**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 #44: The Story of R. Pinchas ben Yair, and Chasidic Stories (1)**

The countless rabbis, sages, and spiritual leaders depicted in various sources throughout the generations differ from each other and may be characterized in different ways. One type of prism through which we might choose to view an array of sages is their attitude toward the physical, material world. Another point of comparison might be the complexity with which each figure is depicted (ultimately, this amounts to their complexity in our view, since this is the only way we encounter them): are they one-dimensional, perfect figures, portrayed only in positive terms, or are we shown a more nuanced view that also exposes weaknesses or mistakes?

The following story presents two figures who are different in this sense, creating tension at their point of encounter.

The first *sugya* in *Massekhet Chullin* deals with the question of who is fit to perform *shechita* for kosher meat, and in the course of the halakhic discussion,[[1]](#footnote-1)  the Gemara mentions “animals of *tzaddikim*.” The *sugya* ends with the question, “What is [meant by] ‘animals of *tzaddikim’*?” and offers a lengthy *aggada* in response:

A.

R. Pinchas ben Yair was on his way to engage in the redemption of captives when he came to the Ginai River.

He said to the river: Ginai, part your water for me so I can pass through you.

[The river] said to him: You are going to perform the will of your Maker, and I am going to perform the will of my Maker [i.e., to continue flowing]. [With regard to] you, it is uncertain whether you will perform [His will] or not. [But] I will certainly perform His will.

R. Pinchas ben Yair said to it: If you do not part, I decree upon you that water will never flow through you. [The river] parted for him.

There was [with him] a certain man who was carrying wheat [for the preparation of *matza*] for Pesach. R. Pinchas ben Yair said to the river: Part [your waters] for him, too, since he is engaged in [performing] a mitzva. The river parted for him.

There was an Arab who was accompanying them. R. Pinchas ben Yair said to [the river]: Part [your waters] also for him, so that he will not say: Is that how one treats a person who is accompanying him? The river parted for him.

Rav Yosef said: How great is this man, [greater even] than Moshe and the six hundred thousand who left Egypt! For there [the waters parted] once, and here [they parted] three times. But perhaps here too, the waters parted just once [and then resumed its flow only after all three of them had passed]? Hence [we conclude that he was *as* great] as Moshe and the six hundred thousand.[[2]](#footnote-2)

B.

[R. Pinchas ben Yair then] happened upon an inn. They gave his donkey some barley, but it would not eat. They sifted it, but still [the donkey] would not eat. They picked carefully through it [but still] it would not eat. [R. Pinchas] said to them: Perhaps it was not tithed? They tithed it, and [the donkey] ate. He said: This poor creature is going to perform the will of its Maker, and you feed it untithed produce?!

But does produce meant for animal consumption then actually require tithing? After all, we learn in the Mishna: “One who purchases [grain] for sowing, or for animal [feed]… is exempt from [tithing it as] *demai* [i.e., produce concerning which it is not clear whether or not it was tithed]!” [The answer is that] there it was stated that R. Yochanan said: “They taught this only in the case where the grain was purchased in the first place for animal [feed], but if it was purchased for human consumption and then the owner changed his mind [to use it] for animal [feed], then he is obligated to tithe.” And it is taught in a *beraita*: “One who purchases fruit from the market for human consumption, and then reconsiders [and decides] to use it for animals, he may not place it before either his own animal or someone else’s animal before tithing it.”

C.

Rebbi [Yehuda Ha-Nasi] heard and went out to greet [R. Pinchas ben Yair]. He said to him: Would you like to dine with me? He said: Yes. Rebbi [Yehuda Ha-Nasi] beamed [literally, “yellowed,” with pleasure]. [R. Pinchas ben Yair] said to him: Do you imagine that I have taken a vow not to derive benefit from the Jewish people [and that it is for that reason that I do not usually accept invitations]? The Jewish people are holy. [But] there are some who wish [to invite] but do not have [the means], and there are others who have [the means] but do not wish to [invite], and as it is written, “Do not eat the bread of one who has an evil eye, and do not desire his delicacies. For like one who has reckoned within himself, so is he. He says to you, ‘Eat and drink,’ but his heart is not with you” (*Mishlei* 23:6-7). But you [R. Yehuda Ha-Nasi] want [to invite guests], and you have [the means]. However, right now I must refuse, since am rushing to perform a mitzva; when I return, I will come to you.

