**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

**\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\***

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

**By Rav Dr. Yonatan Feintuch**

**Shiur #47: R. Yehuda ben Levi and Mashiach (1)**

The *mishna* in the tenth chapter of *Massekhet Sanhedrin* (*Perek Chelek*, which in the *Bavli* is the eleventh chapter) lists those who have no portion in the World to Come, starting with anyone who denies that belief in the resurrection of the dead has a source in the Torah. The first *sugya* on this *mishna* opens with the resurrection, followed by discussion of the future redemption and Mashiach, including the following story of R. Yehoshua ben Levi and Mashiach:

R. Yehuda ben Levi found Eliyahu standing at the entrance to the cave of R. Shimon bar Yochai. He said to him, “Will I merit the World to Come?”

He answered, “If our master here [lit. “this”] wishes it.”

R. Yehoshua ben Levi said, “I saw two, but heard the voices of three.” He said, “When will Mashiach come?”

[Eliyahu] answered, “Go and ask him.”

“Where is he sitting?”

He said to him, “At the entrance to Rome.”

“And how will I recognize him?”

“He is sitting among those afflicted by sores, with those suffering disease. And all of them untie and retie [their bandages] all at once, but he unties one and then reties it, for he thinks to himself: If I am called in the meantime, I shall not be delayed.”

[R. Yehuda ben Levi] went and found him. He said to him, “Peace be upon you, my Teacher.”

He answered him, “Peace be upon you, son of Levi.”

He said to him, “When will you come?”

[Mashiach] answered him: “Today.”

[Afterwards R. Yehuda ben Levi] went [back] to Eliyahu and said to him, “He lied to me.”

[Eliyahu] told him: “What he told you was, ‘Today – if you will listen to My voice’ (*Tehillim* 95:7).”

He said, “What else did he tell you?”

He said, “I said to him, Peace be upon you, my Teacher.”

“And what did he answer you?”

He said: “Peace be upon you, son of Levi.”

[Eliyahu] said: “[With those words] he promised both you and your father [a place in] the World to Come.” (*Bavli Sanhedrin* 98a; the story appears here as per MS Yad Ha-rav Herzog[[1]](#footnote-1))

The story starts with an encounter at the entrance to the cave of R. Shimon bar Yochai (Rashbi).[[2]](#footnote-2) Some scholars have understood this as a reference to Rashbi’s burial cave.[[3]](#footnote-3) However, it appears to me, on the basis of both the context (the encounter with Eliyahu) and the content (to be discussed below) that what we have here is an allusion to the cave in the famous story about Rashbi’s years in hiding (*Bavli*, *Shabbat* 33a). There, too, we find the expression “the entrance to a cave,” with Eliyahu appearing at that spot – apparently a transition point between different worlds. Recall that Rashbi and his son maintained an existence in the cave that included being nourished by a tree (requiring no labor) and having no clothes (but rather being covered with sand) – both reminiscent of existence in the Garden of Eden. Thus, the entrance to the cave is comparable to the entrance to the Garden of Eden.

R. Yehoshua ben Levi, standing at the entrance, asks whether, after his death, he will enter the Garden of Eden, the paradisical World to Come. This question is not immediately answered. Yona Frankel’s interpretation of this story,[[4]](#footnote-4) as in many other instances, extracts a moral lesson: he maintains that R. Yehoshua ben Levi’s question as to whether he will merit the World to Come reflects a focus on himself, and therefore the response he receives is not clear. He learns the lesson, and his later conversation with Mashiach concerns redemption for Am Yisrael as a whole. In the wake of his transition from preoccupation with himself to a concern for the fate of the nation, he also receives an answer to his personal question. The message of the story, according to this view, is a religious and moral one, directing a person to worry less about himself and more about the collective.

As I wrote previously concerning this story (a brief preliminary discussion, in a previous series on this website),[[5]](#footnote-5) I believe the focus of this story lies elsewhere. I would like to delve more deeply into the story and to offer a different perspective.

