**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**

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Dedicated in honor of the marriage of our son,   
Aharon (YHE '19) to Ariella Berman   
by Rav Yitzchak and Stefanie Etshalom

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**Shiur #26: The Story of Rav Sheshet and the Heretic (*Berakhot* 58a) (3)**

The previous two *shiurim* dealt with certain aspects of the story of Rav Sheshet and the heretic. In this *shiur*, I would like to focus on another small piece of it, as a springboard for a broader view of the context of the story within the *sugya*.

Let us first review the story:

Rav Sheshet was blind.

Everyone was going to greet the king, and Rav Sheshet stood up and went along with them. A heretic found him there and said to him: Jugs [that are intact] go to the river; where do the broken ones go?

Rav Sheshet said to him: Come and see that I know more than you do.

The first troop passed, and when the noise grew louder, this heretic said to him: The king is coming.

Rav Sheshet said to him: The king is not coming.

The second troop passed, and when the noise grew louder, this heretic said to him: Now the king is coming.

Rav Sheshet said to him: The king is not coming.

The third troop passed, and when there was silence, Rav Sheshet said to him: Certainly now the king is coming.

This heretic said to him: How do you know this?

Rav Sheshet said to him: Royalty on earth is like royalty in the heavens, as it is written [with regard to God’s revelation to Eliyahu at Chorev]: “And He said: Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord. And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire a still small voice.” (I *Melakhim* 19)

When the king came, Rav Sheshet began to bless him.

The heretic said to him: Can you then bless someone you do not see? […]

**"Human royalty is like heavenly royalty"**

Rav Sheshet asserts that his ability to discern when the king is approaching is based on his familiarity with an analogous situation, since "human royalty is like Divine royalty." He reads the situation through a parallel between human royalty and God's Divine Kingship. We might interpret this in a simple, technical sense, as an indicator that helps R. Sheshet to make sense of the situation: since he believes there is similarity between human royalty and Divine royalty, he is able to use the verse from *Sefer Melakhim*, which describes Divine revelation, to predict what sort of atmosphere will herald the arrival of the human king. This represents the plain meaning of the story on its own.

However, we can enrich our understanding of R. Sheshet's statement by considering the broader halakhic context of the *sugya*. The story of R. Sheshet and the heretic appears right after a *beraita* concerning the appropriate blessings to be recited upon seeing sages and kings:

The Sages taught: One who sees sages of Israel says: "Blessed… Who has shared of His wisdom with those who revere Him."

[One who sees] sages of the nations of the world says: "Blessed… Who has given of His wisdom to flesh and blood."

One who sees kings of Israel says: “Blessed… Who has shared of His glory with those who revere Him.”

[One who sees] kings of the nations of the world says: "Blessed… Who has given of His glory to flesh and blood.” (*Berakhot* 58a)

The *beraita* establishes that there is a blessing to be recited upon seeing a king of a non-Jewish nation. Reading this *halakha*, it seems that the reason for the blessing is to give thanks for something that God gave to the world: “Who has given of His glory.” Glory and majesty, integral aspects of human kingship – including kingship among the nations – are bestowed by God. They add color and a dimension of majesty to the world. Kingship can be an anchor and a point of identification for a nation, a source of national pride, an institution that contributes to the order and security of a country – and these too are Divine gifts to the world, in the form of mortal kingship. The characteristics of such kingship are a copy of sorts of the characteristics of His Kingship. It is God Who “bestows” some of His glory on human kingship, and we recognize this gift by reciting the blessing and giving thanks for it.

