**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 #48: R. Yehuda ben Levi and Mashiach (2)**

In the previous *shiur* we looked at the Talmudic story of an encounter between R. Yehoshua ben Levi and Mashiach. We saw how the narrative in the *Bavli* (*Sanhedrin*) seems to be a reworking of parallel materials found in the *Yerushalmi* (*Ta'anit*), molding them into a story with specific themes.

This *shiur* will continue our study of the story, and will also consider its broader context within the *sugya*. We will explore how the molding of the story in the *Bavli* is connected to the context, and the "discourse" between them.

First, let us review the story itself in the *Bavli*:

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, as per MS Yad Ha-rav Herzog)

**The entrance to the cave of R. Shimon bar Yochai**

A few words are in order regarding the allusion at the beginning of the story to the broader context of the *sugya*. The ideas discussed in the previous *shiur* – the focus on "today" and what is happening in this world – bring us back to the opening scene, where R. Yehoshua ben Levi meets Eliyahu at the entrance to the cave of R. Shimon bar Yochai. This cave is neither neutral nor incidental: it is a site of great significance, in the context of the *Bavli*’s well-known account of R. Shimon bar Yochai's refuge in the cave (*Shabbat* 33b-34a).[[1]](#footnote-1) In that story, R. Shimon bar Yochai expresses rejection of this world – the material, physical world, prominently represented by Rome. He views the Roman markets, bridges, and bathhouses through a negative lens that focuses only on their lowliness and impurity. For instance, the markets represent for him nothing more than places of lewdness and promiscuity; he does not see the economic development, welfare, and livelihood that the markets bring to the world. Likewise, when he first emerges from the cave – after years of existing in a state somewhat similar to the World to Come, where there is only life of the spirit – he burns everything that he sees, viewing it all as mere physical, material matters of this world. He then undergoes a process in which he comes to appreciate the value of this world, and comes to accept that the material sphere can be elevated to the level of sanctity – as, for example, in the case of the old man who is hurrying with his two myrtle twigs in honor of Shabbat. The bathhouses, too, and even the prostitutes, are also reconsidered with a more humane eye: R. Shimon's skin, covered with sores from being covered with sand during his stay in the cave, is healed by the bathhouse waters, and he also manages to take a more human look at the way the prostitutes help each other.

In our story, R. Yehoshua ben Levi is taken from Rashbi's cave to the gates of Rome – the same Rome that Rashbi himself originally rejected, as a symbol of materialism. It is here that the story situates Mashiach, who redirects R. Yehoshua ben Levi's focus. Here, again, we find the idea that the ideal is not just to have one's eyes trained on the World to Come, but to also appreciate the value of engagement in this world and the opportunity to do good in it, even in the lowliest places.

**The broader context of the story in the *sugya***

The quest for Mashiach brings R. Yehoshua from the "gates of heaven" (Rashbi’s cave) to the gates of Rome. We can gain some interesting perspectives on this transition by paying closer attention to the context of the story in the *sugya*, which deals more broadly with redemption and Mashiach.

In the section preceding our story, the Gemara records a dispute between the *Tannaim* R. Yehoshua and R. Eliezer concerning the question of whether the redemption is dependent on Israel's repentance:

R. Eliezer said: “If Israel does *teshuva* – they are redeemed; if not, they are not redeemed.”

R. Yehoshua said to him: “If they do not do *teshuva*, then they will not be redeemed? [That cannot be;] rather, the Holy One, blessed be He, appoints them a king whose decrees are as terrible as [those of] Haman, such that Israel repents and returns to the proper path.” (*Bavli Sanhedrin* 97b-98a)

Each of the disputants cites verses in support of his position, until eventually, "R. Eliezer fell silent."