**The Parallel in the *Yerushalmi***

There is a *sugya* in the *Yerushalmi* (*Taanit* 1:1, 64a) that also includes R. Yehoshua ben Levi, Rashbi, Rome, the question of when, and a homiletical lesson on the verse, “Today – if you will listen to His voice”:[[6]](#footnote-6)

R. Yehoshua ben Levi said: If someone says to you, “Where is your God?” – say to him, “In the great city of Rome.” What is the source for this? “A call to me from Se’ir” (*Yeshayahu* 21:11).

R. Shimon ben Yochai taught: Wherever [the people of] Israel were exiled, the Divine Presence was exiled together with them. They were exiled to Egypt, and the Divine Presence was exiled with them… They were exiled to Rome, and the Divine Presence was exiled with them.

What is the source for this?

“A call to me from Se’ir: Watchman, what of the night?” [Meaning,] Israel said to Yeshayahu: Our teacher, Yeshayahu, what will we emerge with from this night [i.e., exile]?

He said to them: Wait while I ask. After he asked, he returned to them.

They said to him, “Watchman, what of the night (*ma mi-leil* – can also be understood as ‘what did He say’ – i.e.,) what did the Watchman of the worlds say?”

He said to them: “The watchman says, ‘The morning comes, and also the night…’ (v. 12)” …. It is not as you think; rather, it is morning for the righteous, and night for the wicked; morning for Israel, and night for the nations of the world.

They said to him: When?

He told them: When you wish it, He wishes it – “if you will inquire, inquire” (ibid.).

They said to him: What is holding it back?

He told them: Repentance – “Return, come” (ibid.).

R. Acha taught in the name of R. Tanchum in the name of R. Chiya: If Israel would engage in repentance for one day, the son of David would immediately appear. What is the source? “Today – if you will listen to His voice.” (*Yerushalmi Taanit* 1:1, 64a)

This passage in the *Yerushalmi* contains several points of similarity with the one in the *Bavli*:

1. R. Yehoshua ben Levi says that God resides in Rome.
2. The *sugya* supports his statement with a teaching of Rashbi, appearing in a *beraita*, that says the Divine Presence was exiled together with Israel wherever they went, and also ended up in Rome.
3. The arrival of the redemption depends on the will of Israel and their repentance.
4. The dependence of redemption on repentance is supported by a homiletical interpretation of the verse from *Tehillim*, “Today – if you will listen to His voice.”

The differences between these aggadic fragments in the *Yerushalmi* and the story in the *Bavli* are manifest. One important difference is that in the *Yerushalmi*, it is God – or the Divine Presence – that resides in Rome, rather than Mashiach. Am Yisrael appeal to Him and He promises that the redemption will come, and this coming is dependent on the will and repentance of Israel: “Return, come.” From the perspective of the Sages of Eretz Yisrael, the ultimate “exile” – both of the nation and of the Divine Presence – is Rome, and thus Am Yisrael’s appeal to the Divine Presence, which is with them in exile, happens there. The *Bavli*, on the other hand, speaks of “exile of the Divine Presence” to Babylonia,[[7]](#footnote-7) while it is Mashiach who is in Rome. It seems that the story in the *Bavli*, which includes the common elements mentioned above but also different content, is a reworking of the material from Eretz Yisrael that molds it into a single, continuous story. In order to understand this reworking, attention should be paid to the literary molding and the themes woven into the story, and then to its integration into the broader context of the *sugya* in the *Bavli*.

**The Version of the Story in the *Bavli***

The first question that R. Yehoshua ben Levi asks is whether he is deserving of the World to Come. The answer, according to those who are consulted, depends on the will of “our master here.” R. Yehoshua ben Levi’s next words (“I saw two, but heard the voices of three”) suggest that he hears the voice of a third figure – i.e., someone other than Rashbi and Eliyahu – but sees only them; it is the third figure that is referred to as “our master here (*adonenu zeh*).”

