**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 #41: Destined for Theft – in Rabbinical Narratives and Chasidic Stories (4)**

In the last few *shiurim*, we discussed R. Nachman’s story about the man whose fortune, according to an astrologer, would lie in stealing. We looked at an interpretation by “*anshei shelomeinu*” (disciples of R. Nachman) of the story, which appears as part of the text in some versions of it. We then discussed a different reading, which relates to the idea of “stealing” in the spiritual realm as a (potentially) positive act of deviation from one’s “natural” place in order to “break through” to a higher spiritual level.

## **“Stealing” as Divine Concealment**

Rav Dov Singer, who, as mentioned in the previous *shiur*, raises some questions regarding the interpretation of “*anshei shelomeinu*,” offers a different interpretation. Like the Chasidic teachings cited in the previous *shiur*, he understands the “fate to be a thief” as a more general and more profound potential, which could be channeled in a different direction. The pauper in the story could have understood that any proposal has two aspects: an aspect of the “other side” (the *sitra achra*), which would lead to actions that are prohibited, and an aspect of “the side of holiness.” The aspect of the “other side” translates into stealing money or property – a sin, which cannot be God’s will. This is where the *Ba’al Davar* – the evil inclination itself, disguised as the astrologer – wants to lead the man. Ultimately, he succeeds; he causes the pauper to stumble, catches him in his trap, and leads him to a tragic death. But things could have been different. A fate that looks like the “other side” conceals a kernel of truth that can be channeled in a positive direction, but this requires in-depth thinking and searching. The astrologer’s forecast holds out an opportunity, and if the man were to think about it more deeply, he could have used the potential brought to his attention by the astrologer in a different way, and the story would have had a different ending.

The man in the story is sitting in the *beit midrash* and engaged in Torah study, but his religious life is “routine.” As mentioned in the previous *shiur*, R. Nachman expresses in various teachings his opposition to Divine service that is performed as a matter of habit. But how is the alternative to such routine connected to stealing?

The concept of “stealing” here relates to the way R. Nachman elsewhere describes a certain manner of spiritual conduct in this world, with all its limitations, requiring concealment and secrecy. He is not talking about “stealing” money or property, but rather “theft” in the sense of action carried out in a concealed manner. Concealment is a central tool serving the thief when he steals – and it also relates to R. Nachman’s explanation of his use of stories as a way of rousing people spiritually:

For there are people who sleep away their days. And even though it seems to everyone that these people are serving God, and engaging in Torah and prayer, nevertheless, God takes no pleasure in any of their service, since it all remains down below… When we want to show a person his [own] countenance and rouse him from his sleep, it is necessary to clothe the countenance in the telling of stories… (*Likkutei Moharan*, 60)

The “clothing” of Torah in stories is a type of concealment that can mediate the message even to someone who is spiritually “asleep,” without arousing resistance the way direct religious exhortation often does. R. Natan, disciple of R. Nachman, elaborates further on this idea. First, he explains that “stealing” is the tool in trade of the *Ba’al Davar* (evil inclination), and the root of all theft in the world is to be found in his conduct:

For a thief comes in secrecy and concealment, with cunning and great cleverness. And its root is from the Ba’al Davar, who is the great thief, approaching a person in concealment (“stealing”) and cunning… (*Likkutei Halakhot*, Laws of Stealing, 5:10)

He explains in greater detail how the evil inclination acts with cunning – which is a type of “stealing” – in causing a person to perform a transgression. For if the act were to appear to the person as a transgression, he would likely avoid it. Concealing the true nature of the act and presenting (“clothing”) it as something else is how the *Ba’al Davar* manages to cause the person to do it:

For all thefts can ultimately be traced back to the Ba’al Davar, who is the prime thief – the head of all thieves and swindlers in the world. For he deals with people for the most part with astounding theft [concealment], cunning, and deceit. He deceives a person in a great many different ways, constantly misguiding him, until he is ready to trap him in his net, heaven forfend, as we all know from experience… For in truth, for the most part it is impossible for the *Ba’al Davar* to approach a person and lure him directly into something that is an outright transgression, Heaven forbid. Rather, at first he clothes himself in *mitzvot*, and misguides the person, showing him why the act is in fact permitted and clothing his bad advice in mitzvot, today telling him, “Do this,” and then tomorrow, “Do that,” and so on. (*Likkutei Halakhot*, Laws of Stealing, 3:2)

