**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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

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**Shiur #40: Destined for Theft – in Rabbinical Narratives and Chasidic Stories (3)**

In the previous *shiur*, against the background of the Talmudic account of R. Nachman bar Yitzhak and the prediction that he would be a thief, we read R. Nachman of Breslav’s story about a man who was told by an astrologer that his fortune would lie in stealing. We also looked at the commentary that is included immediately after one of the versions of the story, attributed to “*anshei* *shelomeinu*” – disciples of R. Nachman – who explain that the man’s mistake was to allow even the tiniest opening for the astrologer and his forecast, instead of simply “continuing to serve God as he was accustomed to,” in the *beit midrash*. It was this opening that ultimately led him to theft, and to his tragic end. We also mentioned Rav Dan Hauser’s insight in this regard, suggesting that the man at the beginning of the story feels whole and thoroughly accepting of himself, with no interest in anything more from outside of himself.

As noted at the end of the previous *shiur*,Rav Dov Singer[[1]](#footnote-1) offers a very different reading of the story. He starts by drawing our attention to the fact that the idea of “continuing to serve God as he was accustomed to,” which “*anshei shelomeinu*” point to as the proper course of action, does not sound like the sort of direction R. Nachman encouraged and propounded. For instance:

The good inclination is called “poor and wise” (*Kohelet* 4:13), corresponding to *Malkhut,* which represents the state of being poor and needy, insofar as it possesses nothing of its own other than what it receives from *Chokhma* (Wisdom). The evil inclination, on the other hand, is called a “king that is old and foolish” … insofar as “the fool does not desire understanding” (*Mishlei* 18:2). (*Likkutei Moharan*, 1)

It is not good to be “old.” Whether an “old” *chasid* or an “old” *tzaddik*, “old” is not good. One must reinvent oneself every day and constantly be starting anew. (*Sichot Ha-Ran*, 51)

R. Nachman is not speaking against old age in and of itself, in the manner of the “anti-aging” trends that we are familiar with today. On the contrary, his view of old age, representing experience and life wisdom, is positive. What he is decrying in the above excerpts is not advanced age, but a mentality of spiritual stagnation and a lack of innovation, which can characterize any age. There are people who are old in years but possess spiritual energy, and people much younger than them in years who are spiritually “weary.” A person whose heart is open is called a “poor, wise child”: the “poverty” is the sense of deficiency that allows a person to continue absorbing new things and growing, while “fullness,” or mental old age, is a state of being closed to learning more from life or from Torah.

Aside from the general message drawn from the story, one might also disagree with “*anshei shelomeinu”* with regard to the example they cite. They note that the word “vayema’ein” (“and he refused”), describing Yosef’s reaction to the temptations of Potiphar’s wife (*Bereishit* 39:6), is marked with the cantillation note *shalshelet*, in which the last syllable is prolonged by repeating the same descending melodic ornament three times, “alluding to three stages of one continuous refusal. This is why Yosef merited deliverance from his spiritual test, and eventually became the king's viceroy.” However, the *shalshelet*, with its repeated wavering, does not sound like the musical embodiment of a firm and decisive position; it seems far more likely reflective of profound equivocation. Admittedly, the plain reading of the text in *Bereishit* gives no hint of even the slightest deliberation on Yosef’s part, but there are various *midrashim* in which *Chazal* portray him as battling an excruciating, fierce inner challenge in the face of the attempts by Potiphar’s wife to seduce him. For example:

R. *Shimon said: “The bow was drawn, and then relaxed” [a euphemism for sexual arousal, followed by a return to a state of relaxation] – this is as it is written (in Yaakov’s blessing to Yosef, Bereishit 49:24), “But his bow was strongly established” (his bow – kashto – to be read as kashiuto, “his firmness”).*

R. Yitzchak said: His semen dispersed and emerged through his fingernails, as it is written, “and the arms of his hand were gilded [*va-yafozu* – to be read as *va-yafutzu[[2]](#footnote-2)* – were dispersed]” (ibid.).

R. Huna said in the name of R. Matna: He saw the image of his father, and his blood cooled, as it is written, “from the shepherd of the Stone of Israel” (ibid.) – Who did so [i.e., who enabled Yosef to conquer his desire in this situation]? “From the God of your father, and He will help you… blessings of the breasts and of the womb” (*Bereishit* 49:25) – [i.e.,] the blessings of your father and your mother. (*Bereishit Rabba* 87:7)

This reading of the word “vayema’ein” and its cantillation opens up room for the idea that the words of the astrologer were perhaps worthy of some consideration, and might have held some positive potential. Indeed, there are scholars who have interpreted R. Nachman’s story – especially the version that ends happily for its hero – as actually encouraging a type of “stealing”; of course, not in the sense of appropriating someone else’s property, which is obviously forbidden, but rather in the spiritual sense. What is “stealing” in a spiritual context? The following, for example, is an interpretation of the story appearing on the Zusha website of Chasidic stories:

Perhaps R. Nachman is hinting, through this metaphor, that the courage of a simple person may cause the “king” – in other words, God – to perform kindness towards him.[[3]](#footnote-3)

