**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 #33: The Story of the Harlot and the *Tzitzit* (3)**

**Comparing two versions of the story**

Having considered the story of the harlot and the *tzitzit* in its context in the *Bavli*, and analyzed its unique molding there, we must now compare it with its earlier version, in the *midrash halakha* known as *Sifri*. The two versions are quite similar, but there are some minor differences. While at first these might seem to be mere superficial nuances, we will see how they relate to the differences between their respective contexts, with each source taking the story in a slightly different direction. The following table compares the two versions:

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| ***Sifri Bamidbar*** | ***Bavli Menachot*** |
| Rabbi Natan says: There is no mitzva in the Torah that does not come with a reward.  Go and learn from the mitzva of *tzitzit*. | Rabbi Natan says: There is no mitzva, however minor, that is written in the Torah, for which there is no reward given in this world; and in the World-to-Come I do not know how much reward is given.  Go and learn from [an incident concerning] the mitzva of *tzitzit*. |
| There was a man who was punctilious in his observance of the mitzva of *tzitzit*. He heard that there was a prostitute in one of the cities of the sea, and she would take four hundred gold coins as her payment. He sent her four hundred gold coins and she fixed a time for him.  When it was his time, he came and sat at the entrance to her house.  Her maidservant entered and said to her: That man who with whom you scheduled the time, is sitting at the entrance of the house.  She said to her: Let him enter.  When he entered, she prepared for him six beds of silver and one of gold, and she was in the uppermost one. Between each and every one of them was a stool of silver, with the uppermost one made of gold. | There was a man who was punctilious in his observance of the mitzva of *tzitzit*. He heard that there was a prostitute in the cities of the sea who took four hundred gold coins as her payment. He sent her four hundred gold coins and fixed a time to meet with her.  When it was his time, he came and sat at the entrance to her house.  The maidservant of that prostitute entered and said to her: That man who sent you four hundred gold coins came and sat at the entrance.  She said: Let him enter.  He entered. She arranged seven beds for him, six of silver and one of gold. Between each and every one of them was a ladder made of silver, with the top one made of gold. |
| When they were about to engage in the act, his four *tzitzit* [fringes] came and appeared to him as four witnesses, and slapped him on his face. He dropped down immediately and sat down on the ground. | **She went up and sat naked on the top, and he too went up to sit naked facing her**, [but] his four *tzitzit* [fringes] came and slapped him on his face. He dropped down and sat himself on the ground, and she also dropped down and sat on the ground. |
| She said to him: “I swear by the *gappa* of Rome that I will not allow you to go until you say what defect you saw in me.”  He said to her: “I swear by the Temple service that I saw no defect in you, for there is no beauty like yours in all the world.  But there is an easy mitzva that the Lord, our God, commanded us, where it is written: ‘I am the Lord your God… I am the Lord your God’ (*Bamidbar* 15:41), twice. ‘I am the Lord your God’ Who in the future will reward; ‘I am the Lord your God’ Who in the future will punish.” | She said to him: “I swear by the *gappa* of Rome that I will not allow you to go until you tell me what defect you saw in me.”  He said to her: “I swear by the Temple service that I never saw a woman as beautiful as you.  But there is a certain mitzva that the Lord, our God, commanded us, known as *tzitzit*, where it is written twice: ‘I am the Lord your God’ (*Bamidbar* 15:41) – hinting [respectively]: ‘I am the One’ Who will punish those who transgress My *mitzvot*, and ‘I am the One’ Who will reward those who fulfill them. Now, [my *tzitzit*] appeared to me as four witnesses.” |
| She said to him: “I swear by the Temple service that I will not allow you to go until you write for me your name, and the name of your city, and the name of the study hall where you study Torah.” He wrote her his name, and the name of his city, and the name of his teacher, and the name of the study hall where he learned Torah. | She said to him: “I will not allow you to go until you tell me: What is your name, and what is the name of your city, and what is the name of your teacher, and what is the name of the study hall in which you studied Torah?”  He wrote [it all] and placed it in her hand. |
| She arose and dispensed with her money: one-third to the government, one-third to the poor, and one-third she took with her, and came and stood in the study hall of R. Chiya.  She said to him: ‘My teacher, convert me.’  He said to her: ‘Perhaps you have set your sights on one of the students?’  She brought out the note that was in her hand. | She arose and divided up her property, one-third to the government, one-third to the poor, and she took one-third in her possession, in addition to the beds.  She came to the study hall of R. Chiya and said to him: “My teacher, instruct your students concerning me and make me a convert.” R. Chiya said to her: “My daughter, perhaps you have set your sights on one of the students?” She took the note from her hand and gave it to R. Chiya. |
| He said to him, “**Arise and take possession of your purchase.** Those beds that she arranged for you in a prohibited fashion, she will now arrange for you in a permitted fashion.”  This is the reward given to her in this world; with regard to the World-to-Come, I do not know how much [reward she will be given]. | He said to her: “**Go take possession of your purchase**.”  **Those same beds that she had arranged for him in a prohibited fashion, she now arranged for him in a permitted fashion.** This is the reward given to him in this world; with regard to the World-to-Come, I do not know how much [reward he will be given]. |

