**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 #42: Rav Asi and His Mother, and the Rav and the Only Son (1)**

*Massekhet Kiddushin* includes a relatively well-known *sugya* dealing with honoring parents, whose point of departure is a *mishna* that discusses “the commandments of a father concerning his son” (*Mishna Kiddushin* 1:7). Part of the *sugya* is an aggadic unit comprising several aggadic statements as well as some stories on the topic of honoring parents, the best-known among them concerning Dama ben Netina and R. Tarfon and his mother. This aggadic unit concludes with the story of Rav Asi and his mother. I presented an extensive literary analysis of this story in an earlier series of *shiurim* for the VBM, and in my book, *Panim el Panim*. I will present a concise summary here of that analysis, followed by some additional insights into the story, and will then address a story by R. Nachman about relations with parents.

*Bavli Kiddushin* 31b

A

Rav Asi had an elderly mother. She said to him, “I want jewelry,” and he made [some] for her. [She said,] “I want a husband,” [and he replied,] “I will seek one for you.” [She said,] “I want a husband who is as handsome as you.” He left her and went to Eretz Yisrael.

B

He heard that she was following him [to Eretz Yisrael]. He came before R. Yochanan and said to him, “What is [the *halakha* regarding] leaving Eretz Yisrael to go outside of Eretz Yisrael?”

He said to him, “It is forbidden.”

[He said, “If it is] to welcome one’s mother?”

He replied, “I do not know.”

He waited a while, and then came back.

[R. Yochanan] said to him, “Asi, are you [then] determined to go? May the Omnipresent return you in peace.”

C

[R. Asi then] came before R. Elazar, and said, “Perhaps, God forbid, (R. Yochanan) is angry [with me]?”

He said to him, “What did he say to you?”

He said, “May the Omnipresent return you in peace.”

[R. Elazar] said, “Had he been angry, he would not have blessed you.”

D

Meanwhile, he heard that [his mother’s] coffin was coming. He said, “Had I known, I would not have left.”

The story comprises four scenes. In the first, which takes place in Babylonia, Rav Asi’s elderly mother makes three requests of her son. The third (that he find her a husband “as handsome as you”), which might be understood as a blurring of the line between spouse and son (and hence a sign of dementia), frightens him, and he flees from her to Eretz Yisrael. In the second scene, he hears that she is on the way, and asks his teacher, R. Yochanan, whether he may depart from the land (in order to meet her, to welcome or escort her). In the third scene, another disciple of R. Yochanan, R. Elazar, eases R. Asi’s concern, reassuring him that R. Yochanan’s words to him were meant not in anger, but in conciliation and blessing. In the final scene, R. Asi hears that his mother passed away and it is her coffin that is on its way to Eretz Yisrael, for burial. The story concludes with his words, “Had I known, I would not have left.” This may be interpreted in different ways, as we shall see below, but the simplest meaning seems to be that R. Asi is expressing regret over having fled from his mother and abandoning her a short time before her death. His words, and – more generally – a first glance of the story as a whole, convey a strong sense of a missed opportunity in terms of parent-child relations. R. Asi appears to have made a mistake in this realm, with tragic results. By the time he regrets it, it is too late, and his mother is gone.

The idea of a missed opportunity seems to sit well with the *sugya* as a whole. As noted, this story concludes a larger aggadic unit in (*Kiddushin* 31a-b) that includes several stories and anecdotes on the topic of honoring parents. Some of these describe successes in fulfilling the mitzva, but there are also stories that express the great difficulty it involves, and that even despair of fulfilling it. For example:

1. Concerning R. Tarfon, we are told that he would crouch so his mother could “step” on him as she climbed up to or down from her bed. But the response of his companions in the *beit midrash* suggests that even this impressive devotion, performed on a daily basis, does not approach even half of the fulfillment of the mitzva. To fulfill the mitzva more thoroughly, he would have to pass a much harder test, in which she would “throw a purse into the sea in front of you, and you would not embarrass her.”
2. R. Yochanan, the greatest of the *Amoraim* of Eretz Yisrael, declares, "Fortunate is he who never saw [his father and mother]” – i.e., who was orphaned at birth – and thus was never faced with the obligation of honoring them, which he apparently views as too great a challenge.[[1]](#footnote-1) The Gemara goes on to recount that R. Yochanan himself had in fact been orphaned at birth. He views his circumstances in a positive light, since proper fulfillment of the commandment to honor one’s parents seems to him entirely impossible. Of course, this is a very strong statement, and difficult to accept. The Gemara notes that Abaye was also an orphan and appears to concur with R. Yochanan’s view.

The only figure among this collection of stories who manages to meet the high standards that the Sages set for R. Tarfon is a non-Jew from Ashkelon, Dama ben Netina. But Dama is presented in the *sugya* as the “other” – the non-Jew, someone from the outside – and hence his success is not necessarily any indication of the chances that Jews, even Sages, will be able to meet their challenge. It is no coincidence that the Sages formulate the conditions for full and proper fulfillment of the mitzva as having the purse tossed in the sea “in front of his face” and “not embarrassing her” – directly paralleling the description of Dama’s success:

Once, he was dressed in a fine cloak of gold, and was sitting among the nobles of Rome. His mother came and tore [the garment] from him and struck him on the head, and **spat in his face**, and he **did not embarrass her**.

