**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 #43: Rav Asi and His Mother, and the Rav and the Only Son (2)**

In the previous *shiur*, we discussed the story of Rav Asi and his mother (*Bavli Kiddushin* 31b) and the complexity of relationships between parents and children – especially from the perspective of children towards their parents. A different perspective on these relationships, from the opposite direction, arises from a story by R. Nachman of Breslav – "The Story of the Rabbi and the Only Son" (*Sippurei Ma'asiyot*, 5576).[[1]](#footnote-1) The story touches on complex and painful aspects of the relationship, some of which recall the difficulties raised in the Talmudic narrative.

There was once a rabbi who had no children. Later, he had an only son, and he raised him, and married him off. [The son] would sit in an attic and study [Torah], in the manner of those supported by the wealthy. He would study and pray constantly, but he felt himself deficient in some way; he did not know what was lacking, but he felt no purpose in his study and his prayer. He told this to two young people, and their advice was that he should travel to a certain *tzaddik*. And this son had performed a certain mitzva, by virtue of which he was comparable to the "lesser luminary.”

Now, this only son went and told his father that he wasn't feeling any purpose in his [Divine] service, and that something was deficient but he didn't know what it was, and that he wanted to journey to that *tzaddik*. His father answered him, "How do you come to [decide to] travel to him? For you are more learned than him, and your pedigree is better than his. It is not proper that you travel to him; desist from this path," thereby dissuading him from going.

So [the son] returned to his studies, but again he felt the same deficiency, and again he consulted the same people, and they advised him, as before, to go to the *tzaddik*. Again he went to his father, and his father dissuaded him and prevented him [from going]. This happened several times.

The son felt that something was missing, and he longed to fill the void, but he knew not with what. So he approached his father again, and pleaded with him, until his father was compelled to travel with him, for he didn't want to let his son travel alone, being that he was his only son. His father said to him, "Look, I will go with you, and I will show you that he has no substance."

They harnessed the carriage and set off. The father said, "I will make this the test: if everything goes smoothly, then it is from Heaven; if not, it is not from Heaven, and we will turn back." They traveled and came to a narrow bridge, and one of the horses fell; the carriage overturned, and they nearly drowned. The father said, "See, it's not going smoothly; this journey is not [ordained] from Heaven." And they returned.

Again the son went back to his study, and again he experienced the same deficiency that he had felt before, and that he couldn't define. Again he beseeched his father, as before, and again he was forced to travel with him. When they set off, his father set the same test as before: whether the journey would proceed smoothly. Now it happened while they we traveling that both axles [of the carriage] broke. His father said, “See, it's not going smoothly. Is it normal for both axles to break?!" For they had traveled in that carriage many times, and nothing like this had happened [in the past]. So they turned back.

The son resumed his way as before, and again felt the same lacking, and the people advised him to travel. He went back to his father and begged him all over again, and his father was compelled to travel with him again. The son said to him, “Let’s not make that sort of test again – since it's natural that a horse sometimes falls, or that axles sometimes break – unless something really unusual happens." And they set off. They came to an inn to spend the night, and found a merchant there. They began talking with him, in the manner of merchants, but didn't mention their destination to him, for the Rabbi was embarrassed to say that he was going to that *tzaddik*. So they discussed worldly matters, until the conversation came around to *tzaddikim* and where *tzaddikim* are to be found. [The merchant] told them that there was a *tzaddik* in this place, and in that, and also another. And they began talking about the *tzaddik* that they were traveling to. He said to them, "Him? He's not serious. I've just come from him. I was there; he committed a transgression." The father then said to his son, "You see, my son, what this merchant is saying, without even knowing [what our destination was]? And he's just come from there." And they went back home.

Then the son passed away. He appeared to his father, the rabbi, in a dream, in a state of great anger. [His father] asked him, "Why are you so angry?" He replied, "Go to the *tzaddik* (to which he had intended to travel with his son), and he will tell you why I am angry." [The father] woke up, and said, "It's just a dream." He dreamed of [his son] again, and [again] he brushed it off as "just a dream," and likewise a third time. Then he understood that there must be something to it, and he went. On the way, he bumped into the same merchant that he had met previously, when he traveled with his son. He recognized him and said, "Wasn't it you that I saw at that inn?" [The merchant] answered, "Of course you saw me." And he opened his mouth wide and said, "If you want, I'll swallow you up." He said, "What are you talking about?" And he answered, "Remember when you traveled with your son, first the horse stumbled on the bridge, and you turned back. Then the axles broke. Then you met me, and I told you that [the *tzaddik*] wasn’t serious. And now that I have caused him – your son – to die, you may now travel. For he was comparable to the "lesser luminary," while that *tzaddik* is comparable to the "greater luminary.” Had they met, Mashiach would have come. Now that I caused him to die, you may travel." And as he was talking, he disappeared, and [the father] was left talking to no one. So the rabbi traveled to the *tzaddik*, and he cried, “A shame! A shame! A shame, for those who are lost and not forgotten. May the blessed God speedily bring back our forsaken ones. Amen."