When he came [back], he happened to enter through a doorway where [R. Yehuda Ha-Nasi’s] white mules [dangerous animals; see *Yerushalmi Yoma* 8:5] were standing. He said: The angel of death is in his house, and I should eat with him?! R. Yehuda Ha-Nasi heard this and came out to meet him. He said: I will sell them. He replied: [But what of the prohibition,] “You shall not place a stumbling block before the blind”? [I.e., someone may buy them without knowing the danger they pose.] [He said to him:] I will declare them ownerless. [He said to him:] That will only increase the damage [for there will be no owner to take responsibility for them]. [He said:] I will remove their hooves [so they will no longer pose a danger], but he said to him: There is [a prohibition against] causing suffering to animals. [He said:] I will kill them. [To which he replied:] There is [a prohibition] not to destroy [items of value]. R. Yehuda Ha-Nasi implored him greatly, until a mountain arose between them. R. Yehuda Ha-Nasi wept and said: If [the righteous are like this] during their lifetime, how much more so after their death?! As R. Chama bar Chanina says, “The righteous are greater after their death, more so than during their lifetimes.” […]

It was said of R. Pinchas ben Yair that he never broke bread that was not his own, and from the day he could think for himself, he did not benefit from a meal [even] of his father. (*Chullin* 7a)

The story comprises three acts, each of which takes place in a different setting. The overall framework is R. Pinchas ben Yair’s journey to redeem captives, with each act representing an incident or challenge along the way. At this stage, following an initial, superficial review of the story, we might ask what connects the three acts. Are they simply a series of events that happen during his journey, and for this reason they are juxtaposed? Or do they share some common theme beyond the technical, chronological level?

This question comes into sharper focus in light of parallels in the *Yerushalmi* to the different parts of the story. There we find a series of anecdotes about R. Pinchas ben Yair, three of which largely parallel the parts of the story in the *Bavli* in *Chullin*, but with some differences in the plot.

The following are the parallels from the *Yerushalmi* (*Massekhet* *Demai* 1:3, 24d[[3]](#footnote-3)):

1. R. Pinchas ben Yair’s donkey was stolen in the night. She was hidden with [the thieves] for three days, during which she refused to eat. After three days, they decided to return the donkey to her owner. They said: We will return her to her owner so she will not die in our possession and cause the cave to stink. They brought her out, and she went and stood at her owner’s gate, braying. He said to [those present]: Open up for the poor thing; she has eaten nothing for three days. They opened for her, and she entered. He said to them: Give her something to eat. They placed barley before her, but she did not want to eat. They told him: She doesn’t want to eat. He said to them: Is [the barley] fresh? They said: Yes. He asked: And did you tithe it as *demai*? They said: No, for did Rebbi not teach: “If one buys for sowing, for [feeding] animals, for flour, for hides, for oil for the lamp, or for oiling vessels, then he is exempt from *demai*”? He said to them: What then shall we do with this unfortunate animal, who is very stringent with herself? So they tithed, and she ate.

2. R. Pinchas b. Yair was on his way to the house of study [lit., assembly], when the [River] Ginnai rose up. He said: Ginnai, Ginnai, why are you keeping me from the house of study? So it parted for him, and he crossed over. His students asked him: Can we, too, cross over? He told them: Someone who knows that he never in his life mistreated a fellow Jew can pass over and no harm will come to him.

3. Rebbi wished to permit produce of the seventh year. R. Pinchas b. Yair came to him. Rebbi said to him: How is the produce doing? He answered: The chicory [or endives; an herb that grows without the need for any human care] is doing well…. [from this] Rebbi knew that [R. Pinchas b. Yair] did not agree with his intention.

