**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 #32: The Story of the Harlot and the *Tzitzit* (2)**

In the previous *shiur*, we began to discuss the story of the prostitute and the *tzitzit*, which appears in *Menachot* (44a), and looked at some of the readings that have been proposed for it. The final view cited there was that of Y. Marcus. Marcus proposed, based on the context of the story in the Gemara, that it creates a contrast between the cultural world of Rome, characterized by the magnificence that captivates the man in the story, and the world of Torah and *mitzvot*. While altogether different in terms of content, the latter also has a place for splendor and majesty – as expressed, for example, in the *tekhelet* of the *tzitzit*. The discovery (or rediscovery) of this majestic aspect of Torah and *mitzvot* allows the man to return to and re-choose the world that he came from. I would like to elaborate on this contrast between the two worlds, based on the structure of the story and the symbols that appear in it.

**Comparing worlds – order and chaos, external and internal**

As noted by the scholars cited in the previous *shiur*, the story is divided into two parts, which highlights a comparison between two different cultural worlds: the *beit* *midrash*, belonging to the Jewish world of Torah, and the house of prostitution, belonging to the cultural world of Rome. Each half of the story has one of these worlds at its center.

The way the house of prostitution is portrayed may at first seem rather surprising. We might have expected that both its external appearance and its atmosphere would give the impression of lawlessness and chaos. Indeed, this is how prostitution appears in many places, both in literary descriptions and in reality. Prostitution is by definition a violation of social norms, undermining the most fundamental foundations of human culture: the faithful bonds of marriage and family. As a phenomenon that usually exists at the margins of society, it is not surprising when we encounter it in a setting of darkness and concealment, somewhere in the poorer, neglected, dirty, smelly outskirts of the city.

The description in our story is altogether different. Not only does the place not give any impression of poverty or neglect, but quite the opposite. In truth, had this been prostitution of the type described above, surrounded by dirt and destitution, perhaps it would never have come to compete in the man’s mind with the life of the *beit midrash* – especially if we accept Marcus’s suggestion that what attracts him in the first place is more than just sexual lust. What we have here is prostitution of a more institutionalized sort, which also existed during different periods, including in the Roman Empire, and was often characterized by conditions that were comfortable and even luxurious.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Still, it would seem that the narrator here takes things to a bit of an extreme, even for this sort of prostitution – thereby creating a well-crafted literary description that deliberately molds a theme. What is interesting about the description of the prostitute’s house is not just the physical splendor, but also the orderliness. Everything about the place projects order, esthetics, and hierarchy (which is also a kind of order). Clients must make a proper appointment; they are received in orderly fashion by a receptionist at the entrance, wait patiently for permission to enter, and are met with a tidy, esthetic structure of beds and drapery. The organization of the beds themselves likewise embodies a hierarchy: the gold bed is placed above the silver ones, and the entirety is built around the typological number seven, symbolizing the order in Nature and reinforcing the impression of organization. This is a more sophisticated sort of prostitution than is found in the filthy, poverty-stricken outskirts of town. We might say that in this scenario, the inner chaos and violation of the social order comes wrapped in an outer veneer of magnificent order.

The beds of silver and gold are reminiscent of the palace of Achashverosh ("beds of gold and silver” – *Esther* 1:6), and this might be meant as an allusion to the story of his kingdom. There too we encounter a sphere in which a system of rules and regulations (such as, for instance, the rules governing decrees signed with the king’s ring) supposedly reigns supreme, while in fact, beneath the surface, there is chaos, drunkenness, lust, and lawlessness. Things happen based on the arbitrary whims of the king and the maneuverings of the various figures who have influence over him. An example of the contrast between external order and internal chaos is the selection of the new queen, following the banishing of Vashti. The detailed descriptions of the preparations that the women undergo prior to their meetings with the king (Chapter 2) give the impression of a well-planned and orderly process, with set times for the different rituals: "six months with oil of myrrh and six months with sweet perfumes…". But at the heart of this process rages the objectifying, bestial, exploitative lust of a narcissistic king.