I will focus here on two significant differences that are highlighted in the table, although there are also others that deserve discussion some other time.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**The nakedness of the prostitute in the broader context of the story**

The version in the *Bavli* contains a description that is absent in the *Sifri*: “She went up and sat naked on the top [bed], and he too went up to sit naked facing her.” I elaborated on this description and its significance in the previous *shiur*, and now we see that it is integral to the way the story is molded in the *Bavli*, but not in the *midrash*. This might perhaps indicate that the narrators in the *Bavli* included this sentence to help create a contrast (as discussed in the previous *shiur*) between the splendor, order, and hierarchy reflected in the prostitute’s house and the beds, and the lawlessness and chaos that reign at the core of her existence and her lifestyle. This chaos reveals the orderliness to be nothing but an outer shell.

If we look at the broader context of the story in the *Bavli*, following the collection of *beraitot* quoted in the previous *shiur*, we find a *beraita* that shares linguistic links with this added sentence in the *Bavli*’s version of our story:

Our Sages taught: Beloved are Israel, being that the Holy One, blessed be He, surrounded them with *mitzvot*: *tefillin* upon their heads and *tefillin* upon their arms, tzitzit upon their garments, and a *mezuza* at their doorways, and concerning them David declared (*Tehillim* 119:164), “Seven times a day I praise You, for the laws of Your righteousness.” [Two *tefillin*, plus four fringes, plus the *mezuza*, yield a total of seven.] When David entered the bathhouse and saw himself standing naked, he said, “Woe is me, that I stand naked of *mitzvot”* – but upon remembering the circumcision of his flesh, he was reassured. After emerging, he gave praise over it, as it is written (*Tehillim* 12:1), “[A psalm] unto the musician upon the eight-stringed harp, a psalm unto David” – concerning circumcision, which was given [as a commandment to be performed] on the eighth [day]. (*Menachot* 43b)

In this *beraita*, too, the word “naked” (*erom*) is central. David catches a glimpse of himself naked in the bathhouse, and this glimpse disturbs him as being indicative of a spiritual problem: he feels himself naked – devoid – of *mitzvot*. A moment later, however, he realizes that he is never “naked” and devoid of any mitzva; circumcision turns even the naked body into part of the normative system of *mitzvot*. It seems that it is no coincidence that the sentence about nakedness is then added into the version of the story in the *Bavli*, as though emphasizing the contrast between David’s realization – finding holiness even after all his “coverings” have been removed – and the prostitute – whose state of nakedness expresses the opposite.

**Inversion of roles in the story, in relation to the broader context**

In the *Sifri Bamidbar*, when the woman presents herself to R. Chiya and shows him what the man had written, R. Chiya turns to the **man** and instructs him to marry her: “He said to him, **‘Arise and take possession of your purchase.** Those beds that she arranged for you in a prohibited fashion, she will now arrange for you in a permitted fashion.” W.Z. Harvey[[2]](#footnote-2) notes that the same language is used in other halakhic *sugyot* where a question arises as to a couple’s marital status immediately after their wedding, in the wake of a suspicion that the woman engaged in relations with another man during the period of betrothal (*Bavli Ketubot* 10a-b). When the question is brought before the sage, he renders a decision that clears the woman of all suspicion, telling the man, “Go, take possession of your purchase” – instructing him, in other words, that he may consummate the marriage. The word *mikchekha* (“your purchase”) is, of course, related to the “acquisition” that is made at the time of the betrothal between the man and the woman; this is the expression used in the Torah for *kiddushin* (marriage). (*Ki yikach ish isha* – “If a man marries a woman…” – *Devarim* 22:13). Here, too, the expression, “Arise and take possession of your purchase” marks the moment where, in the eyes of R. Chiya, the woman is cleared of opprobrium and is worthy of being married to the man – in a manner reminiscent of the instances addressed in the *sugya* in *Ketubot*. In fact, we might view this moment as one in which the woman is transformed from the prostitute that she was previously into a new, pure, and unsullied figure who is able to commence a new relationship with the man. The continuation of R. Chiya’s words are also directed at the man, who has returned to center stage: “Those beds that she arranged for you in a prohibited fashion, she will now arrange for you in a permitted fashion.”