Who is this figure? Rashi (ad loc.) explains that it refers to the Divine Presence. This interpretation sits well with the understanding that R. Yehoshua ben Levi only hears this figure, but does not see it. It also accords with the appellation “the Lord God” (*ha-Adon Hashem*), which appears in several places in Tanakh; for instance, in *Shemot* 23:17, “all your males shall appear before the Lord God” (and its parallels – *Shemot* 34:23 and *Devarim* 16:16), describing an encounter with the Divine Presence. The fact that R. Yehoshua ben Levi’s entrance into the Garden of Eden is dependent on the will of this “Master” also makes sense if it is God that we are talking about.

However, a different possibility, which seems more likely in view of the continuation of the story, is that “our master” refers to Mashiach. From Eliyahu’s words at the end of the story, it seems that it is Mashiach who tells R. Yehoshua ben Levi that he will have a place in the World to Come.

What is more certain than the identity of “our M/master” is that the initial answer to R. Yehoshua ben Levi’s question is an opaque one that does not provide the information he is looking for. I believe that the opacity of the response is not related to the fact that R. Yehoshua ben Levi is asking about his own fate, as Frankel suggests, but instead to the fundamental, essential element of the “unknown” surrounding this type of question, and perhaps other reasons as well, which I will discuss below. In any event, at this stage, Eliyahu does not supply R. Yehoshua ben Levi with a clear answer to his question.

The response to his first question leads him to the next one: When will Mashiach come? Here we encounter opacity surrounding the question itself, since there are two possible ways of understanding it:[[8]](#footnote-8) on one hand, it might be understood as an expression of the longing for redemption of the nation and a desire for Mashiach to come soon; on the other hand, when Mashiach comes, he will be able to provide an answer to the personal question of whether R. Yehoshua ben Levi will merit the World to Come. At this stage of the story, the motivation for R. Yehoshua ben Levi’s question as to when Mashiach will come remains unclear. One theme in the story is thus molded through the use of opacity, reflecting the fog and lack of clarity surrounding questions concerning the future.

Another point that should be noted concerns the two different realms entailed in R. Yehoshua ben Levi’s questions to Eliyahu concerning Mashiach: the “when” and the “where.” As we will see, these realms turn out to be significant motifs in the story.

**Where – Mashiach at the gates of Rome**

Eliyahu’s response to R. Yehoshua ben Levi’s second question sends him – and us, the readers – far from the entrance to the cave of Rashbi, the “gateway to heaven”: to the gates of Rome. To emphasize this transition, the story uses the same expression in the Aramaic – “*pitcha de-romi*” (the entrance to Rome), paralleling “*pitcha di-ma’artei de-Rashbi*” (the entrance to Rashbi’s cave) from the beginning of the story (unlike the language of the *Yerushalmi*, “the great city of Rome”). Indeed, this place is portrayed as a sort of inverse to the entrance to Rashbi’s cave: first and foremost, it is an exceedingly earthly place. Moreover, in a story whose context is the coming of Mashiach and the redemption, Rome – destroyer of Jerusalem – symbolizes the location of wickedness. Finally, in contrast to the lofty characters that R. Yehoshua ben Levi meets at the entrance to the cave (Rashbi and Eliyahu), at the entrance to Rome we find “those afflicted with sores…suffering from disease.”