Further on, R. Nachman explains the approach of the *tzaddik*, who uses the same tools in order to “clothe” the teachings of Torah in stories:

For the *tzaddik* deals with the *Ba’al Davar* with concealment and deceit, as discussed above. For just as the *Ba’al Davar* hoodwinks a person, by dressing himself in mitzvot and then leading the person to perform transgressions, Heaven forfend, and even the *mitzvot* of the *Ba’al Davar* themselves are transgressions, so the *tzaddik* acts likewise: he dresses himself in stories, which are regular tales much like mundane folktales and mundane talk, and it is specifically them that he uses to conceal and clothe the seventy facets of Torah. (Ibid. 3,3)

R. Nachman is describing how *tzaddikim* operate. They understand that some sophistication and a measure of concealment are necessary in the way in which they offer themselves and their message to the world. An overly direct approach is likely to arouse resistance. The indirect approach, clothing ideas in a story, bypasses the barriers that people place around themselves so that Torah and faith can penetrate their hearts.

On the basis of the above teachings by R. Nachman and R. Natan, Rav Dov connects the act of stealing in our story with the notions of concealment, secrecy, and “clothing.” The *tzaddikim* study the methods of the Ba’al Davar, who acts with cunning and “theft.” The legitimacy for their use of this manner of operation is the fact that, in essence, what the *Ba’al Davar* does also has a positive root, but it is perverted and used in a negative way. The idea that even the actions of the *Ba’al Davar* in the world have a positive root arises from a concept that is fundamental to *Chasidut* in general, and to R. Nachman’s teachings in particular – that “there is no place that is devoid of Him,” but God’s Divinity is often concealed behind multiple screens, as we learn from the teaching of R. Wolf cited in the previous *shiur*. This concealment of Divinity, which was necessary in order for the world to be created, is the prototype of all acts of concealment, as R. Natan goes on to explain in his elaboration of R. Nachman’s teaching:

For a thief comes in concealment and wraps, with cunning and great deception. And his root is from the Ba’al Davar, who is the great thief that comes to a person with “theft” and deception, as it is written, “He lies in wait in a secret place…” (*Tehillim* 10:9), and as explained above in the preceding *halakhot*. And the root of the *Ba’al Davar* and the “other side” is from the primal “*tzimtzum*” [contraction] of the empty space, where the blessed God covered up and concealed the light of His wisdom, as it were, for the sake of [man’s] free choice. And this covering up and concealment is a kind of “theft,” for in truth, God is actually there; He is simply covering and concealing Himself, as it were, for the sake of the test [of faith] and free choice, reflecting the verse (*Yeshayahu* 45:15), “You are a God who conceals Himself,” and the verse, “I shall surely hide My face…” (*Devarim* 31:18). (Ibid. 5:10)

This is a very radical proposition. R. Natan is suggesting that God’s own act of contraction and concealment is itself a sort of “stealing” – again, not as an inherently negative act, but as a manner of acting that can be either negative or positive, depending how it’s used.

We might borrow this idea and apply it to the astrologer’s forecast. By the end of the story, we discover that the astrologer is the *Ba’al Davar* himself, and this connects with R. Natan’s teaching about him, above. The *Ba’al Davar* himself points the man in the direction of actual, physical stealing. But had the hero of the story understood in depth the spiritual potential of the words of the Ba’al Davar, he could have used the power of concealment as the *tzaddikim* do, rather than simply sitting in the *beit midrash*. Thus he could have realized his “fate” without being a thief led to the gallows.

I wish to add another point that Rav Dov makes with regard to this idea. The decision of the pauper-thief to accede to the king’s request that he reveal himself and his story is shown, surprisingly enough, to be another critical mistake. Admittedly, the king promises that no harm will come to the person who presents himself as the thief and confesses, and this is indeed his intention. But the king – metaphorically representing, as always, the King of the universe – does not rule the world directly, openly, or alone. God “contracted” Himself, as it were, in order to create the world, so that man would have free choice. One of the ramifications of this contraction is that God operates in the world in a concealed manner, via a mechanism of agents and of “din” (justice, boundaries), just as the king in the story rules his kingdom via his ministers and his courts. It is they who manage the kingdom in practice, not the king himself, who chooses to remain behind the scenes, such that his control is covert. This is a point that the thief does not take into account. In an ideal world, in which God’s Presence is unveiled, human honesty and proper behavior would always bring a favorable result. But that ideal world doesn’t exist. What we have is a world of *tzimtzum*, concealment, and boundaries, which – by nature – are sometimes arbitrary. The concealment and justice sometimes lead to pain and suffering, but they play an important role in allowing man to exist, to develop an identity, and to choose. A person must understand that this is how the world operates, and not expect a world in which everything is overt, God’s Presence is revealed, and goodness prevails exclusively.