However, in most versions in the *Bavli*, R. Chiya’s words are reformulated as being addressed to the woman [[3]](#footnote-3) – in other words, at this stage R. Chiya is still talking to her, not to him. The fact that R. Chiya addresses himself to the woman here is quite logical, inter alia in light of the continuation, with the sentence about the beds not being addressed in the *Bavli* to the man, as they are in the *Sifri*, but rather being formulated as a description of the situation, leaving the woman and her actions at center stage: “Those same beds that she had arranged for him in a prohibited fashion, she now arranged for him in a permitted fashion.”

This is a most dramatic turnaround – both in light of the comparison with the instances in *Massekhet Ketubot*, which appear to be the source for the expression the narrator adopts here, and also because of the line, “Go and take possession of your purchase,” which awards and attributes the initiative, the forging of the relationship and the building of the home, and even – by symbolic allusion – the act of *kiddushin*, to the woman. R. Chiya’s words to the woman sit well with the structure of the story which, as already discussed, is divided into two parts: in the first part, it is the man who is active, while in the second part, the initiative and action come from the woman. The dialogue at the end of the second part takes place between her and R. Chiya, and thus is it only natural that she is the one R. Chiya addresses in his encouragement of the realization and institutionalization of their relationship – even if formally and practically, from the halakhic point of view, it will be the man who actively performs the *kiddushin*.

It seems that it is no coincidence that in the *Bavli*, R. Chiya’s words are addressed to the woman, and this is related to the broader context of the story in the *sugya*. Let us have another look at the collection of *beraitot* preceding the story in the *sugya* in *Menachot* (which includes the one cited above, and some cited in previous *shiurim* as well):

It is taught in another *beraita*: “That you may look upon it and remember all the commandments of the Lord” (*Bamidbar* 15:39) – [indicating that] once a person is obligated in this mitzva of ritual fringes, he is obligated in all of the *mitzvot*. And this is in accordance with R. Shimon, who says that [*tzitzit*] is a positive, time-bound mitzva.

It is taught in another *beraita*: “That you may look upon it and remember all the commandments of the Lord” – [indicating that] this mitzva is equivalent to all the *mitzvot*.

And it is taught in another *beraita*: “That you may look upon it and remember… and do” – [indicating that] looking [at the *tzitzit*] leads to remembering [the *mitzvot*], and remembering them leads to doing. And R. Shimon bar Yochai says: Anyone who is energetic in [performing] this mitzva merits to receive the Divine Presence. [For] it is written here: “That you may look upon it [*oto*]” (*Bamidbar* 15:39), and it is written there (*Devarim* 6:13), “You shall fear the Lord your God; and Him [*oto*] shall you serve.”

Our Sages taught: Beloved are Israel, being that the Holy One, blessed be He, surrounded them with *mitzvot*: *tefillin* upon their heads and *tefillin* upon their arms, tzitzit upon their garments, and a *mezuza* at their doorways, and concerning them David declared (*Tehillim* 119:164), “Seven times a day I praise You, for the laws of Your righteousness.” [Two *tefillin*, plus four fringes, plus the *mezuza*, yield a total of seven.] When David entered the bathhouse and saw himself standing naked, he said, “Woe is me, that I stand naked of *mitzvot”* – but upon remembering the circumcision of his flesh, he was reassured. After emerging, he gave praise over it, as it is written (*Tehillim* 12:1), “[A psalm] unto the musician upon the eight-stringed harp, a psalm unto David” – concerning circumcision, which was given [as a commandment to be performed] on the eighth [day]….”

R. Eliezer ben Yaakov said: Anyone who has *tefillin* upon his head and *tefillin* upon his arm and *tzitzit* upon his garments and a *mezuza* at his entrance – all are reinforcements against him sinning, as it is written (*Kohelet* 4:12), “but a three-fold cord is not quickly broken,” and it is written (*Tehillim* 34:8), “an angel of God encamps round about those who fear Him, and delivers them.”