He asked him: Would the rabbi agree to eat something small with us today? He answered: Yes. When he came down [to eat with them], he saw Rebbi’s mules standing there. He said: Are Jews feeding all of these [animals]? Perhaps he will not see me again! They went and reported this to Rebbi. Rebbi sent messengers, hoping to appease him. They came to his city. He said: People of my city – come close to me. The people of his city came and encircled him. They said to them: Rebbi wishes to appease [R. Pinchas b. Yair]. [The people of the city] left him and went on their way. He said: My cousins, come close to me. A fire descended from heaven and surrounded him. They went and reported this to Rebbi. He said: Since we have not merited satisfaction from his company in this world, let us merit it in the World to Come.

In the *Yerushalmi*, each of the three stories stands alone, with no connection between them. Nevertheless, considering the similarities between the two sources, they seem to be telling the same stories. How, then, do we explain the differences?

One possibility is that the different traditions about R. Pinchas ben Yair were passed down through different “channels” in different places. In one tradition, transmitted in Eretz Yisrael up until the time of the *Amoraim*, each of the three incidents took place in separate circumstances, as portrayed in the *Yerushalmi*. The tradition in Babylonia, on the other hand, maintained that all three events took place within the framework of R. Pinchas ben Yair’s journey, and in a manner slightly different from the details in the *Yerushalmi*.

Another possibility, which seems more likely in view of the differences in the details and the molding of the story in the *Bavli*, is that the story as it appears in the *Bavli* is a product of literary development and processing of the traditions in the *Yerushalmi*, or of some similar source predating the traditions in the *Bavli*. Viewing it from this perspective, we might suggest that the literary work in the *Bavli* weaves three brief vignettes together into a single story with a logical narrative progression. If this is so, we still need to explain what is gained by this technique. Does the long story have a distinct theme that is served by all three parts? In principle, we might propose that a single long story allows for gradual, cumulative portrayal of the main characters and presentation of the theme. We will explore whether this is the case in the *Bavli*. As to the integration of the story within the context of the *sugya* in the *Bavli*, as noted by Ofra Meir[[4]](#footnote-4) concerning the middle part (the story of the donkey):

Although it is the second story, it is the only one that explains the reason all three stories appear in the *sugya*. It comes in response to the question of what is meant by “animals of *tzaddikim*.”

I will discuss this statement later on, in light of a new perspective on the halakhic context and the integration of the story within it. But first, let us take another, closer look at the story itself.

**Analysis of the story in the *Bavli***

In the first part of the story in the *Bavli*, R. Pinchas ben Yair is introduced to us as someone who is on his way to engage in redeeming captives. This opening sentence is apparently meant as a sort of heading that covers all three anecdotes. He reaches the river and commands it to part so that he can continue on his way to perform the mitzva. At first, the river refuses, arguing that it is “performing the will of its Maker” by continuing to flow. Eventually, R. Pinchas ben Yair prevails, and the river parts to allow him to pass through.

Although the idea of the river “performing the will of its Maker” is not part of the story in the *Yerushalmi*, we do find similar statements concerning various natural phenomena in other, earlier sources, which might have inspired this formula in the *Bavli*. For instance, concerning the ocean’s adherence to its boundaries, we find:

“‘Do you not fear Me?’ says the Lord. ‘Will you not tremble before Me, who placed sand as a boundary for the sea, an everlasting ordinance which it cannot pass?’” (*Yirmeyahu* 5:22). The sea said: If I, lacking any of those [worries that trouble humans], fulfill the will of my Maker… (*Sifrei Bamidbar*, *Naso* 42)

Likewise, concerning the earth and the heavens:

"And the Lord called the dry land Earth (*eretz*)” – Why was it called *eretz*? Because it hastened (*ratzta*) to perform the will of its Maker. R. Natan said in the name of R. Acha, and R. Berachia in the name of R. Yitzchak: “I am God Almighty [*sha-dai*]” (*Bereishit* 17:1) – I am the One who [*she-*] said to the heavens and the earth: Enough [*dai*]. Had I not done so, they would have continued to expand until now. (*Bereishit Rabba* *parasha* 5, Theodor Albeck edition p. 37)

What is interesting about both *midrashim* is that these natural phenomena “perform the will of their Maker” specifically by restraining or limiting themselves, adhering to the boundaries that God set for them. In our story, in contrast, the river views the continuation of its flow as performing the will of its Maker, and it is R. Pinchas ben Yair who places a boundary (albeit a temporary one). Bearing the other sources in mind, his action is not necessarily a fundamental breach of the way Nature performs the will of its Maker. Perhaps the redactor’s inclusion of the expression “performing the will of my Maker” here, as in the earlier sources, is intended to hint to this idea.

Afterwards, R. Pinchas ben Yair commands that the river part for another man who is engaged in a mitzva (carrying wheat that will be used for making *matzot*), as well as for the non-Jew who is accompanying them. The scene presents R. Pinchas ben Yair as someone who engages in the mitzva of saving his fellow Jews as well as addressing the needs of those around him – the people accompanying him – and as possessing special spiritual powers. More importantly, it conveys, via the "response" of the river, the idea that the constant flow of water is not merely a physical phenomenon but is fundamentally a fulfillment of God’s will; the river flows because God wills it to. It can therefore be overcome by means of R. Pinchas ben Yair’s powers, which arise from his constant engagement in *mitzvot* and taking care of the needs of *Am Yisrael*. The river’s claim that R. Pinchas ben Yair may or may not succeed in fulfilling his God-given mission apparently makes no dent in his status as someone who is constantly occupied with God’s will. The river’s constant flow ultimately becomes a metaphor for and mirror image of R. Pinchas ben Yair.

The crossing of the river by R. Pinchas ben Yair obviously recalls the parting of the sea at the time of the Exodus.[[5]](#footnote-5) The mitzva that the other Jew is engaged in – bringing wheat from which to make *matzot* for Pesach – likewise evokes the Exodus. The non-Jew who crosses the river with them may be a symbolic representation of the “mixed multitude” (*erev rav*) that left Egypt with Bnei Yisrael, and R. Pinchas ben Yair’s task of redeeming captives likewise recalls Moshe, who leads Israel out of their captivity and slavery. Thus, R. Pinchas ben Yair’s character is cast in the first part of the story, inter alia, as a sort of replica of Moshe.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The second act focuses on R. Pinchas ben Yair’s donkey and what happens at the inn where they spend the night during their journey.[[7]](#footnote-7) The owners of the inn try unsuccessfully to feed the donkey produce that has the status of *demai* (which, according to the Mishna, does not require tithing when it is intended as animal feed). This part of the story is a thematic continuation of the previous one in two senses. First, the image of R. Pinchas ben Yair’s righteousness is reinforced when it turns out that even his donkey is punctilious in its observance of *halakha*. Secondly, R. Pinchas ben Yair explains that the reason for this punctiliousness is that the donkey is “on its way to fulfill the will of its Maker.” It seems that the main purpose of the story about the animal is to have it function as a reflection of its owner.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The character of R. Pinchas ben Yair is further molded, via the mirror-image of the donkey, as a figure who is constantly and continuously engaged in “performing the will of his Maker.” This point sheds further light on his ability to threaten the river and overpower it in the first part of the story: like the river, he, too, “flows” constantly on a path of performing God’s will. At the same time, the reader gradually becomes cognizant of something else about R. Pinchas ben Yair: in both parts of the story, he is forced to deal with elements that somehow interfere with his “performance of the will of his Maker” – the river, and the owners of the inn.