Who are these “afflicted” ones? Notably, this expression (*sovlei chala’im*) appears in Hebrew, while the rest of the dialogue is in Aramaic – possibly indicating a biblical source. It would seem that Frankel is correct in suggesting[[9]](#footnote-9) that this expression is based on the verse from the section in *Yeshayahu* that starts (52:13), “Behold, My servant shall prosper…” and goes on to describe the “servant of God”: “Surely **our diseases** he did bear, and **our pains** he carried, while we considered him **stricken**, **smitten** of God, and **afflicted**” (53:4). The people at the gates of Rome – deformed, diseased and in pain – are, like lepers,[[10]](#footnote-10) at the margins of society. They dwell not in the midst of the city, but at its outermost edge, at the point of passage in and out of the city, outside of the regular human realm of work, family, and social dynamics. They have little to do but to tie and untie the bandages covering their sores. In other words, at first R. Yehoshua ben Levi hears Mashiach’s voice at the “gateway to heaven,” but as soon as he tries to find him, he is directed to the opposite pole – the gates of Rome. This represents an initial indication that he should search in a place that is here, in this world, and that needs repair – whether it be Rome, as a symbol of wickedness, or among the afflicted and diseased unfortunates at the margins of society.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Admittedly, Mashiach does not merge perfectly into his surroundings even at the gates of Rome. Unlike the other sufferers, who untie all their bandages at then retie all of them, Mashiach unties and reties his bandages one at a time. Aside from the practical reason mentioned in the story (that this way he will be ready the moment the time comes (“today”) and there will be no delay), his behavior also sets him apart from those around him. He is there – but he does not completely belong there. His differentness emphasizes the transience of his stay there, and the fact that this is not the only place where he can be found. Taking both parts of the story together, it appears that he belongs simultaneously both to the gates of heaven and to the nethermost depths of this world. This statement awards value and significance to both places. While R. Yehoshua ben Levi initially searched for Mashiach only in heaven, he is directed to search on earth, too, as a significant place with value and whose events are important. As mentioned, place is a significant theme in the story.

There is another notable point in the description of Mashiach that has symbolic or metaphorical significance. The constant untying and retying of the bandages creates a visual impression of an ongoing movement of revealing and concealing. We might suggest that the symbolic meaning of this movement is that revelation and concealment are intertwined with regard to the figure of Mashiach and its appearance in the world. This idea connects with another theme, mentioned above: that when it comes to the future, Mashiach, and the World to Come, there is an inherent element of concealment; it is impossible to achieve simple, open clarity. As we shall see below, Mashiach’s answer to R. Yehoshua ben Levi, concerning the future, conceals more than it reveals; this is anticipated by the physical illustration of this movement with the bandages.

In the encounter between R. Yehoshua ben Levi and Mashiach, it seems that R. Yehoshua has internalized part of the message conveyed by Eliyahu’s response to him. When he meets Mashiach, he avoids asking him anything about his own place in the Garden of Eden, sufficing with the question of when Mashiach will come. This casts his previous question, at the beginning of the story (where the motivation and significance of the question were in doubt), in a favorable light. The first part of the story, then, is clarified in light of the second. Its focus is not the question of R. Yehoshua ben Levi’s right to enter the Garden of Eden, but rather the coming of Mashiach as a goal in itself; the anticipation of redemption. However, as we shall see below, here too Mashiach’s response is not what R. Yehoshua ben Levi was hoping for.

**When? – “Today”**

The answer Mashiach gives is “Today,” and R. Yehoshua ben Levi, no doubt overjoyed at this news, suffers a great disappointment when Mashiach does not appear that day. He expresses his anger to Eliyahu, accusing Mashiach of lying. Eliyahu interprets the answer that Mashiach gave in light of the verse in *Tehillim* (95:7): “Today – *if* you will listen to His voice.” Contrary to what R. Yehoshua ben Levi had, apparently, initially assumed, Mashiach’s arrival is not connected to some specific, predetermined point in time; rather, it depends on Am Yisrael and their conduct.

The language that Mashiach uses in explaining his occupation with his bandages one at a time – “If I am called in the meantime, I shall not be delayed” – recalls (in the Aramaic) the verse from Yeshayahu that appears in the parallel text in the *Yerushalmi*, and the homiletical lesson derived from it: “They said to him: When? He told them: When you wish it, He wishes it – ‘If you will inquire, inquire’ (*Yeshayahu* 21:11). They said to him: What is holding it back? He told them: Repentance – ‘Return, come’ (ibid.).”[[12]](#footnote-12) In other words, in the story in the *Bavli*, Mashiach declares that if he is called, he will not be delayed, but in the background we hear echoes of the parallel *sugya* in the *Yerushalmi*, suggesting that the coming of the redemption depends on the will and the actions of Israel.