It is taught: R. Meir would say, “How is *tekhelet* [the blue dye for *tzitzit*] different from all other sorts of dyes? Because *tekhelet* is reminiscent of the sea, and the sea is the color of the sky, and the [color of the] sky recalls the Throne of Glory, as it is written (*Shemot* 24:10), “and beneath His feet was the like of a paved work of sapphire stone, and the like of the very heaven for clearness,” and it is written (*Yechezkel* 1:26), “the likeness of a Throne, as the appearance of a sapphire stone.”

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.

It is taught, R. Meir would say: A person is obligated to recite one hundred [*me’a*] blessings every day, as it is written, “And now, Israel, what [*ma*] does the Lord your God require of you?” (*Devarim* 10:12). On Shabbat and Festivals, [when the prayers contain fewer blessings,] R. Chiya, son of R. Avya, made an effort to fill this quota with blessings on spices and sweet fruit.

It is taught, R. Meir would say: A man is obligated to recite three blessings every day, and these are they: “Who did not make me a gentile”; “Who did not make me a woman”; and “Who did not make me an ignoramus.” R. Acha bar Yaakov heard his son reciting the blessing: “Who did not make me an ignoramus.” He said to him: Is it proper to go that far? His son responded, What blessing should one then recite? If you say, “Who did not make me a slave” – that is the same as a woman. [To which R. Yaakov responded:] A slave is more lowly than a woman.

The Sages taught: This *chilazon* – its body resembles the sea, its form resembles a fish, it emerges once in seventy years, and with its blood one dyes wool the color *tekhelet*; therefore it is expensive. (*Menachot* 43b-44a)

At the beginning of this collection, we find the teaching connected to R. Shimon’s conclusion that wearing *tzitzit* is a positive, time-bound mitzva (such that women are exempt). Towards the end, we find the teaching of R. Meir concerning the three blessings that a man recites every day, including one that highlights the difference between men and women. As Y. Marcus points out,[[4]](#footnote-4) R. Meir’s teaching already appears in the Tosefta (*Berakhot* Chapter 6), along with other parts of this collection of *beraitot*, and we might therefore suggest that they “migrated” together into the *sugya* in the *Bavli*. However, more significant than the fact that both appear in the Tosefta in *Berakhot* is the connection between them in terms of content, which might justify the fact that both are cited in this collection of *beraitot* in *Menachot*. It would seem that in this *sugya*, as Rashi explains (ad loc.), the blessing that a man recites, “Who has not made me a woman” (like the two preceding blessings, “Who has not made me a slave” and “Who has not made me a non-Jew”) is connected to his obligation with regard to positive *mitzvot*, which is more extensive than the obligation of a woman. This is also the broader context of the collection of the *beraitot*: the obligation of a Jewish man with regard to many of the positive *mitzvot*. Here there is indeed a halakhic distinction between men and women, with women being exempt from those positive *mitzvot* that are time-bound. The difference between men and women comes up again in the middle of the collection, in the *beraita* about David. Even in the bathhouse, he discovers that there is a mitzva that accompanies him – circumcision – a clear example of a mitzva that women are not commanded to fulfill.

Specifically against the background of this series of *beraitot*, in which men appear in the context of their obligation with regard to positive *mitzvot*, reflecting a significant gap on the religious, halakhic level between men and women, it is especially interesting to read the complex message conveyed by the story. Once again – in the first part of the story, it is the man who is active, both in his journey to the prostitute and at the significant moment where he overcomes his physical urge due to the reminder from his *tzitzit*. In the second part, it is the woman who is active; she sets out on a journey of her own, in the footsteps of this man, his people, and his Torah. In this part of the story, it is difficult to miss the audacious inversion in R. Chiya’s words to the woman: “He said to her: Go and take possession of your purchase.” As mentioned above, Harvey notes that this would seem to be a play on the expression, “Go [in the male imperative] and take possession of your purchase” that is to be found in some instances set forth in *Ketubot* 10, where the sage rules that the woman’s claim that she was not unfaithful may be relied upon, and he tells the man, “Go and take possession of your purchase.” But here the words are addressed to the woman – who, firstly, has undertaken a journey of *teshuva* and repair from the world of prostitution, and secondly, is indeed the active party in creating this marital bond.