We might propose that the ability to listen to the astrologer and view him as bearing God’s word in the world – if it is properly decoded and the “shells” discarded – is the understanding of this principle. At first glance, the astrologer represents something negative and even forbidden – at least, if we take him at face value, and his advice in its simplest sense. But if we understand that this is just an outer “shell,” we might be able to see beyond that, to the positive core within. More generally, the story might be teaching us something about the ability to listen to God’s voice speaking via every thing in the world, in which He is concealed in different ways; the ability to connect with Him and to find the path to Him via many different things, not only sitting in the *beit midrash*.

In the same way, for the pauper in the story as well, it is not proper to act in a completely exposed manner, and to reveal himself and the fact that he is the thief, with the belief that his honesty will exempt him from punishment. Let us think about what this means for our own lives. A Jew seeks God’s closeness. But he has to understand that in this world, the encounter with God is intermingled with “din.” It has to be that way, by definition – as it were, against the will of God, who had to contract Himself in order to create the world. Without that contraction, man could not exist, for there could be no free choice. Contraction entails concealment; it requires that the world include an element of mystery and hiddenness. It also entails acting through formal systems, such as the detailed system of *halakha*, with its technical, formal aspects. These systems have their disadvantages and failings, but it is how God chose to act in the world – via contraction. The Divine contraction defines a world with boundaries and limitations, and with the attribute of justice, which unfortunately also entails elements of estrangement and separation. For this reason, the *tzaddikim* don’t disseminate Torah that is open, but rather clothe it in a manner that allows it to be accepted and embraced.

To explain this further, let us consider an example from a slightly different conceptual world. The 20th-century Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas argued that man cannot truly relate to his fellow man as a subject in the same way that he experiences himself. My tools for understanding the person in front of me are limited. All I really know is my own way of thinking and my own feelings and sensations; I try to understand the other through these, but since he is truly “other,” my understanding of him will be deficient. It is inescapable that the way I relate to him will always involve some element of “object.” On the other hand, Levinas concedes, if I am willing to accept this limitation as my point of departure, then I can build a relationship with a moral aspect, with an understanding of the partiality and imprecision of the relations.

Another example that illustrates the idea is the marital relationship. We strive to have an open, completely honest relationship with our spouse, and of course this is essential. At the same time, we must conduct ourselves with great care and circumspection, because even the best marriage is not symbiosis: there always remains an otherness and difference; things always look somewhat different through the eyes of the other party, and therefore even absolute, complete honesty and openness at any given moment is not always what is best for the other side and for the relationship. Young couples, especially, sometimes profess an innocent belief that things don’t work that way, and that love is enough to bring about absolute oneness. The very view of the other person as a separate person, who exists in his own right, is conceptually connected to the attribute of *din* and to boundaries, but paradoxically, it is this that allows for greater good, understanding this otherness and differentness leads me to place a boundary where I end and the other begins. In addition, there is also something important in the idea of hiddenness, in the positive sense. Paradoxically, once again, the existence of hiddenness contributes to the relationship.

As I see it, this relates back to R. Nachman’s teaching, because it defines the role of boundaries, borders, and separation that eternally exist between people in this world. Consciousness of the concept of “stealing” or “concealment” means forgoing in advance the idea that I can have an encounter that is completely true, open, and direct – whether with another person or with God. In this world, there are “garments.” The garments facilitate God’s communications with us, as well as people’s communications with each other. The garments cover up and create concealment and mystery, but at the same time, they embody that which we choose to expose and to express. One of the advantages of the separation created by garments is that it is “on the table,” out in the open. A place that lacks this definition and separation, and that pretends to erase the boundaries between people, ultimately brings about great injustice and hurt. In this world, there is no option of bypassing or transcending the boundaries. Recognizing that reality facilitates the moral act of attempting to create an encounter, with an awareness of its limitations.