Why, then, does Mashiach not suffice with simply answering R. Yehoshua ben Levi, “If/when you will listen to His voice”? Why does he respond with the deceptive response that specifies a point in time – “Today”? One possible answer is that in doing so, Mashiach continues the “game” of revelation and concealment. The opacity of his answer conveys, first and foremost, that the way R. Yehoshua ben Levi presents the question is not productive. Focusing on the question of “when” will not bring redemption any closer, and the real answer is to be found not in what he hears from Mashiach, but in a different type of “listening”: obeying God. This is emphasized elsewhere, too, as noted, in the literary molding of the story – such as in the opacity of the response, “if our M/master here wills it,” and in the motivation for R. Yehoshua’s question concerning when Mashiach will come. The use of ambiguity and vagueness in the story serves to emphasize the message: there are things that remain unclear, and there is no point in trying to arrive at any clear knowledge about them.[[13]](#footnote-13) Likewise, the words “if you listen to His voice (*im be-kolo tishma’u*) echo the “hearing” that was mentioned at the beginning of the story, where R. Yehoshua declares, “I saw two, but heard the voice of three.” He had been listening to the voices of elevated personalities at the gateway to heaven, and the story diverts him from there to hearing/obeying God. This might also be hinted to in the continuation of the psalm from which the verse is taken: “Today, if you will listen to His voice. Do not harden your hearts, as at Meriva, as on the day of Masa in the wilderness, where your forefathers tested Me and proved Me, even though they saw My work” (*Tehillim* 95:7-9). Obeying God, according to the psalm, is expressed in being different from the generation of the wilderness. On the simple level, the context in the psalm is, of course, the sins of the generation of the wilderness, and especially their lack of faith in God at different points in their journey – but in the context of our story, the verse might be understood as a warning not to involve oneself in God’s activity, but rather to concentrate on what man himself should be doing, i.e., obeying God.

In addition, however, it seems that the word “today” in Mashiach’s answer is a call to concentrate on “today” and the task at hand – obeying God. Just as in the realm of place (“where”), R. Yehoshua ben Levi is diverted from the “gateway to heaven” to what is happening on earth, so too in terms of time (“when”), his consciousness shifts from the time of redemption to “today” and what needs to be done right now.[[14]](#footnote-14) Although Mashiach, according to the story, is a real figure who is destined to appear and to redeem the world, there is no point in endeavoring to investigate and calculate his appearance and its timing; it is more important in this world, “today,” to perform God’s word. This is a central message of the story: there is significance and value to what is happening in the here and now, where our duty is to obey God.

Nevertheless, at the end of the story, R. Yehoshua ben Levi receives a response to his first question – now that it is no longer his focus. The response comes from an unexpected source: from Mashiach’s greeting, “Peace be upon you, son of Yochai.” R. Yehoshua ben Levi does not at first perceive this as the answer to his question, but once he focuses his attention on this world and listening to God’s voice, as Mashiach directs him to do, Eliyahu gives him a gift: a new insight and understanding of Mashiach’s simple greeting. This resolution of the doubt concerning his entry into the Garden of Eden joins the previously discussed resolution of the opacity concerning R. Yehoshua ben Levi’s motive in asking when Mashiach will come. On one hand, there is opacity in real time; on the other hand, later on, some of the opacity is resolved at an unexpected time.