Thus, the *sugya* as it is set forth creates an interesting tension between *halakha* and *aggada*. In the practical, halakhic world, there is a clear distinction between men and women, which is expressed, for example, in two halakhic statements in the *beraitot* (the teachings of R. Shimon and of R. Meir). In this halakhic world of *Chazal*, the act of marriage is also one in which the man is more active. But the realm of *aggada* is more abstract, theoretical rather than normative, and it allows for more freedom of thought. The aggadic story, which belongs to the philosophical, conceptual sphere, introduces a certain questioning of these differences between men and women. Even if there are no practical ramifications in the halakhic realm, the questions of the *aggada* can echo, on a conceptual level, through the generations.

This inversion in the story recalls the well-known midrashic account of R. Shimon and the childless couple from Sidon. There too, the formal, halakhic framework of the relationship is maintained, while the woman takes the initiative:

A different teaching: “Let us exult and rejoice in you” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 1:4) – We learned there: If a man marries a woman and lives with her for ten years and she has not given birth, he may not remain idle. Rabbi Idi said: There was a certain woman in Sidon who lived with her husband for ten years and did not give birth. They came to R. Shimon bar Yochai and sought to separate from one another. He said to them: “By your lives, just as your union [was celebrated] with food and drink, so you shall separate only with food and drink.” They followed his advice and arranged a celebration for themselves, and made a great feast, and she got him to drink in excess. When he was in good spirits, he said to her: “My daughter, choose any good item that I have in the house and take it, and go to your father’s house.” What did she do? After he fell asleep, she motioned to her servants and maidservants and said to them: “Carry him in his bed and take him to my father’s house.” In the middle of the night, he awakened from his slumber, his inebriation abated. He said to her: “My daughter, where am I?” She said to him: “In my father’s house.” He said to her: “What am I doing in your father’s house?” She said to him: “Is this not what you said to me last night: ‘Choose any good item that I have in the house and take it, and go to your father’s house’? There is no item in this world better for me than you.” They went [back] to R. Shimon ben Yochai, and he stood and prayed for them, and they were remembered… (*Shir Ha-Shirim* *Rabba* 1:4)

The scope of our present discussion does not allow for an analysis of this amazing story.[[5]](#footnote-5) For our purposes, it is clear that the story happens within a halakhic framework – the mandate for a couple to divorce after ten years of marriage if they have produced no offspring, as well as the clear procedural framework regarding the active party in creating and dissolving a marriage. Within this framework, however, it is the woman who finds her own direction and initiative in order to change their reality and to preserve the marriage.

This, then, is one of the ways in which *Chazal* mold the dynamic between *halakha* and *aggada*, with each representing a different aspect of the truth, on a different level. The encounter between them underlies a fascinating tension between the normative world of *halakha* and a theoretical, conceptual world in which space is given to question this normative order.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

1. Another difference was noted in the previous *shiur*, citing A. Kosman: In the version in the *Bavli*, it seems that the *tzitzit* raise themselves from the floor in miraculous fashion and strike the man’s face, thus intensifying the shock and the connection between his punctiliousness in observing the mitzva and its saving him from sinning. In the *Sifri*, this element of the plot is presented in less dramatic fashion; it seems that he encounters his *tzitzit* as he removes his clothing. This difference between the two sources is also related to the difference I propose in this *shiur* – the description of the man’s ascent “to sit naked opposite her.” Concerning some further differences, A. Goshen-Gottstein (see previous *shiur*) notes that the literary molding in the *Sifri* serves to emphasize more clearly the division between the two parts of the story; some of this is lost in the version in the *Bavli*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. W.Z. Harvey, “The Pupil, the Harlot, and the Fringe Benefits,” *Prooftexts* 6 (1986), 259-264. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In most manuscripts, in the Venice edition of 5683, and in the Vilna edition – though in a small number of manuscripts, his words are formulated in the masculine. The original formula would seem to have R. Chiya addressing the woman, since the dialogue takes place between them, while the man is not part of the proceedings. MS Munich 95, which has R. Chiya addressing the man, may represent an amendment to conform with halakhic norms. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Y. Marcus, “*Tzitzit ki-Siman Zehut – Nituach ha-Sippur al Ba’al ha-Tzitzit ve-ha-Zona al pi Hekshero ha-Sifruti ha-Rachav*,” *Netu’im* 19 (5774), pp. 107-120. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The interested reader may see, for example. A. Chevroni, “*Gevarim mi-Bavel, Nashim mi-Eretz Yisrael*,” *Tekhelet* 29 (2007), pp. 89-94, and the references there to additional sources, p. 103, fn. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)