**The Story Within the Story**

In the story of the pauper thief, there is a stage at which he seeks to have the king rule on the argument between himself and the other thieves, and he disguises himself as the king’s storyteller during the night:

The next day, he [entered the palace and] began to shake the bed until the king awoke. Immediately, the king commanded the royal storyteller to tell him a story. However, the storyteller, too, was asleep. So the burglar took on the role of storyteller, recounting his story to the king, but in a disguised way. When he was through, he asked the king for his opinion about the dispute.

In view of the interpretation above, this is an important stage of the plot: the pauper in fact realizes his destiny as a “thief” in a different manner – not through stealing money or property, but by misleading the king (the Hebrew term *geneivat da’at* literally means “stealing the mind” of someone else, meaning to misguide him), in a manner that doesn’t harm him in any way. This manner of “stealing” aligns perfectly with R. Nachman’s description of how a *tzaddik* operates: “clothing” an idea within a story. The “theft” here is twofold: both the disguise as the storyteller and the way he tells the story, without exposing himself as the thief – “recounting his story to the king, but in a disguised way.” The story conceals his identity and protects him, but at the same time, it also effects a change in the real world, engaging the king and eliciting his response, causing him, in his wonder and curiosity, to seek the identity of the thief. Thus, the story within the story has the same effect as the stories told by *tzaddikim*: rousing a person to thought and action. This is the essence of what the pauper could have achieved more broadly by enlisting his abilities – if only he had better understood his “fate.”

Thus, at the heart of the story about the pauper and the astrologer lies an important statement about the power of stories, the centrality of the role of the storyteller, and his special closeness to the king. Perhaps this is also related to a different spiritual directive of R. Nachman: the regular practice of standing before God and addressing Him in one’s own words (usually, in the context of “*hitbodedut*” – solitary meditation/prayer), in which a person tells God his story. One might say that he “clothes” his prayer in a story. Indeed, R. Nachman says:

“*Hitbodedut*” is a supreme virtue, greater than all else – meaning that a person sets aside an hour or more to seclude himself in a room, or in a field, and to set forth his dialogue with his Creator, with arguments and justifications, words of favor and appeasement and conciliation… And this prayer and dialogue should be in the vernacular… and he should discuss and recount before God all that is in his heart… (*Likkutei Moharan*, 25)

**Returning to the Story in the Gemara**

With the insights gained from R. Nachman’s story, we now return to the narrative with which we started: that of Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak, in *Massekhet Shabbat*, who is also destined, according to the astrologer, to be a thief. His mother takes action, ensuring that his head always remains covered. In light of R. Nachman’s story, I would like to propose a symbolic, Chasidic, new interpretation of the idea of this covering. The act of stealing, as discussed, is characterized by “covering” or concealment; this is its essence. The constant covering of R. Nachman’s head might perhaps evoke the concept of covering in its positive sense; it recalls the covering, or concealment, beneath which God acts in the world. If used correctly, the covering is a tool that enables action, within this limited world – action that has an impact, penetrates, and achieves results. The mother connects the covering with “fear of Heaven,” which can be understood as that same system of *din* through which the world operates. Thus, the covering of the head that she initiates might be another type of covering, or “clothing” (like the foretold fate is a garment) – one that symbolizes the concealment through which God operates and communicates in the world, and through which man, too, communicates with others, giving expression to his inner self in a way that mediates it for others while also protecting him from over-exposure that could adversely affect the encounter.

In this way, R. Nachman’s story about the pauper, whose fate, or fortune, lay in stealing, allows us a new reading of the story in the Gemara, with new layers of meaning. (For the purposes of our discussion, it doesn’t matter if this reading wasn’t the conscious intention of the Talmudic redactors, who perhaps didn’t have access to the spiritual language that had developed by the time of R. Nachman.)

If we look more broadly at the theme that is common to the three stories in the Gemara, in the wake of the insights above, we may view “fate” as one of the modes of concealment through which God is active in the world. Thus, the *sugya* does not nullify or deny *mazal*. In the stories, it “works” – it has significance – but it is only part of the story. *Mazal* and its messengers – the astrologers – may present a distorted picture of reality, but they do contain a kernel of truth, arising as they do from God’s contraction of Himself at the time of creation, which left the world to be ruled by all sorts of forces, behind all of which He is concealed. This is what gives “fate” its power, while at the same time limiting it, such that good deeds – which are a more open and significant revelation of God in the world – prevail over them.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)