**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Rabbinic Tales: In the Talmud and in Chasidut**

**By Rav Dr. Yonatan Feintuch**

**Shiur #27: The Story of R. Sheila, and Some Chasidic Sources (1)**

In the last few *shiurim* of this series last year, we looked at the story of R. Sheshet in the ninth chapter of *Massekhet Berakhot*. We will now turn our attention to a story that follows that one in the Gemara – the story of R. Sheila. After some discussion of that story itself, we will explore the relationship between the two rabbinical narratives, examine some related Chasidic sources, and then return to the story.

**The story**

R. Sheila administered lashes to a man who had engaged in intercourse with a Gentile woman. The man went and informed on him to the king. He said, “There is a man among the Jews who passes judgment without royal authorization.” The king sent for [R. Sheila]. When he arrived, they asked him, “Why did you flog this man?” He answered them, “He engaged in intercourse with a female donkey.” They said to him, “Do you have witnesses?” He answered, “Yes.” [The prophet] Eliyahu appeared in the form of a man, and gave testimony. They said to him, “If so, then he is deserving of death!” He told them, “Since the day that we were exiled from our land, we have no authority to pass a death sentence, but you – you may do to him as you wish.”

While they were considering his case, R. Sheila declared: “Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power…” (*Divrei ha-Yamim* I 29:11). They asked him, “What did you say?” He said, “What I said was: Blessed is the Lord Who grants earthly monarchy in the model of Divine Kingship, and has granted you dominion and a love of justice.” They said, “So beloved to him is the honor of the monarchy?!” They gave him a staff and said to him, “You may serve as judge.”

When he left, that man said to him, “Does God then perform miracles for liars?” He replied, “Wicked one! Are they not called donkeys? For it is written, ‘…whose flesh is [as] the flesh of donkeys’ ([*Yechezkel* 23](https://www.sefaria.org/Ezekiel.23?lang=he-en&utm_source=etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker):20).” When he saw that the man was about to inform on him for calling them donkeys, he said, “This man is a persecutor, and the Torah states, ‘If someone comes to kill you, arise and kill him first.’” So he struck him with the staff and killed him. (*Berakhot* 58a)

I offered an initial, detailed analysis of the story as part of a previous VBM series,[[1]](#footnote-1) and will therefore suffice here with pointing out a few central points that will facilitate a discussion of the story in light of the Chasidic sources.

**The truth in R. Sheila’s words**

As Yona Frankel points out, one of the prominent literary techniques in this story is R. Sheila’s heavy use of ambiguity.[[2]](#footnote-2)

R. Sheila’s responses to others’ challenges do not at first seem to reflect the simple historical truth – i.e., what bystanders would have seen. However, contrary to the sinner’s accusation, R. Sheila is not a liar. Rather, he expresses himself in ambiguous terms that can be understood in different ways, with the different levels of meaning directed at two separate audiences. One level is the plain, superficial meaning of the words, which is intended for the non-Jewish audience. On this level, we might say his words indeed deviated from truth in the historical sense – and we would also justify this deviation, due to the mortal danger in which R. Sheila finds himself. But it seems that a more accurate – and more interesting – reading can be found in the other levels of meaning of R. Sheila’s words.

Familiarity with the biblical expressions that R. Sheila uses allows us, reading the story, to perceive the deeper meaning and see how his words express spiritual truths – just as R. Sheshet (in the previous narrative), by virtue of his familiarity with the verses from *Sefer Melakhim*, perceives the deeper significance of the sounds of the procession that he hears together with everyone else. Appropriate terms for this reading do not belong to the dichotomous language of truth and falsehood, but rather to types and layers of truth – layers that may be equivocal and multi-leveled.