This collection of *halakhot* is followed by the story of Rav Sheshet and the heretic. When we first read the story, we might think that it appears here simply because it offers a practical example (albeit with a dramatic twist) of the *halakha* that precedes it: the blessing to be recited upon seeing a non-Jewish king. But in fact, it introduces something that goes beyond the “dry” *halakha*: while the basic obligation applies to physically seeing a king, the story suggests that there are situations where one can, and even should, recite the blessing even without actually seeing the king – as in the case of someone who is blind, like Rav Sheshet, who experiences the encounter with the king in a different way. Having the royal entourage pass by is cause to recite the blessing; “seeing” is simply the most common way to experience this. Perhaps, then, the story should be read as challenging the formulation of the *beraita*. This reading suggests that by including the story, the Gemara proposes a broadening of the *halakha* as stated in the beraita: the *beraita* reflects the regular, common situation, and as such is formulated in terms of seeing; the story comes to show that there are other – perhaps even more effective – ways of experiencing the passage of a king and reciting a blessing over it. The story might also be raising the issue of one’s attitude towards people with handicaps, who are not part of the general population to which the *halakha* in the *beraita* applies, and their place in observance of *mitzvot*.

However, a close reading of Rav Sheshet’s words in the context of the *halakha* reveals something else, such that the story even imbues the blessing itself with new meaning. What we learn from Rav Sheshet is that human kingship is, in some limited measure, similar to, and a reflection of, Divine Kingship. Within the broader context of the *sugya*, this similarity can be understood not merely as the basis on which Rav Sheshet discerns when the royal entourage is approaching, but also as a more profound observation, not immediately obvious from the *halakha* itself, concerning the reason for the blessing: a human king, according to this observation, is representative of Divine Kingship. One who sees a human king is not merely witnessing a gift that God has given the world, but is actually experiencing an encounter of sorts with Divinity itself, with Divine Sovereignty, and it is over this that he recites the blessing: over the essence of the encounter itself, not over God’s creation of a phenomenon in the world.

**The broader context**

We can now broaden our perspective even further, to encompass the context of the *sugya* as a whole. The *sugya* appears in the ninth chapter of *Massekhet Berakhot*. The first few *mishnayot* of this chapter deal primarily with blessings over seeing (or hearing, etc.) different phenomena in nature or in human experience. These blessings acknowledge God as the Creator of the world and all its wonders.

Taking a literary look at these *mishnayot*, we can see that even before we get to the actual blessings that are set down for each situation, the senses themselves – and what we absorb through them – occupy a central place. The chapter opens with the word “*ha-ro’eh* (One who sees…)” and goes on to list many different phenomena that a person perceives through sight or hearing. It seems to me that a reading of the whole list serves to emphasize that even before we get to the point of the blessings – attributing all of Creation to God – we might identify a more immediate goal: drawing our attention to our senses, causing us to open and sharpen them, and to take in Creation through them, rather than remaining indifferent towards it.

Let us now consider the specific content of the *mishnayot* themselves. Unlike most of the phenomena mentioned in this chapter, which relate to nature, the opening *mishna* provides blessings to recite over phenomena that relate to history:

One who sees a place where miracles were performed for Israel, says: "Blessed… Who performed miracles for our forefathers in this place."

[One who sees] a place from which idolatry has been uprooted, says: "Blessed… Who has uprooted idolatry from our land." (*Mishna Berakhot* 9:1)

The Mishna chooses to introduce the chapter with blessings that are recited about positive occurrences: miracles that were performed for *Am Yisrael*, and the transformation of places that had been sites of idolatry. It then moves on to various natural phenomena that are neutral in and of themselves, although in some contexts they may be negative – lightning, strong winds, etc. Only at the end does it give the blessing to be recited over bad things that happen to a person:

In response to rain, and in response to good tidings, one says: "Blessed… Who is good and Who does good."

In response to bad tidings, one says: "Blessed is the true Judge." (end of *mishna* 2)

We might contrast this with the Tosefta’s presentation, which highlights the duality of our reality from the very beginning, with a blessing to be recited over idolatry:

One who sees idolatry says, “Blessed… Who is slow to anger.”