The story of Rav Asi and his mother – apparently another tragic chronicle of failure and missed opportunity – concludes the *sugya*, sealing it on a pessimistic note.

However, this is not the only way of reading the story. We might propose a closer literary reading, which illuminates it in a different light.

**Structure of the story**

As noted, the story of R. Asi can be divided into four parts. As J. Rovner has shown,[[2]](#footnote-2) the Jerusalem Talmud offers a similar narrative that parallels the middle sections of our story (B,C):

R. Asi heard that his mother was coming to Botzra.

He came and asked R. Yochanan: “Is it permissible to leave [Eretz Yisrael, to greet her]?”

He said to him, “If [you wish to escort her] because of the danger of the roads, go. If it is to honor your mother, I do not know…”

He pressed upon him [returning repeatedly to ask], and [R. Yochanan] said, “Have you then decided to go? May you come in peace.”

R. Elazar heard this and said, “There is no greater permission than this.” [I.e., R. Yochanan’s blessing is an indication of his permission.] (Jerusalem Talmud, *Nazir* 7:1, 56a)

In the *Yerushalmi*, this story stands alone. Sections B and C of the *Bavli*, which focus on the interaction between R. Asi and R. Yochanan, could also – with minor adaptations – stand alone as a story. One might also connect parts A and D, which concern the dynamics between R. Asi and his mother, without the intervening sections, and they too could stand alone as a story in their own right.

This view of the story in the *Bavli*, as comprising two stories that could also exist separately, shows that the narrative as a whole is built as a story (B-C) within a story (A-D). The molding of the narrative in this way allows a new reading that imbues Rav Asi’s words at the end: “Had I known, I would not have left,” with new meaning. The plain reading, as noted, has two possible interpretations. First, the reading mentioned above: “Had I known that my mother was soon to die, I would not have left Babylonia and abandoned her, even though it was hard for me to bear what she was saying; I would have stayed to be with her in her final days.” Alternatively, the second reading: “Had I known that my mother was on her way to Eretz Yisrael *after death*, for burial, I would not have left Eretz Yisrael, for the prohibition of leaving the land would have prevailed over the mitzva of honoring her in that case.” However, the relationship between the two parts of the story offers a different reading.

In parts B-C, R. Asi is anxious; he fears that R. Yochanan’s final answer to him expresses anger. This interpretation of R. Yochanan’s words is dismissed by R. Elazar, who explains R. Yochanan’s intention on the basis of his familiarity with their teacher. Parts B-C – the encounter with R. Yochanan – are the “story within the story,” and here, as in many rabbinic narratives, the main character undergoes a process whereby he learns something new about himself. Rovner[[3]](#footnote-3) offers one possibility: that Rav Asi becomes familiar with his strengths. His situation in the beginning is one of inner weakness, which causes him, inter alia, to flee from having to deal with his (domineering?) mother. He learns that he has the strength and the tools to deal with dilemmas. How does he learn this? From his dialogue with R. Yochanan. R. Yochanan does not offer a direct ruling on the question that R. Asi poses to him, which involves a clash between two values – honoring his mother, and the sanctity of Eretz Yisrael. Eventually, when R. Asi insists, R. Yochanan tells him, “Asi, are you [then] determined to leave? May the Omnipresent return you in peace.” R. Asi at first understands this response as an expression of anger at his pressing for an answer, rather than accepting his teacher’s refusal to rule. But R. Elazar gives the response a different interpretation. After R. Elazar’s explanation, R. Asi revisits R. Yochanan’s answer, and understands it differently: R. Yochanan was not angry about his independent will; on the contrary, he sought to encourage it. He makes the answer to the question dependent on Rav Asi’s own inner decision: “Asi, you are determined to leave (in the Hebrew, his words can be read either as a question or as a statement),” and gives validity to this decision by adding his blessing, “May the Omnipresent return you in peace.” Rav Asi therefore learns from this exchange that the power and the answers lie within himself.

We might also offer a different possibility, in which R. Asi learns an important lesson about his encounter with the world and the way he interprets reality. He might conclude, on the basis of his two exchanges, that he views innocent, neutral phenomena with glasses that are too dark, too anxious.

With this lesson learned by R. Asi (emerging from the “story within the story”), we can go back to the larger story – the relationship between R. Asi and his mother. His flight from her is prompted by her statement, “I want a husband as handsome as you are.” According to Rovner’s interpretation, R. Asi is empowered and now believes that his inner strength could have stood up to the challenge of dealing with his mother’s infirm mental state. According to the second interpretation, R. Asi learns that he has an inclination towards interpreting reality in a negative way, which does not necessarily reflect the objective situation. He appears to have interpreted his mother’s words in a negative way, believing that in her senility she is imagining him as her prospective groom.[[4]](#footnote-4) This sort of intent would indeed be disturbing and frightening, and his instinctive reaction of flight is understandable. But perhaps this isn’t what she meant. With his new insight into his own way of thinking and the way his anxieties influence his interpretation of reality, Rav Asi reconsiders the meaning of her words. Perhaps they might be understood differently; perhaps her innocent intention was to compliment him, or to express her love for him and her wish that he remain close to her. In light of these possibilities, he declares that had he known then what he knows now (about his interpretations of reality and the possibility of understanding things differently) he would not have left (i.e., he never would have left her in the first place).