In our story, within all the civilized order that is built up so splendidly in the house of prostitution, the woman sits naked. Clothing is part of human culture; it is what sets mankind apart from animals and base nature. Among other things, clothes symbolize the restraint of "natural" urges, limiting them so they are not expressed at all times, in all places, or at every opportunity. They also symbolize the concealment and mystery of the intimacy that should characterize sexual relations. The absence of any clothing on the woman, in anticipation of her encounter with a man who she is meeting for the first time, serves to expose the wild, chaotic, lustful character of the encounter, devoid of any rules or restraint – a character that has so far been concealed within the hierarchical, orderly structure. In stark contrast to this nakedness, we find the *tzitzit*, the fringes that are, first and foremost, a continuation of the garment – the covering – to which they are attached. The essence of the mitzva of *tzitzit*, as expressed in *halakha*, is the threads themselves, including the thread of *tekhelet*. But its basis is clothing: wearing *tzitzit* requires that one wear a garment. Moreover, a simple reading of *parashat tzitzit* would appear to indicate that the *tzitzit* (the white fringes) are created from threads that are in fact a continuation of the corners of the garment itself (although the *halakha* – arising from the Oral Law – stipulates otherwise): “And they shall attach a thread of *tekhelet* to the fringe of each corner” (*Bamidbar* 15:38).

It is interesting in this context to re-read one of the *beraitot* preceding the story in the Gemara:

It is taught, R. Meir would say: The punishment for not attaching white strings is greater than the punishment for not attaching strings of *tekhelet*. To what may this be compared? A king of flesh and blood who commanded two of his servants: To one, he said, “Bring me a seal of clay.” To the other, he said, “Bring me a seal of gold.” Both were negligent and did not bring the seals. Which of them will have a greater punishment? It must be him to whom the king said, “Bring me a seal of clay” and he did not bring it. (*Menachot* 43b)

The essence of the *tzitzit* is the *tekhelet*. The *tekhelet* has a strong presence, and signifies the infinite heavens, but it rests, like a gently beating heart, within the more ordinary surroundings of the white threads – which, according to R. Meir, are no less important. All of the threads, including the *tekhelet*, emerge from the garment itself. The significance of the garment is the opposite of the nakedness of the prostitute.

**Seven Heavens**

To this we might add another point concerning the special structure found in the house of prostitution. The story describes seven beds, with ladders in the spaces between them, and the prostitute sitting on the uppermost bed. This is strongly reminiscent of *Chazal*’s description of the structure of the upper worlds – the “seven heavens,” according to the view of Reish Lakish:

R. Yehuda said: There are two heavens, as it is written (*Devarim* 10:14), “Behold, to the Lord your God belong the heavens and the heavens of heavens.” Reish Lakish said, “[There are] seven, and these are they:…” (*Bavli Chagiga* 12b)

Even more significant is a *beraita* in *Menachot*, within the same *sugya* in which our story appears, that deals with the number of knots that should be tied in the *tzitzit*:

It was taught: One who minimizes [the number of knots] may not have fewer than seven, and one who adds may not have more than thirteen. One who minimizes may not have fewer than seven – corresponding to the seven heavens. And one who adds may not have more than thirteen – corresponding to the seven heavens and the six air spaces between them. (*Bavli Menachot* 39a, according to MS Alliance Israelite Universelle, Paris, 147)

This fragment does not appear in the earlier source (the *midrash* in the *Sifri*). Its inclusion in the *Bavli* may shed new light on how these details function in the story, serving as a mirror image of the structure set up by the prostitute. This may be yet another reason for the choice of *tzitzit* to provide a contrast to the prostitute – because of its symbolic meaning. It symbolizes the difference between the Divine kingdom and the kingdom of Rome, as symbolized in turn by the orderly house of prostitution. It is a huge difference, but also a subtle one. In both cases there is an external framework, a base that projects a sense of order. The external structure seems the same in both instances: a hierarchy of seven spaces, one above the other, with the seat or throne upon the uppermost one. Both are animated by extremely powerful forces deep inside. But in the kingdom of Rome, as reflected in this story, the orderly, cultured outward wrapping is nothing more than an illusion, because what is unleashed within it is a chaotic, lawless urge that not only conforms with no sort of order, but in fact undermines it and empties it of all meaning.