(A hint from R. Nachman: That merchant was Samael himself, who appeared as a merchant and tricked them. Afterwards, when he met the rabbi again, he tormented him for having listened to his advice, for this is his way, as everyone knows; may the blessed God deliver us.)

Here again is a story of a lost or missed opportunity. The father has lost his only son, and their relationship, too, loses out along the way. Throughout the story, R. Nachman offers a detailed portrayal of the father, not only in words or descriptions, but also – and especially – through his actions.

The father is opposed to his son visiting the *tzaddik*. We may assume that the background to this position is the profound opposition that prevailed in the past on the part of Jewish orthodoxy towards *Chasidut*. Today, the opposition seems difficult to understand. What was it about *Chasidut* that caused the leaders of the *Mitnagdim* (literally, "opponents") to be so fiercely and implacably antagonistic towards the movement? It is important to understand the dispute in the historical context in which it arose. Of course, the scope of this *shiur* does not allow for extensive discussion of the history; the roots of the dispute go back to the great crises of world Jewry in the 16th and 17th centuries, including the Spanish expulsion in 1492, whose effects were felt throughout the 16th century, and the bloody pogroms in Eastern Europe (the Chmielnicki Massacres of 1648-1649 and many others). These calamities were intensified and transformed into an even more profound spiritual crisis following the debacle of the false messiahs Shabbetai Tzvi and Yaakov Frank. All of this looms large in the background to the concerns and fears on the part of the *Mitnagdim*. Even if their attitude towards *Chasidut* turned out to be overly suspicious – as *Chasidut* did not take the path of the false messiahs – we can still understand the extreme anxiety and sensitivity that prompted their sometimes intense and even violent opposition.

In the case of the father in the story, this opposition becomes an obsession that goes beyond reasoned opposition to a particular *tzaddik*. He opposes the journey from the outset, and again and again. Each time his son's pleas cause him to yield, the same pattern repeats itself: he insists on traveling with his son, not allowing him at any point to undertake the journey alone. He maintains a firm, unremitting grasp on his son, profound in an inner sense as well as on the practical level.

There is also the matter of the "signs.” Contrary to the father's declarations, such "signs" have no objective meaning; rather, each is an event that is open to interpretation. Of course, the father's interpretation is greatly influenced by his initial bias against the *tzaddik* and the idea of traveling to him. We might perhaps go further and propose that the signs function somewhat as self-fulfilling prophecies. The father anticipates all sorts of hurdles and inconveniences along the way, which will symbolize Heavenly opposition to the journey, and these indeed occur. I wouldn't go so far as to say that he consciously causes these problems to happen, but on the subconscious level, it is possible that the way he drives the horses and the carriage is influenced by his mood and frame of mind, and perhaps this is how the "accidents" come about. The narrator gives expression to this view of the "signs" and their interpretation in the son's suggestion after the first two journeys. The son, who apparently understands that the signs need not be viewed as objective occurrences, suggests a condition for the third journey: they will not regard a potentially coincidental or natural phenomenon as Heavenly opposition. In so doing, he reinterprets what happened on the two previous journeys.

But the Satan is smarter than that, and at this stage, disguises himself as a more "objective" sign: a merchant who chatters "without knowing (his listeners' destination)" and has harsh words to say about the *tzaddik*. Is this then indeed an objective sign? Not necessarily. A person who wants to meet a *tzaddik* will not necessarily be swayed by a stranger who speaks badly of him. But in view of the father's deep-seated bias, it is difficult to expect any other result. The Satan, in disguise, manages to execute a very targeted, very precise attack that is far more effective than a mere technical hitch involving the carriage. He manages to besmirch the *tzaddik* himself, in a manner that echoes the father's own words from the beginning of the story.

The technique attributed to the Satan here is not new. The reader is immediately reminded of the *midrash* about the binding of Yitzchak: a father sets off with his beloved only son, who was born after many years of childlessness; on the way, he meets the Satan, who has come in disguise with all sorts of religious, moral, and emotional arguments to dissuade him from his mission. In both stories, the Satan tries to sow religious doubt on the continuation of the journey. Avraham, who adheres to his faith and to God's command, is not convinced. Ultimately, he is not required to sacrifice Yitzchak, and he is granted his son back, alive. In R. Nachman's story, however, the father yields to the Satan's temptation and goes back to where he came from – but loses his son.