For example, R. Sheila cannot tell the non-Jewish king that he administered lashes to a Jewish man for engaging in relations with a non-Jewish woman, so he states that the man engaged in relations with a donkey. When the accused later objects that this is a lie, R. Sheila invokes the prophet Yechezkel’s description of sexual licentiousness among the nations: “… their flesh is as the flesh of donkeys.” On one level, this response does not seem particularly convincing, since it is clear that the verse does not mean to draw a sweeping, all-encompassing comparison between non-Jews and donkeys. However, if we pay attention to the biblical context of the quote, and the context of the present narrative, the logic of R. Sheila’s comparison becomes clear: the man’s act involves animalistic desire and prohibited physical intimacy with a Babylonian woman, and Yechezkel is describing *Knesset Yisrael* as a woman who is unfaithful to her husband (God) and engages in prohibited licentious behavior with the Babylonians:

And the Babylonians came to her into the bed of love, and they defiled her with their harlotries; and she was polluted with them, and she was alienated from them… Yet she multiplied her harlotries, remembering the days of her youth, wherein she had played the harlot in the land of Egypt. And she lusted for concubinage with them, whose flesh is as the flesh of donkeys, and whose issue is like the issue of horses. (*Yechezkel* 23:17-20)

Hence, in the context that the narrative is dealing with – a situation of sexual licentiousness of Jews with non-Jews (specifically with the Babylonians[[3]](#footnote-3)), the comparison to engaging in relations with a donkey is an appropriate metaphor. R. Sheila’s statement should therefore be read and interpreted in its deeper sense, on a metaphorical and spiritual level, rather than as a concrete assertion.

Nevertheless, the manner of expression allows for a realistic, physiological interpretation of the statement. R. Sheila, fearing execution at the hands of the authorities for the crime of serving as a judge without first receiving formal royal authorization, allows the king and his ministers to understand the case at hand as an instance of actual bestiality, which they apparently also saw as an abomination. In relation to this crime, not only do the Persian authorities support wholeheartedly the Jewish sage’s administering of lashes, but they even give him license to carry out a death sentence. The spiritual truth in R. Sheila’s words is that debauched, uncommitted relations of this sort are, in his eyes, animalistic. To his view, proper, human sexual relations take place within the framework of the marital covenant, as an expression of mutual love, partnership, and commitment.

**R. Sheila’s prayer**

A critical moment in the story comes when R. Sheila prays, murmuring a verse:

Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the splendor, for all that is in heaven and on earth; Yours, O Lord, is the kingdom and You are exalted above all. (*Divrei ha-Yamim* I 29:11)

In this verse, various powers or characteristics are attributed to God.[[4]](#footnote-4) It seems that through this verse, R. Sheila is expressing his faith that every event in this world takes place by God’s will. The variety of powers attributed to Him explains how He can be behind such diverse phenomena, both “positive” and “negative.” This includes everything that a human king, too, might decide and command, ultimately reflecting the will of the true King, the King of the universe. Thus, through his words, R. Sheila places his fate in God’s hands, and asks for His deliverance.

However, in response to the non-Jewish authorities who ask what he is saying to himself, R. Sheila again adopts ambiguity – on one hand, saving himself from death, and on the other hand, conveying spiritual depth through his words. To spare himself their ire, he has to create some distance between the full meaning of what he is saying, as he understands it in his mind, and the meaning that he offers them. He tells him that he is blessing God Who created earthly sovereignty on the model of heavenly Sovereignty, awarding it power and imbuing in it a love of justice. This in fact recalls the Aramaic translation of the verse – which is not a precise literal translation, but includes interpretation as well:

Yours, O God, is the Sovereignty in heaven, exalted over all the angels of heaven and over all who are appointed as rulers upon the earth… and the honor of kings and rulers from before You is given to them, and You rule them all.” (Targum on *Divrei ha-Yamim* 1 29:11-12).[[5]](#footnote-5)