The world molded by Torah, too, has an outer wrapping of order along with an inner fire of desire and eros – which are also connected to Divinity, as we know from descriptions in *Shir Ha-shirim* – but they are bounded and limited within the framework of a holy covenant, between man and God, or between a committed couple within a marriage. This inner fire and desire provide an important inner force driving the world of *mitzvot* and the covenant between the nation and God, and the boundaries are part of that covenant itself, making room and providing a vessel for this force. There can and should be a delicate dance between desire and covenant, such that the former does not come to violate the latter, but rather serves as part of its realization. *Tzitzit* may symbolize this, because the *tekhelet* thread that it contains is bound and tied to the white threads, and to the garment – which, as noted, are its context and environment. The *tekhelet* itself symbolizes the heavens, which in turn recall the Throne of Glory – “and they saw the God of Israel; and there was under His feet the like of a paved work of sapphire stone, and the like of the very heaven for clearness” (*Shemot* 24:10). Thus, when the *tekhelet* is affixed to the garment, it connects the wearer, via his most mundane, everyday framework – his garment – to the heavens.

**The turning point**

When the man reaches the top of the ladder, having encountered one level of order and hierarchy after the next, something surprising happens: the symbolic system is turned upside down. The *tzitzit*, emerging from the orderly world that he has left behind – and which itself is fashioned in an orderly, hierarchical way – suddenly behaves contrary to its nature, and violates the illusion of order created by the house of prostitution. It lifts itself from the floor and lashes out wildly at his face. And the man falls – not in an orderly, gradual descent, the way he climbed ladder after ladder, but rather all at once, to the floor. In these symbolic events, the *tzitzit* itself creates a mirror image, reflecting that which has been concealed from the man – and the reader – behind the tidy, esthetically pleasing exterior created by the prostitute: a place of wild chaos; the violation of order. We might therefore suggest that what causes the turnaround in the man is not merely the power of the mitzva, revealed in the *tzitzit* lifting itself into the air, but also the way it specifically reflects the lawless essence of Roman splendor. The man is indeed persuaded, and he comes back to the regal Jewish order described by Marcus, in which – in contrast to the Roman kingdom as portrayed in the story – order flows from the covenant, in which there is also room for eros.

The man’s turnaround makes an impression on the woman, and she follows his example, making a transition from the house of prostitution to the *beit midrash*. Within the new order that she takes upon herself, too, there will be room for desire and for physical urges motivated by the life force that should not be eradicated. By the end of the story, the sexual urge has been transformed from a negative force into a positive one, as symbolized also by the transition of the bedding, the orderly vessels: “The bedding that she had arranged for him in a prohibited fashion, she now arranged for him in a permitted fashion.”

**The broader context of the story in the *sugya***

Marcus’s remarks, cited in the previous *shiur*, also addressed the connection between the story and its broader context in the *sugya*. The *tekhelet* of the *tzitzit* is presented in the *sugya* as part of the royal garb with which God clothes a person – the covering of *mitzvot*, of which the *tzitzit* is an impressive element. This regal framework is set as an alternative opposite the royal splendor of Rome, which is part of what had attracted the man in the first place, and he is reminded of it when the *tzitzit* rises up to slap his face. In addition to Marcus’s comparison between the two worlds – the Roman and the Godly – in terms of man’s sense of royal dignity, I would like to add another point about the relationship between the two exteriors, each built up in beautiful, orderly fashion, and what each actually contains. The stately bedding of the prostitute can belong to the grandeur of Roman décor, concealing a core of prostitution and lawlessness, or it can be part of the royal setting of Torah, containing covenant and commitment. As noted, the *beraita* that draws a parallel between *tzitzit* and the seven heavens is also part of the broader context of the *sugya* (in a looser sense; it is not adjacent to the story, but rather part of the *sugya* in general), and it, too, reinforces the comparison between the two royal realms with which this man may identify: the Roman, and the Godly.