The third part of the story is different. It focuses not on R. Pinchas ben Yair alone, but on his encounter with Rebbi (R. Yehuda Ha-Nasi). At first, R. Pinchas ben Yair postpones Rebbi’s invitation until he has completed his mission of redeeming captives. This reinforces our impression of his devotion and dedication to his public activity. His response to Rebbi also reveals something else: he is careful not to take up invitations for meals from people who lack the means, or from those who are not truly, wholeheartedly willing to share a meal with him.

Interestingly, I have found no parallel to R. Pinchas ben Yair’s statement in earlier sources, but the *Bavli* itself does offer some similar positions, based on the same verse in *Mishlei*, and attributed to *Amoraim*:

R. Yehoshua ben Levi says: Anyone who derives benefit from miserly people transgresses a prohibition, as it is stated, “Do not eat the bread of one who has an evil eye [and do not desire his delicacies]. For like one who has reckoned within himself, so is he. He says to you, ‘Eat and drink,’ but his heart is not with you.” (*Mishlei* 23:6-7). R. Nachman bar Yitzchak says: He transgresses two prohibitions: “Do not eat…” and “Do not desire….” (*Bavli Sota* 38b)

It is possible that the inclusion of R. Pinchas ben Yair’s refusal to benefit from “miserly people,” based on the verse from *Mishlei*, within the story in the *Bavli* in *Chullin* – broadened to include a refusal to benefit from those who “want to [invite] but lack the means” – is a literary expansion based on the above Amoraic statements.

When R. Pinchas ben Yair returns from his mission, he discovers by chance that Rebbi keeps white mules in his house, apparently as part of his status as Nasi; they may have been something of a “status symbol” in those times. These are expensive animals (as suggested by the story in the *Yerushalmi*), but also dangerous. R. Pinchas ben Yair’s opposition to these animals, which he calls “the angel of death,” being kept in Rebbi’s house, causes him to refuse to eat there.

R. Pinchas ben Yair’s response and its formulation here – “The angel of death is in this house, and I should eat with him?!” – recalls a similar response in a different story that also relates to the world of “*chasidim*,” like R. Pinchas ben Yair, from the Tannaitic period. It tells of a *chasid* who is instructed by doctors that he must have fresh goat’s milk. However, the Sages had forbidden raising goats in Eretz Yisrael:

It once happened that there was a certain *chasid* who was groaning from [pain in] his heart. Doctors were consulted and they said, “He will not recover unless he suckles warm milk each morning.” So they brought a she-goat and tied it to the leg of the bed, and he suckled warm milk from it each morning. Sometime later, his friends came to visit him. Seeing the she-goat tied to the leg of the bed, they turned back, saying, “There is an armed bandit in this man’s house, and we are going in to him?!” (*Bavli Bava Kama* 80a, according to MS Hamburg 165)

The *chasid’s* friends – who, we may assume, are also *chasidim* – express themselves in a manner very similar to that of R. Pinchas ben Yair as he enters Rebbi’s house. They are shocked at the fact that the man keeps a goat – one of the domesticated animals which the Sages had forbidden to raise because of how it grazes, “stealing” and destroying vegetation (an “armed bandit”). Like R. Pinchas ben Yair, they mention the damage associated with the animal that the *chasid* is keeping, and like him, they refuse to enter the house. This story in the *Bavli* also has earlier parallels, in the Tosefta and in the *Yerushalmi*, with a statement that is similar but formulated slightly differently: “They said: How can we enter, when there are bandits with him in the house?” (*Sota* 9:10, 24a). The formulation in the *Bavli* is closer to the words of R. Pinchas ben Yair. Again, it may be that this is an example of literary molding by the redactors of the *Bavli*, whose phrasing of R. Pinchas ben Yair’s statement in *Chullin* is inspired by the story of the *chasid* and the she-goat in *Bava Kama*.

