into a more complex worldview. To go to the extreme of blindness would not be correct because sight, too, gives us something important.[[5]](#footnote-5) The story presents an extreme view, but we can internalize it in a partial, judicious manner, such that it enriches our awareness of the inner layers of reality that lie beyond that which we can see, and motivates us to always be on the lookout for them.

**The Ruzhin story of Beggars**

Having devoted some attention to R. Nachman’s beggars, let us now consider a different view of beggars, this time from a story attributed to R. Yisrael of Ruzhin. The background to the story is a framework narrative (which, for the sake of brevity, I have not included here in its entirety) in which the Rebbe travels to a town that is seeking his help. On his return journey, one of his escorts remarks on the great sum that the Rebbe collected from the townspeople (to be put towards the needs of the Chassidic court).

Our holy Rabbi responded: “Is even that sum considered money among you? But all the money in the world is mine!” And he told a story:

There was a certain beggar who was very successful and became very wealthy, and wanted to give his children the privilege of continuing his path and becoming beggars like himself. So he instructed the midwife who would attend his wife as she gave birth that she should “look upon the birthstool: if it is a boy, she should afflict him with some permanent defect – blindness or a broken hand or foot – that would render him fit to be a beggar, since beggars usually have some sort of disability.

On one occasion a beautiful and handsome child was born to him, and his mother didn’t have the heart to disfigure his beauty by inflicting a defect. She said to her husband, “It pains me greatly to maim a precious, beautiful son. Let this one alone of all our sons remain without any defect.” And he agreed to this.

When his time came to die, he summoned his sons and commanded that all his possessions be given to the son who was physically intact, with no defect. His disfigured sons shouted at him, “Father, why have you changed your way? It should be the opposite: we, who are maimed, are the ones you should have compassion on! You should give us a greater portion of your possessions than our brother, who is complete and perfect in all his bodily parts. We have no ability to engage in any sort of labor!”

The father replied: “It is not so, my disfigured sons. You have no need to worry about the future, for I am leaving you a good inheritance, and you will all be able to be beggars because of the defects that were implanted in you. But the son who is physically intact and unable to be a beggar – it is proper that all my wealth and property be given to him…”

And [the Ruzhiner] concluded with the words: “Am I not one of those children who has no defect, and all the wealth and the money in the world belong to me…”

Understand this well. (R. Reuven Zak, *Knesset Yisrael: Derashot, Imrot ve-Sippurim mi-shel ha-Ruzhiner*)

The story seems to be moving in a certain direction, but at the end there is a sudden twist. At first, we have the impression that the narrator is glorifying the status and the life of the beggar. The father, having experienced great success as a beggar, wishes to bequeath this occupation to his sons. He is “forced” to bequeath his possessions to the son who is physically intact, since he is the only one – “poor boy” – who cannot fulfill his destiny of making a living by begging. However, the sensitive ear will also pick up on the criticism that is also apparently being leveled here: the decision to deliberately maim a baby sounds exceptionally cruel, and this alone would be enough to convey R. Yisrael’s criticism of this glorification of beggary. The conspicuous allusion to Pharaoh’s command to the Hebrew midwives in Egypt reinforces this negative view.

But the real turnaround comes in the remark that follows the end of the story, when the Ruzhiner declares that he himself is one of the children who has no defect, and all wealth belongs to him. This represents a double identification with the state of fullness and completion – both physical integrity and permanent ownership of all wealth, recalling the question that he poses prior to the story: “Is even that sum considered money among you? But all the money in the world is mine!” We may assume he does not mean that all the money in the world actually belongs to him. Rather, the statement expresses a psychological state and worldview. It is an attitude of satiety in which nothing is lacking and nothing is missing. It is a very different position – perhaps even the opposite – from that proposed by R. Nachman. What could be the advantage of such a stance?

While R. Nachman emphasizes that which is lacking, and may be viewed as empowering the figure of the moon (in the story of the diminishing of the moon), the Ruzhiner emphasizes fullness and completion. Wholeness, in contrast to deficiency, is associated with greatness. This is the stance that he wishes to encourage. In his eyes, a position of deficiency leads to a sense of lowliness, and this affects a person’s initiative and activity. It is a position that is referred to in *Chassidut* as *mochin de-katnut* (small-mindedness). A person who views himself as small, deficient, and weak will behave accordingly, taking action in a limited way and on a small scale. In order to act on a larger scale and achieve great things, one needs a consciousness of greatness, which flows from a sense of fullness and completeness.

Coming back to the story of Rav Sheshet and the heretic, I believe that R. Nachman’s story sits better with the Talmudic illumination of the advantage that “broken” vessels may sometimes have. This does not mean to suggest that there are no other voices among Chazal. For example, going back to the story of the diminishing of the moon, we find both aspects: along with the focus on the moon, there is also recognition of the advantage held by the “great luminary,” which remains large and which, in its fullness and completeness, has other advantages in the way it operates in the world. In this context, the fullness of the sun need not necessarily imply only physical, external wholeness, but could also symbolize the inner sense of wholeness and greatness that can inspire a person to achieve great things, as per the message of the Ruzhiner.

In the next *shiur*, we will look at the broader context of the story of Rav Sheshet and the heretic within the *sugya*.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

1. This point, as Yona Frankel points out (*Sippur ha-Aggada: Achdut shel Tochen ve-Tzura*, p. 211, n. 50), echoes the motif found in general literature of the blind subject who "sees" better than his seeing companions. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As Frankel notes; ibid., p. 210. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In two of her poems – “The Old School for the Blind” and “Children at the School for the Blind” – [Zelda](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zelda_(poet)) expresses a similar idea, relating to the world that is visible only to those who cannot see. It is worth noting that there was criticism of this romanticizing of the “inner eye” associated with blindness, on the part of individuals who could speak from first-hand experience (see for example, the article by Y. Samet-Sheinberg, [https://blog.nli.org.il/alhaivaron](https://blog.nli.org.il/alhaivaron/)). We may assume that the same criticism would be leveled at R. Nachman in response to his blind beggar. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See, for example, Rav Y. Dreyfus’s description of the stage of old age, *Neshimot Amukot*, pp. 28-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. And, as noted above, we have to be careful of romanticizing blindness. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)