After the third unsuccessful journey, the son dies. The story does not state the cause of death, but we may assume that it has to do with the son’s distress and anguish. The son, as has been described several times in the story, has lost his sense of purpose in life; he finds no meaning in what he is doing. He needs spiritual renewal like oxygen, but the father withholds it from him. It is not for nothing that the story repeats over and over that the son finds his Torah study and prayer to be meaningless. We might say that the father, in refusing to let go of him, ends up suffocating him.

Let us consider this story against the background of the story of Rav Asi and his mother. Rav Asi flees from his mother when he feels “suffocated.” Perhaps he needs to make this break and needs his independence, such that the tragic end of the story is inevitable. However, as we discussed in the previous *shiur*, part of what causes him to flee is also related to the inner world of his thoughts and interpretation of reality. From this perspective, the story of Rav Asi is also a story about a certain measure of success: he learns to break through the constrictive bubble of his thoughts – a bubble that can develop in anyone’s head around different perceptions and inclinations and the “spectacles” through which one views reality. Even if this breakthrough comes too late for R. Asi in terms of his relationship with his mother, and a physical encounter with her is no longer possible, he is still “reunited” with her in a certain sense by virtue of the new interpretation that he is able to give to her wishes, as simply a desire to be close to him and nothing more. In contrast, the father in R. Nachman’s story loses his son in the most tragic way because he maintains his own perceptions and his rigid grasp on his son; he cannot let go.

It seems to me no coincidence that the question of the ability to break out of one’s conceptions and interpretations, into a broader, more objective reality, is a significant theme in both of these stories. Both deal with the relations between parents and children, which are built on communication. Communication can be challenging between any two parties, and in the context of the relationship between parents and children, the generation gap adds its own element of difficulty. Dealing with this challenge depends, to a considerable extent, on the ability of both sides to break free of their perceptions and see things from the perspective of the other side. And the ability to break free of perceptions, in turn, depends on successful communication.

**The son – the “lesser luminary”**

Much of the responsibility in R. Nachman’s story lies with the father, but what about the son? What is his part in the tragedy?

One interpretation, proposed by Michal Schwartz,[[2]](#footnote-2) attributes some of the responsibility to the son. She quotes from Kafka’s *Dearest Father*:

Sometimes I imagine a map of the earth laid out and you stretched diagonally across it. And then it seems to me that I can only lead my own life in those areas that are neither covered by your body, nor within your reach.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Schwartz argues:

Now, the question is no longer how it is possible to live in the shadow of such a controlling and forceful father, but rather how the son can find his way in the places that his father has not found. Thus, the responsibility passes to the son to find an opening to emerge from his father’s sphere of influence, and thereby to assume responsibility for his life.

I am not certain that Schwartz is correct. Is the son, in the situation described in the story, truly able to free himself from the grasp of this “controlling” father? It is interesting that R. Nachman, in a sort of parenthetical comment in the midst of the story, notes that the son had performed some mitzva by virtue of which he had become comparable to the “lesser luminary” – a term that refers to the moon. If we go back to the insights gained from a previous *shiur* in this series, about the moon,[[4]](#footnote-4) we see that it is a very apt metaphor for the son. The son feels that his life is lacking something. He is not willing to remain in his static state in his familiar world; he is ready to try something new and to rejuvenate himself, like the moon, which is characterized by waxing and waning. On the other hand, he is unable to emerge from his “smallness” and to grow. The combination between the pressure applied by the father and the scheming of the Satan is too much for him, leaving him unable to free himself – and not necessarily by his own fault. I believe that R. Nachman does not blame the son for this failure, but rather regards him as a tragic victim. His focus is on the father, the possibilities that “might have been,” and the missed opportunity – “A shame, for those who are lost….”

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

1. Z. Mark, *Kol Sippurei Rabbi Nachman mi-Breslav: Ha-Ma'asiyot, ha-Sippurim ha-Sodiim, ha-Chalomot ve-ha-Chizyonot*, Jerusalem 5774, pp. 256-257. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Zusha website [here](https://zusha.org.il/interpretation/%d7%9e%d7%a2%d7%a9%d7%94-%d7%9e%d7%a8%d7%91-%d7%95%d7%91%d7%9f-%d7%99%d7%97%d7%99%d7%93/). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Translated by Hannah and Richard Stokes, Oneworld Classics Ltd., Surrey, 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See *shiurim* 3-4 in this series. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)