[One who sees] a place from which idolatry has been uprooted, says: “Blessed… Who has uprooted idolatry from our land. May it be Your will, O Lord, for us, that idolatry be uprooted from everywhere in Israel and that You turn the heart of Your servants back to serve You.” (Tosefta *Berakhot* 6:2)

The presentation of “both sides” – a blessing over the uprooting of idolatry, as well as a blessing when seeing idolatry that has not yet been uprooted – follows the same approach that led the Tosefta, in the preceding lines, to cite R. Meir with regard to the blessing recited when something bad happens:

R. Meir says: From where do we know that just as one recites a blessing when something good happens, so one should recite a blessing when something bad happens?

With regard to idolatry, the Tosefta sets forth two possibilities, reflecting the dual nature of the reality of this world. There are places from which, fortunately, idolatry has been uprooted; these move us to recite a blessing in great joy. But there are other places where idolatry still exists, and we are to bless God in relation to these places, too: we recognize that He is slow to anger and allows man free choice, even when it comes to a phenomenon as reprehensible as idolatry. Even in this situation, we acknowledge God – manifest here in His attribute of *gevura* (lit. strength), or restraint. What is common to both blessings is the recognition of God’s immanence in everything that exists and that happens in the world. Different phenomena, whether positive or negative, reflect different Divine attributes: kindness, restraint, compassion, justice, and so on. Nothing and nowhere is devoid of God.

The *sugya* in the Bavli follows the same approach as the Tosefta. Its discussion of the blessing to be recited regarding idolatry in Mishna 9:1 is introduced with a *beraita* that mentions both realities:

[We learned in the *mishna* that one who sees] “a place from which idolatry has been uprooted [says…].”

The Sages taught*:* One who sees [the idol called] Markulis[[1]](#footnote-1) recites: “Blessed…Who has shown slowness to anger to those who violate His will.”

[One who sees] a place from which idolatry was uprooted says: “Blessed…Who has uprooted idolatry from our land. And just as it was uprooted from this place, so may it be uprooted from everywhere in Israel. And turn the heart of those who worship them, to serve You.” (*Berakhot* 57b)

This is followed by a teaching of R. Hamnuna with blessings to be recited at various major sites in Babylon (the capital city of Babylonia in the time of Nevukhadnetzar). These blessings are likewise divided into those recited over positive phenomena (places where evil was uprooted, such as the destroyed palace of Nevukhadnetzar, or miracles that happened) and those recited over negative phenomena (for instance, seeing the idol Markulis in Babylon).

The Gemara’s treatment of the duality of reality continues with a teaching of R. Yirmiya bar Elazar that contrasts Babylonia with Shomron, both of which are cities in ruins. It then returns to Rav Hamnuna, who proposes the proper responses to seeing different populations:

R. Hamnuna said: One who sees a multitude of Jews says: “Blessed… the Sage of hidden things.” [One who sees] a multitude of non-Jews says: “Your mother shall be exceedingly ashamed” (*Yirmiyahu* 50). (Ibid. 58a)

Once again, this pair of blessings expresses a dichotomous view. The *beraita* that immediately follows elaborates on the blessing to be recited over a multitude of Jews, and also deepens the dichotomy between the two populations: it cites a teaching of Ben Zoma on the difference between a desirable guest and an undesirable guest, which might be read in context as referring back to the two previously-mentioned groups (Jews and non-Jews), since all human beings are ultimately guests in this world. Further on (58b), the *sugya* returns to this dichotomy of Israel and the nations, this time with regard to houses and graves.

The next part of the *sugya* is the *beraita* that relates the blessings to be recited over seeing sages and kings, followed by the story of Rav Sheshet and the heretic. It would seem that by means of this *beraita*, the *sugya* is introducing a heretofore unexplored nuance in the dual nature of reality. Here we are no longer speaking of an absolute dichotomy between good and evil, as in the *sugya* up to this point, but of phenomena that are inherently combinations of both aspects. The kings of the nations of the world are a good example. On one hand, they are not kings of Israel, and their kingdoms are, at best, not conducted in accordance with Torah (sometimes not even in accordance with any moral standard). When we think of kings, many examples come to mind of kings around the world whose reigns were characterized by cruelty and tyranny. On the other hand, there is something about royalty – even among the nations – that is splendid and majestic, with the power to inspire respect and honor and to imbue their nations with a sense of identity, cohesion, and national pride. Moreover, the words of Rav Sheshet – “Human royalty is like heavenly royalty” – encourage us to view these kings as representing something Divine; some partial representation of God’s Kingship.