Thus, the story shifts R. Yehoshua ben Levi away from an attempt to hear the answers to questions about the future – both personal and general – although it does not nullify those questions. Focusing on questions of this sort does not bring answers. If an answer comes, it will come at a time and place that are unpredictable, when the questioner is not looking for it, but is rather engaged in obeying God. Indeed, a peek at the broader context of the story within the *sugya* (to be addressed in greater detail in the next *shiur*) reveals: “Three things come unexpectedly, and these are they: Mashiach, finding [a lost article], and a scorpion” (97a). Concerning Mashiach, we have already seen that the real answer concerning when he will come requires that we set the question aside and deal with other things. To put it differently, the answer to the question does not exist right now in reality, for in truth, the time of his coming depends on our actions, and has therefore not yet been determined.[[15]](#footnote-15)

In the next *shiur*, we will continue our study of this story, especially in light of its context in the *sugya*.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

1. A Yemenite manuscript considered the best existing manuscript of *Massekhet Sanhedrin*. See M. Sabato, *Ketav Yad Temani le-Massekhet Sanhedrin (Bavli) u-Mekomo be-Masoret ha-Nusach*, Jerusalem 5758. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. There are other versions, in other manuscripts, which situate the encounter at the entrance to the Garden of Eden. There is little practical difference, since the entrance to the cave of R. Shimon bar Yochai itself symbolizes a gateway of sorts to the Garden of Eden – see below. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Kadari (below, n. 5), p. 23, fn. 7, and his reference there to Frankel. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Y. Frankel, *Sippur ha-Aggada – Achdut shel Tochen ve-Tzura*, Tel Aviv 5761, pp. 284-293. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/holidays/three-weeks/aggadot-redemption-can-we-ask-when-mashiach-will-come>. A. Kadari, “*Rav Ha-Nistar* – *Ta’atu’ei Gilui ve-Kisui be-Sippur ha-Talmudi*,” *Machshevet Yisrael* 2 (5771), pp. 20-33, makes some similar observations, as well as noting additional points (to be discussed below), and offers a different interpretation of the story. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. As Frankel notes. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In the *Bavli* (*Megilla* 29a) we find Rashbi’s teaching that the final place of exile of the Divine Presence is Babylonia, not Rome; cf. Kadari (above, n. 5, p. 27). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. As Frankel notes in his analysis of the story, ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. p 291, fn. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Frankel (ibid.) also refers to an adjacent fragment in the *sugya* in which the Sages refer to Mashiach as “a leper of the house of Rebbi” (according to Rashi’s interpretation), and quote as their source the same verse in *Yeshayahu*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Of course, the mention of Rome, and of Mashiach as a figure that suffers affliction and disease, is liable to call to mind Christian perceptions of “Mashiach.” However, the differences are very clear; for instance, Rome (which is analogous to Christianity, at the time of the *Bavli*) is perceived as a place characterized by such social injustices. More significantly, the suffering and disease of Mashiach are not described as arising from his bearing the sins of humanity. For more on these comparisons, see E. Ottenheijm, “Elijah and the Messiah (b. Sanh.98a)” in: *Prophecy and Prophets in Stories* (ed. B. Becking and H.M. Barstad), Leiden-Boston 2015, pp. 195-213. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. As noted by Kadari (above, n. 5, p. 30). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. As noted, Kadari mentions several similar points in the molding of the story (above, n. 5), but has a different view of the main theme of the story. As he sees it, this is a humorous story that paints those who try to calculate the time of the redemption in an ironic and perhaps even farcical light, after the *sugya* preceding the story presented different opinions concerning this sort of pursuit (see also the continuation of our discussion in the next *shiur*, concerning the broader context of the story). To my mind, the motifs of opacity and revelation/concealment in the story are not meant to create humor or irony, and the focus is not R. Yehoshua ben Levi’s failure to understand, but rather the shift of his interest from matters concerning the future – which necessarily include much that remains unknown – to spiritual occupation with “today” and the here and now. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. In the next *shiur*, I will propose a different way of understanding the call to hear “God’s voice” in the earthly reality, which might even be concealed within *Chazal*’s account, although the simple meaning here is obeying God – observing the *mitzvot* and performing God’s will. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Kadari, too, mentions the motifs of revelation and concealment in both the molding and content of the story, but he takes the story in a different direction and, as noted above, interprets these motifs as expressing irony and humor at the attempt to calculate and discover the time of the redemption. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)