To this we might add another literary connection that links the story to its context in the *sugya* and reinforces the comparison between a chaotic encounter and one that takes place within a covenant: the collection of *beraitot* preceding the story in the *sugya*, some of which are quoted by Marcus. The *beraitot* cited in the previous shiur are preceded by a several others that focus on what may be learned from the words, “that you may look upon [the *tzitzit*].” One of them reads as follows, in the familiar version that appears in the printed editions:

R. Shimon bar Yochai said: Anyone who is expeditious (*zariz*) in [performing] this mitzva merits to welcome the Divine Presence. [We learn this from the use of the same expression] that is written here, “that you may look upon it (*oto*),” and that is written elsewhere, “[You shall fear the Lord your God and (*oto*) shall you serve” (*Devarim* 6:13). (*Menachot* 43b)

However, in most manuscripts of *Massekhet Menachot* (including MS Alliance Israelite Universelle, Paris, 147, which is the most reliable textual witness for this *massekhet*), the word *zahir* (careful; punctilious) appears instead of the word *zariz.* Assuming this is indeed the more precise version, R. Shimon bar Yochai’s teaching here connects directly back to the beginning of the story, in which we read that this man was “punctilious (*zahir*) in [performing] the mitzva of *tzitzit.*”

The link between the two phrases is not mere coincidence. There is a profound connection between R. Shimon’s teaching and the conclusion of the story, in which the man and the woman are married. A marriage conducted “in accordance with the law of Moshe and Israel” is an “I-Thou” encounter, face to face, not just the physical union of two bodies in an act of prostitution. It therefore recalls the encounter that is mentioned by R. Shimon: “he merits to welcome the Divine Presence.” Concerning the marital bond, R. Akiva (R. Shimon bar Yochai’s teacher) taught, “If they merit it – the Divine Presence dwells between them” (*Sota* 17a). This encounter is a stark contrast to the one in which the man climbed to the uppermost bed to sit facing the prostitute. The story formulates his intention as being to sit “*kenegda* (=opposite her)” – in a manner recalling the well-known *midrash* on the verse, “I shall make him [Adam] a helpmate (*ezer kenegdo*)”: “If he does not merit it, she is *kenegdo* [against him]” (*Yevamot* 63a).

There is yet another connection between R. Shimon bar Yochai’s teaching, “Anyone who is punctilious in [performing] this mitzva merits (*zokheh*) to welcome the Divine Presence [*penei ha-Shekhina*),” and the story. When the man ascends to the uppermost bed, his *tzitzit* fly up and “slapped him on his face [*panav*].” This causes him to drop out of the encounter with the prostitute, and leads to the happy ending where there is an encounter of a different kind, paralleling the welcoming of the Divine Presence: an encounter of holiness. When R. Chiya sends the woman off with his blessing to this encounter, the expression he uses is, “*Zekhi be-mikchekh*” – meaning, “Take possession of your purchase.” Admittedly, the same phrasing is also found in the earlier version of the story, in the *Sifri Bamidbar*, as we shall see when we compare them, and were not added by the narrator in the *Bavli*. However, the *Bavli* molds the connection between the teaching of R. Shimon bar Yochai, in the *sugya*, and the story,[[2]](#footnote-2) serving to highlight the difference between the two encounters between the man and the woman.

In summary, in the wake of his reading of the story in light of its context, Marcus discusses the man’s attraction to the royal splendor of Rome, which finds expression in the magnificent house of prostitution, and his return to the *beit midrash* once he realizes that his *tzitzit*, and specifically the *tekhelet* thread, likewise express a regal world – one with a superior type of splendor. To his discussion, I add that the context in the *sugya* introduces additional motifs: a comparison between the magnificent hierarchical structure set up by the prostitute and the hierarchical majesty symbolized by the *tzitzit*, with a contrast between the two structures in terms of their essential core, as well as the possibility of an intimate and even erotic encounter within a covenantal framework, symbolized by the *tzitzit*, as opposed to the wild, lawless sexuality that is afforded by the structure set up by the prostitute.

In the next *shiur*, I will present another perspective on the story and its theme, which likewise flows from the broader context but takes a completely different direction. The combination of the themes will illustrate the thematic and literary richness of this story.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

1. See, for example, the studies cited by M. Belberg, “*Bein Heterotopia la-Utopia: Keria bi-Shnei Sippurei Masa el Zonot u-ve-Chazara*,” in *Sifrut u-Mered* (Ed. A. Hirschfeld, Ch. Chever, Y. Levinson), Jerusalem 5768, pp. 3-4, nn. 3,6,8). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. R. Shimon’s words do not appear in the *Sifri Bamidbar* in the teachings on *parashat tzitzit*. A similar teaching, by R. Meir, appears there, without the word *zahir*: “R. Meir said… Anyone who fulfills the mitzva of *tzitzit* is considered as though he welcomed the Divine Presence….” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)