Attention should also be paid to the wording of the blessing, and the difference between the blessings recited when seeing a Jewish or a non-Jewish king. Both are representations of the same Divine glory. The main distinction expressed in the different blessings is the degree of “justification” for God “sharing” His glory, as it were, with human beings. We have the sense that it is more appropriate in the case of a king of Israel – i.e., of “those who fear Him” – than when God’s qualities of Kingship are represented by a king who is not among “those who fear Him.” But in both cases, the blessing recognizes the human king as an instance of God sharing His glory.

In conclusion, then, we might ask why these blessings – and especially the blessing over non-Jewish kings – appears in our *sugya*. On the simplest level, they belong to the category of blessings recited over phenomena that we see, following on the list of blessings in the Mishna. In this understanding, the person recites a blessing upon seeing a king. From a deeper look at the *sugya* as a whole, however, we might suggest further that the blessing for a king is part of the development of a single idea: from the beginning of its discussion of the *mishna*, the *sugya* presents the dichotomous, complex nature of our reality and various aspects of it. The blessings over these different aspects of reality collectively express the idea that they are all connected to God and attributed to Him. Even the continued existence of a negative phenomenon such as idolatry is not disconnected from God, but is a reflection of the Divine attribute of restraint – which is essential for the existence of the world in general, since man will inevitably make mistakes and commit misdeeds. In other words, as paradoxical as it sounds, even the places from which God or His sovereignty are seemingly absent actually attest to, and manifest, the Divine attribute of restraint and slowness to anger. Non-Jewish royalty is also part of the world that God created, and its existence expresses something that He specifically placed, or “allows,” in the world.

But, from all the above, we might go even further. We might also view the blessing recited over seeing a non-Jewish king not only as a blessing over something that God put in the world, by virtue of the attributes that characterize Him, or something whose existence He tolerates, but also as a blessing over the encounter with Divinity itself, embodied and clothed in the form of that king. The encounter with the king can be experienced as a sort of Divine revelation or worldly expression of the Divine.[[2]](#footnote-2) There are phenomena in the world that are mixtures of good and evil; goodness is manifest in the world in a partial way. This, in fact, is how God is revealed in our world – as partial goodness that comes intertwined with, or concealed by, phenomena that are neutral or even negative. Therefore, an encounter with anything in the world – any phenomenon at all – is an encounter with God, and this is expressed in the blessing that is recited over the encounter. These blessings direct us to view God in every detail of reality. The encounter with the non-Jewish king is a complicated, ambivalent experience, but this, too, is an encounter with God and with His quality of Kingship, clothed in and combined with other things. This is what we learn about the *halakha* from within the story, where Rav Sheshet declares that “human royalty is like Divine royalty” – if indeed it is possible to read this sentence not as attesting to a similarity between the two separate royalties, but rather as a statement that royalty on earth is actually a continuation and revelation of Divine Kingship itself. The same idea is found in acknowledging the existence of places from which idolatry has not yet been uprooted as expressions of the Divine attribute of slowness to anger. Another means of expression is the “victory” of Rav Sheshet – the blind Sage who physically embodies deficiency – over the heretic who is whole in physical health.

In the next *shiur*, we will study the story that appears in the Gemara directly after the story of Rav Sheshet, and see where it takes our discussion of connections with Chassidic teachings and stories.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

1. R. Shaul Lieberman (*Yevanit vi-Yevanim be-Eretz Yisrael*, Jerusalem 1984, p. 248) writes that Markulis/Mercury usually represents the Greek-Roman pantheon in Talmudic literature. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The next story that appears in the *sugya* – the story of R. Sheila, which we will discuss in future *shiurim* –illuminates even more sharply the complexity of non-Jewish royalty. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)