Based on the Targum, we might say that R. Sheila is blessing God for establishing sovereignty in the world in the image of, and as a reflection of, Divine Sovereignty. On the superficial, external level, one might understand – as the non-Jews in the story do – that R. Sheila is granting recognition to their kingdom and its power. Indeed, his words recognize their earthly kingdom as a positive phenomenon in the world, whose existence God desires. On a deeper level, however, R. Sheila is also undermining their rule from a certain perspective, by revealing that the power of an earthly king comes exclusively from God. The Persian king thinks he rules by virtue of his lineage or his physical power; R. Sheila hints to him that a human king actually has no independent power at all, but the king will never understand or accept such an idea, and one might reasonably expect that an explicit assertion in this vein would lead R. Sheila to be executed. He therefore reveals just a tiny sliver of his meaning: he says that he is blessing God Who has empowered the kingdom of this non-Jewish king on earth. This is a partial truth, but it is truly a part of R. Sheila’s perception of reality.

However, there is even deeper significance in R. Sheila’s words. Even the understanding that R. Sheila’s real meaning nullifies the king’s power and stature, since it all comes to him only from God, is not the full picture. On one hand, it renders empty and meaningless the king’s self-perception of his power and might. But on the other hand, in the deepest sense, it is specifically because his power comes from God – since God chooses at this time to award that power to this non-Jewish king – that his sovereignty is reinvested with true validity, and is no longer empty and meaningless. As R. Sheila perceives it, the king’s position is a true revelation of God’s will and His power in the world.

Thus, there is some validity in the king’s understanding of R. Sheila’s words as a recognition of his power and his sovereignty. It is therefore natural that not only is R. Sheila saved from death, but his “recognition” of the regime makes him worthy of being awarded formal authority to serve as a judge. This too, from R. Sheila’s point of view, is both ironic and, at the same time, an expression of profound truth, because it is only in terms of outward appearances that his appointment is granted to him by this mortal king. In truth, as he perceives it, it is bestowed on him by God Himself, Whose will is expressed at that moment through the decision of the non-Jewish king.

**“What did you say?”**

As Frankel demonstrates,[[6]](#footnote-6) the narrative has a chiastic structure, with the authorities’ question, “What did you say?” at the center. In fact, this question is a central axis not only in the structure of the story, but also in its deeper significance, which turns on R. Sheila’s words and wordplays, and the reciprocal connections between their meanings. It is no coincidence that the heart of the structure is the question, “What did you say?”

What is it, in fact, that R. Sheila says? As we have seen, there is no single, unequivocal answer to this question. His words are multi-layered and multi-voiced; he says several things at once, whose meanings depend on one’s interpretation. However, the message that is conveyed to the reader through the words “What did you say?” transcends any specific meaning. The question itself signifies, first and foremost, that the monologue preceding it is not something clearly defined and unequivocal. It is multi-faceted, and thus gives rise to the question.

Indeed, the ambiguous and multi-layered nature of R. Sheila’s words reverberates beyond the boundaries of this narrative, extending to other parts of the *sugya* in which it appears – the *sugya* that discusses appropriate blessings to recite over all sorts of phenomena in the world. The multiplicity of meanings behind a person’s speech is a reflection of the multi-faceted nature of reality itself, and many different points in the *sugya* relate to the complex nature of reality in a world in which God, Who is the cause and living force behind everything, on one hand, is hidden and silent, on the other.

For instance, the natural phenomena for which the Mishna stipulates that a blessing should be recited can be regarded in different ways. It is possible to observe a mountain, or lightning, merely in terms of their external appearance, but this is a limited perspective. One might also view them as Divine creations, expressing the Divine power that is “garbed” in Nature, such that the encounter with them is an encounter of sorts with God. Natural phenomena that are experienced by the human subject as painful or bad, such as earthquakes and violent storms, can likewise be viewed from different angles. In the reality of this world, good and evil are intertwined, which is a key idea in the *sugya* as a whole. For events that occur in the life of an individual, too, the Mishna teaches that one blesses over the bad as he blesses over the good. These blessings flow from the recognition that the source of a bad event is the same God Who provides goodness, as well as the understanding that the evaluation of reality as good or bad depends on one's point of view, and may go in different directions. An earthquake may be viewed in and of itself as a neutral natural phenomenon, but from the point of view of its consequences for the local population, it can be a catastrophic event. Ultimately, multifaceted realities – both natural and human – reflect multi-faceted Divinity, encompassing both "*chesed*" (loving-kindness) and "*din*" (strict judgment); even that which is manifest in the world as "*din*" may have other aspects to it.