This ending to the story is still somewhat tragic. R. Asi himself has missed his opportunity. His mother cannot be restored to life, and his abandonment of her cannot be retracted. But what the reader gains from the story is not pessimistic at all. Through R. Asi’s personal journey, the reader is able to undergo an inner process of his own, and this process may change the way he acts in the world. He may have a new view of relationships – especially inter-generational ones, which are often rife with gaps and misunderstandings – that allows for new interpretations, a smoothing of communications, and a bridging of gaps.

In view of this, we might also read the fact that the *sugya* concludes with R. Asi’s story in a different way. The *sugya* is not leaving us with the idea that honoring parents is an impossible mission; rather, thanks to R. Asi’s bitter experience, it allows us to learn an important lesson. Often, the relations between parents and children are shaped by age gaps, personality gaps, and generation gaps, leading to a mutual lack of understanding of each other’s needs. All of this can easily cause communication problems. The insight arising from the story – the awareness that our understanding of the desires and responses of the other side are sometimes the result of our own internal fixed thought patterns, rather than a reflection of their real thoughts – may make a significant contribution to the relationship between the sides, and improve our ability to fulfill the mitzva of honoring parents. Admittedly, as we see both in this story and in others in the *sugya*, the mitzva remains a difficult challenge. But R. Asi’s story, which concludes the *sugya*, opens an important direction of thinking that can shed light on at least part of the source of the difficulty, and the possibilities for better fulfillment of the mitzva.

**Three partners in the creation of man**

Another central idea in the *sugya* that may be illuminated in a new way by the story of R. Asi is the comparison of the parent-child relationship and the relationship one has with God. This point arises at different points in the *sugya*, in statements and in stories, including the following:

Our Sages taught: It is written (*Shemot* 20:12), “Honor your father and your mother,” and it is written (*Mishlei* 3:9), “Honor the Lord with your wealth.” [By using the same command, “honor,”] the text equates the honoring of one’s father and mother to the honoring of the Omnipresent…

Our Sages taught: There are three partners in [the creation of] a person: the Holy One, blessed be He, and his father, and his mother. When a person honors his father and his mother, the Holy One, blessed be He, says: I consider it as though I dwelled among them and they honored Me…

A *Tanna* taught a *beraita* before R. Nachman: When a person causes his father and his mother anguish, the Holy One, blessed be He, says: I did well in not dwelling among them, for had I dwelled among them, they would have caused Me anguish…

Rav Huna, son of R. Yehoshua, would not walk four cubits with his head uncovered. He said: The Divine Presence is above my head…

When Rav Yosef would hear his mother’s footsteps, he would say: I shall stand before the Divine Presence that is arriving… (*Kiddushin* 30b-31b)

In the simplest sense, this comparison emphasizes two points. First, the obligation of honoring parents and the obligation of honoring the Divine Presence share a common reason: “There are three partners in the creation of a person….” Second, the importance and severity of the responsibility of honoring parents, which is compared with honoring the Divine Presence. This fundamental principle gives rise to the very high standards of the mitzva, as characterized in the *sugya*.

In view of the interpretation offered above for the story of R. Asi, there is a third point to be made in relation to the comparison between parents and the Divine Presence, and this is perhaps yet another contribution of the story to the *sugya* as a whole. The story raises the issue of the difficulty in inter-generational communications, or, more generally, the difficulty of communications between two people who are separate and different. Thus, the story might illuminate, within its context in the *sugya*, a fundamental difficulty that also characterizes a person’s relationship with God. One of the great challenges facing the believer in his relationship between God is communication: the lack of direct, clear, two-way messaging. The believer lives, prays, and serves God with some degree of uncertainty as to what God wants of him at any given moment, and concerning God’s thoughts and view of him: Is God pleased with him? Is he acting generally as he should, or should he be taking a different direction in his religious service and in the way he conducts his life? These questions have no clear answer, and this is one of the difficulties of religious life. Perhaps the suggestions arising from R. Asi’s story have something to offer on this question, too: the personal empowerment that R. Asi undergoes, in the area of decision-making when uncertain or in learning to live with the uncertainty, may serve a person in his service of God, too.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

1. Commenting on the words, “Fortunate is he who never saw,” Rashi explains his meaning: “For it is impossible to honor them to the degree that he is required to, and he is punished because of them.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. J. Rovner, “‘Rav Assi had this Old Mother’: The Structure, Meaning, and Formation of a Talmudic Story,” in: *Creation and Composition: The Contribution of the Bavli Redactors (Stammaim) to the Aggada* (edited by J. L. Rubenstein), Tübingen, 2005, pp. 101-124. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. pp.106-108. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Some of the commentators understand her statement in this light. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)