An even more radical idea is that R. Nachman could be hinting that there is something holy about the ability to “steal” on the religious, spiritual level. This idea appears in several Chasidic sources: “stealing” is the ability to change the fixed “law” and order of how things work, and to spiritually “break into” places that one is prohibited from entering. From this perspective, a thief is someone who desires and seeks an encounter and relationship with God, even when he is unworthy of such a connection. This interpretation views “stealing” as a matter of deviating from the place that is seemingly “proper” or “suited” to a person at the moment, the place in which he has a “cover” for remaining, the place suited to his daily routine. The ability to move on and progress spiritually sometimes requires a “leap” to a place that perhaps is not reflective of one’s current spiritual stature. To borrow kabbalistic terms, we might describe this as exposure to “light” that the person does not yet have vessels to contain; the “*reshimu*” – the impression left by what he perceives in those moments – can afterwards provide the motivation and drive to grow further and to develop the appropriate vessels to contain this “light.” Without that initial taste of something more, which lies somewhere beyond the person’s current position, he would not have the drive to progress and to grow.

Other formulations of this idea may be found in other sources, some of them quite surprising. For example, the *Zohar*, commenting on the verses of the Ten Commandments, notes that in the *ta’am elyon* – the special set of cantillation notes used for the public reading of the Ten Commandments on Shavuot – there is a marking indicating a vocal break between the word *lo* (“You shall not”) and each of the prohibitions that follow (“You shall not murder, … commit adultery, … steal,” etc.), and explains its presence:

In all three commandments, there is a tonal pause, for in the absence of this interruptive mark, harmony would be unattainable in the world.

[Concerning the words, “You shall not murder”: Were it not for this tonal pause,] it would be forbidden [for the court] to kill even one who transgresses the law. However, the presence of the pause teaches that in specific instances, killing may be prohibited or permitted.

"You shall not commit adultery": In the absence of this break, it would be prohibited to engage in the commandments of procreation or to enjoy marital intercourse…

"You shall not steal": In the absence of the interruptive mark, it would be forbidden to deceive one's Torah teacher or a Torah scholar in order to gaze upon him. Furthermore, it would be prohibited for a judge to trick a swindling claimant or two disputants in order to clarify the truth… (*Zohar* part II, 93:2)

In other words, in the absence of the pause, the action would be absolutely prohibited even for positive purposes, such as putting a person deserving of the death penalty to death (“You shall not kill”) or engaging in marital intercourse (“You shall not commit adultery”). The pause indicates that there are situations in which the action is permitted. In explaining the pause between *lo* (“You shall not”) and *tignov* (“steal”), R. Zev Wolf of Zhitomir, a disciple of the Maggid of Mezeritch, writes:

What arises from his holy teaching is that if there were no element of the pause between these two words in the cantillation of the Torah… it would be impossible for there to be any stealing in the world at all, even “stealing” that is a mitzva. In any case, if there were no “stealing” in the positive realm, where could “stealing” in the negative realm be drawn from? For every phenomenon in the realm of holiness has a corresponding phenomenon in the negative realm; the one is balanced against the other. (*Ohr ha-Meir*, *derush* for Shavuot)

R. Zev Wolf invokes a well-known kabbalistic and Chasidic principle, according to which nothing can exist in the world without possessing some Divine essence and a root existing in Divinity. The kabbalistic idea expressed in the words “God made one corresponding to the other” (based on *Kohelet* 7:14) means that whatever exists on the “side of holiness” has a parallel on the “other side” (the *sitra achra*), and vice versa. Thus, if there exists some negative phenomenon, such as stealing, in the world of *kelipot*, or the “other side,” then there must be some corresponding phenomenon on the “side of holiness,” otherwise it could not exist in the world at all. The phenomenon or energy of “stealing,” in and of itself, like anything else in the world, has a Divine source that is positive and true. This source is what invests every type and every instance of stealing with its vitality. Some of these instances express themselves in negative acts; they belong to the “other side.” There is a pause between “You shall not” and “steal” because if stealing exists as something real in the world, it cannot be ruled out absolutely. (*Ohr ha-Meir*, *derush* for Shavuot)

A similar message emerges from Rav Hutner in his *Pachad Yitzchak*, where he develops the idea and proposes one possible kind of positive “stealing” in the spiritual realm:

The [prohibition] “You shall not steal” in the Ten Commandments is read with a tonal break after the word *lo*. Our Sages taught that this break comes to tell us that a person may “steal [the mind of]” – i.e., deceive – his teacher and show himself in the eyes of his teacher to be on a higher level than is actually the case, with the intention that the teacher will then convey Torah teachings that are on a higher level than the one he [currently] occupies. And we have to know that if there is license for a disciple to act in this way in relation to his teacher, we must certainly seek an example of such license in a disciple’s behavior when it comes to fear of Heaven. For the fear of one’s teacher should be like one’s fear of Heaven… This license proceeds from the assumption that [assuming] the external façade itself will prompt the [corresponding] inner state. And thus we say that sometimes it is proper for a person to present himself externally as being on a higher level than he actually is inside, in order to thereby arouse an elevation and improvement of his inner state.” (*Pachad Yitzhak* on Purim, 16)

In view of this teaching, we might start viewing the man’s “fate” to be a thief as pointing him towards development of his spiritual world, through a temporary divergence from his “natural” place. As a simple example, a student might join a lesson that is on a more advanced level than his own. Even though he might not understand much of it, he may emerge with a powerful impression of something very significant or interesting having been said, and this will encourage him to keep studying and working so that he will be able to understand a lesson like this in the future. If he never participates in such a lesson, but rather attends only lessons that are suited to his level of knowledge and skills, he may remain at that level, with no significant growth.