R. Sheila's ambiguous manner of expression is therefore not only a way of saving himself from punishment. On a deeper level, it represents the multiplicity of layers of reality. The non-Jewish king and his company perceive only the external level: they are convinced of their own power, certain that their subjects are at the mercy of their decisions.

In a similar manner, the heretic in the story of R. Sheshet, which precedes this story, is concerned only with external appearances; he focuses on the outward splendor of the king and the pomp and ceremony seemingly appropriate to it. He remains "deaf" to the "still, small voice" representing the aspect of Divine Sovereignty that is revealed in the earthly sovereignty of the non-Jewish king. He sees (and hears) only that which he expects, and from this perspective, it makes sense that he asks R. Sheshet why he bothered to join the crowds when he will not be able to see the king. This same perspective causes him to interpret the loud, extravagant procession as the passage of the king himself. R. Sheshet, in contrast, is not impressed by the external sights and sounds of the royal entourage; his senses are attuned to the deeper truth that they represent – the manifestation of God's majesty on earth. "The earthly kingdom is like the Kingdom of heaven."

R. Sheila hints that the power that appears to rest in the hands of the non-Jewish king is in fact an illusion, since real power and dominion are in the hands of God, Who is hidden – just as the appearance of pomp and grandeur that the crowd around R. Sheshet observes with its senses is nothing but an outer garb. R. Sheshet and R. Sheila both understand that the earthly king does not derive his power from himself, but rather from God, Who allows him to rule. This understanding imbues deeper meaning in the blessing that is recited for an encounter with such a king – who is, in a sense, a representation or reflection of the Supreme King. R. Sheila's recital of the words from *Divrei ha-Yamim*, as interpreted by the Targum, is very similar to the blessing that R. Sheshet recites over the non-Jewish king. This represents yet another connection between the halakhic and aggadic portions of the *sugya*.

R. Sheila's ambiguous style of expression thus reflects a return to the halakhic context of the chapter. Reciting blessings over encounters with worldly phenomena expresses recognition of their dual nature. Although we perceive natural phenomena as physical, earthly events or things, which offer no manifest revelation of God's involvement or creation, He is nevertheless active behind the scenes – via the will and decisions of non-Jewish kings, or by means of the fixed laws of nature, or through more “random,” one-time events, such as earthquakes. According to this understanding, which is derived from the narratives included in the *sugya*, the halakhic obligation to recite a blessing over different natural phenomena may be viewed as molding our encounter with the world, sharpening our physical and spiritual senses to be attentive to God’s hidden presence within every detail and every event, awarding it recognition and presence by means of a blessing.

In the next *shiur*, we will examine a Chasidic story that relates to these ideas.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

1. <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/talmud/studies-gemara/midrash-and-aggada/story-rabbi-sheila-purim-story-massekhet-berakhot-part-i>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Yona Frankel, “*Ma’aseh be-Rabbi Sheila*,” *Tarbitz* 40 (1971), 33-40. Reprinted in *Sippur ha-Aggada – Achdut shel Tochen ve-Tzura* (Ha-Kibbutz ha-Me’uchad, 2001), 261-272. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Moreover, although there is no explicit mention of it in the story, we might suggest based on the context of Yechezkel’s prophecy that she was specifically a Babylonian harlot. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It seems to be no coincidence that this verse is transformed, in Kabbalistic literature, into the foundation of the various attributes comprising the ten *Sefirot*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Frankel addresses the connection between the Aramaic translation of the verse and our narrative; see “*Ma’aseh be-Rabbi Sheila*,” p. 266. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., p. 270. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)