In the dialogue and negotiation that develops between R. Pinchas ben Yair and Rebbi, we get a visceral sense of R. Pinchas ben Yair’s shock and revulsion, which distance him from Rebbi. All of Rebbi’s suggestions for repairing the situation and mollifying R. Pinchas ben Yair are summarily rejected, to the extent that “a mountain arises between them” – they are divided by something that cannot be bridged. Deep down, the barrier between them is not just the result of a particular action, which might be reversed or changed, but rather the result of profoundly different worldviews and approaches to life, such that no attempt at repair on Rebbi’s part can be acceptable to R. Pinchas ben Yair.

It seems that this third part of the story – the chasm that opens between R. Pinchas ben Yair and Rebbi – is where the story in the *Bavli* has been leading, and represents its main theme. The heart of the story is not truly the journey to fulfill the mitzva of redeeming captives; that is merely the framework and part of the molding of R. Pinchas ben Yair’s character. The main theme is the encounter and conflict between two very different spiritual leaders of the time. The first two parts of the story present the figure of the lesser-known R. Pinchas ben Yair, and thereby create the background to the conflict between them in the third part. Once we are familiar with R. Pinchas ben Yair and his particular qualities, we have a better understanding of the gap and the tension between the two. R. Pinchas ben Yair represents the figure of the “*chasid*” in the period of *Chazal*.[[9]](#footnote-9) His life centers around a lofty ideal. Some of this focus finds expression in stringent religious observance in certain areas. He goes about with simple Jews and attends to their needs; he is also accompanied by non-Jews, over whom he extends his patronage. Rebbi, on the other hand, is the Nasi, scion of a noble and venerated family; he lives in a majestic home and has the airs of a ruler. His way of life is very different from that of R. Pinchas ben Yair, who recoils from the encounter between them.

In the next *shiur*, we will continue the discussion of the dissonant encounter and conflict between Rebbi and R. Pinchas ben Yair, and its role within the broader context of the *sugya*.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

1. I will address the halakhic discussion itself later on, with a more complete presentation of it. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The story includes a number of asides, here and further on, that are not integral to the story but are parenthetical comments pertaining to a particular point arising from it. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See also a parallel in *Shekalim* 5:1, and another in *Bereishit Rabba* 60:8, Theodor-Albeck edition pp. 648-649. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. O. Meir, “*Chamorato shel R. Pinchas ben Yair*,” *Mechkarim be-Aggada u-ve-Folklor Yehudi* (Ed. Y. Ben-Ami and Y. Dan), Jerusalem, 5743, p. 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Indeed, following the first part of the story, the *sugya* records R. Yosef’s comment in this regard and creates the obvious parallel between R. Pinchas ben Yair and Moshe. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. An even more radical idea may be suggested – that R. Pinchas ben Yair’s act of placing a boundary for the river echoes God’s placing a of a boundary for the ocean and for the heavens. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For the parallel to this anecdote in the *Yerushalmi*, and other parallels, see Meir (above, fn. 4), pp. 117-137. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The story of the donkey may also be meant as a continuation of the allusion to Moshe, who journeyed with a donkey on his way to redeeming Israel (*Shemot* 4:18). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For different characterizations of *chasidim* during *Chazal’s* era, see for example: S. Safrai, *Bi-Yemei ha-Bayit u-bi-Yemei ha-Mishna: Mechkarim be-Toldot Yisrael*, vol. 2, Jerusalem, 5754, pp. 501-539; Z. Falk, “*Mi-Mishnat Chasidim*,” *Sefer Zikaron le-Binyamin de-Vries* (Ed. E.Z. Melamed), Tel Aviv, 5729, pp. 62-69; D. Herman, *Chasidim Kadmonim: Ha-Chasidim u-Mishnatam bi-Yemei ha-Bayit ha-Sheni u-bi-Tekufat ha-Mishna ve-ha-Talmud*, Ph.D. dissertation, Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan, 5747, pp. 78-87, 113-118, 152-157, 235-240; M. Ben-Shalom, *Chasidut ve-Chasidim: Bi-Tekufat Bayit Sheni u-bi-Tekufat ha-Mishna*, Tel Aviv, 5768, pp. 206-448. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)