R. Nachman presents a variation on this conception of “stealing”:

I heard in [R. Nachman’s] name that he reproved someone who had told him that he had no time to learn because he was involved in business. [R. Nachman] said that nonetheless he should grab some time every day to be involved in Torah. He said that this is as our Sages, of blessed memory, taught: “A person is asked: *Kavata* (Did you set) times for Torah?” (Shabbat 31a). The term *keva* (set) connotes “stealing,” as it is written, “and *kava* (rob) the life of those who rob them” (*Mishlei* 22:23). That is, they ask the person if he stole from the times he was busy with his affairs – “Did you steal times for Torah from them?” For a person must grab and steal times for Torah from [his daily] concerns and affairs. (*Likkutei Moharan*, 284)

Here R. Nachman offers a homiletical interpretation of one of the questions that *Chazal* say will be posed by the Heavenly Tribunal after a person dies: “Did you make time [*kavata ‘itim*] for Torah?” – based on a verse from *Mishlei* in which the root of *keva* can be understood as referring to stealing. He explains that a person has to “steal” time from his busy daily schedule for Torah and other spiritual matters, since one’s time will always be filled with mundane, routine tasks and concerns. It is all too easy to get carried away in this everyday tide, such that a day goes by, and another, and another, with no connection to anything spiritual. The person must therefore enlist what is seemingly a negative, selfish force – the inclination to “steal” – in order to break through this endless cycle of material concerns. Because the cycle draws a person in so powerfully, it is specifically the use of a force that comes from the baser, more instinctive places within him that is capable of cracking through the routine and transporting the person to a new stage.

This interpretation sits well with the story of the man whose fate, or fortune, was to be a thief. Seemingly, this man from the outset is engaged in Torah and pursuits of the spirit, in the *beit midrash*. However, as Rav Dov Singer suggests, his engagement in Torah has become routine, and as R. Nachman sees it, that means it has lost some of its vitality and meaning. Perhaps what is needed is some sort of desire or drive, for the purposes of breathing new life into his Torah.

I will elaborate further on this in the next *shiur*, but first, I would like to try to take the ideas that have arisen thus far and bring them back to the story from the Gemara, about R. Nachman bar Yitzchak, who was destined to become a robber. I think that the ideas we have discussed in the interpretation of R. Nachman’s story raise the question of whether Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak’s mother acted correctly in punctiliously ensuring that he cover his head and thereby be delivered from the “drive” to steal or the “trait” of theft. As we saw in our comparison of the three stories presented in the *sugya*, the mother of Rav Nachman is the only character who actively intervenes in reality with a view to trying to change her son’s fate. On one hand, covering her son’s head does seem to prevent him from becoming a thief. On the other hand, perhaps it also prevents him from realizing his potential for growth. If his tendency towards theft had been channeled rather than suppressed, it may have led to extraordinary spiritual growth, beyond what he actually achieved in his life. In other words, it is possible that Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak possessed, in potential, a very powerful energy, which was smothered by the cloak that covered him and his “fear of Heaven.” Though it seems to have successfully molded him as a servant of God rather than a thief, it may have left him with less spiritual energy or creative power. Admittedly, it is difficult to be certain.

In the next *shiur*, we will continue with our interpretation of R. Nachman’s story and see how this alternative interpretation maintains a dialogue with the Talmudic story of Rav Nachman bar Yitzhak in particular, and the cycle of stories about “fate” in general.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

1. D. Singer, “*Ma’aseh mi-Chozeh ba-Kokhavim ha-Nikra ‘Virosh Bit’*,” in *Ha-Chayim ke-Ga’agu’a* (ed. R. Horn), Tel Aviv, 5770, pp. 39-63. See also [the *shiur* on this story](https://www.lifnim.co.il/library/%D7%9E%D7%A2%D7%A9%D7%94-%D7%9E%D7%97%D7%95%D7%96%D7%94-%D7%91%D7%9B%D7%95%D7%9B%D7%91%D7%99%D7%9D/) on the website of the *Beit Midrash le-Hitchadshut*, with additional sources, some of which we will address below. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Editor’s note: As the commentary *Etz Yosef* notes, the Hebrew letters *zayin* and *tzadi* are sometimes interchangeable. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://zusha.org.il/story/%D7%92%D7%A0%D7%91-%D7%91%D7%A8-%D7%9E%D7%96%D7%9C/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)