Several lines later, we find various teachings concerning the timing of the arrival of the redemption or of Mashiach ("son of David"), culminating with two teachings that are attributed to R. Yehoshua ben Levi and immediately precede the story about him:

R. Alexandri said: R. Yehoshua ben Levi raises a contradiction [between two verses]: It is written, “in its time” (*Yeshayahu* 60:22), and it is written, “I will hasten it” (ibid.). [The explanation is:] If they merit, “I will hasten it” [i.e., God will bring the redemption sooner]; if they do not merit, [the redemption will come] “in its time.”

R. Alexandri said: R. Yehoshua ben Levi raises a contradiction [between two verses]: It is written, “There came with the clouds of heaven one with the likeness of a son of man” (*Daniel* 7:13), and it is written, “lowly and riding on a donkey” (*Zekharya* 9:9). [Once again, the verses are resolved as follows:] If they merit, [he will come] “with the clouds of heaven”; if they do not merit, [he will be] “lowly and riding on a donkey.” [[2]](#footnote-2) (*Sanhedrin* 98a)

In effect, R. Yehoshua ben Levi continues the approach of R. Yehoshua, who maintains that redemption will come regardless of *teshuva*; it is only the manner in which it happens that will depend on Israel. The two teachings of R. Yehoshua ben Levi address seeming contradictions between different verses from Tanakh concerning the coming of the redemption or of Mashiach. The verses are not necessarily contradictory on the plain level of the text, but rather in light of R. Yehoshua ben Levi's homiletical reading of them. The first and better-known contradiction concerns the phrases "in its time" and "I shall hasten it." Both occur in the same verse, in a chapter dealing with the redemption – "I am the Lord; in its time I shall hasten it" (*Yeshayahu* 60:22). As per R. Yehoshua ben Levi's interpretation, "in its time" means that redemption will come at the preordained time, while "I shall hasten it" means bringing the redemption sooner than its preordained time. Thus, the two expressions are mutually contradictory. The proposed resolution treats the two expressions as representing two different scenarios: There is a fixed, final time when the redemption is destined to happen no matter what; however, the timing still depends on Israel, as if they are worthy, "I shall hasten it" – meaning, the redemption will come earlier than that preordained time. What constitutes being "worthy"? The content of the *sugya*, prior to R. Yehoshua ben Levi's teachings, offers various possibilities, from "repentance" in general (in the spirit of R. Eliezer's words on 97b: "If Israel does *teshuva* – they are redeemed") to the repairing of specific spiritual deficiencies (see, for example, 98a: “Ze'iri said in the name of R. Chanina: The son of David will not come until the arrogant will cease from the Jewish People").

Likewise concerning the second contradiction, which deals with the arrival of Mashiach – which, again, is related to the broader context of the *sugya* – prior to the teachings of R. Yehoshua ben Levi we find a series of teachings concerning the arrival of "the son of David" (including the aforementioned words of Ze'iri). R. Alexandri says in the name of R. Yehoshua ben Levi that "if they merit it," Mashiach will come with "the clouds of heaven"; if not, he will be "lowly and riding on a donkey." According to the plain meaning, what we have here is a clear dichotomy and hierarchy: there is Mashiach who comes from a heavenly place, as a lofty figure, which is the preferred, "higher" option; and there is Mashiach who is manifest as someone who is “lowly and riding on a donkey," seemingly the less desirable, default option that will be realized if Israel "do not merit."

R. Yehoshua ben Levi's first teaching appears already in the *Yerushalmi*, in a similar context – in the continuation of the same *sugya* that was cited in the previous *shiur*, where we encounter R. Yehoshua ben Levi's description of the Divine Presence in Rome. The *Yerushalmi* records the dispute between R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua, with each side citing verses supporting his position, in the midst of which R. Yehoshua ben Levi is cited by R. Acha:

Opinions were divided: R. Eliezer says, If Israel do not repent, they will never be redeemed, as it is written, “by repentance and rest shall you be saved” (*Yeshayahu* 30:15).

R. Yehoshua said to him, If Israel will then balk and not repent, will they never be redeemed?

R. Eliezer answered him, The Holy One, blessed be He, places over them a king as harsh as Haman, and immediately they [will] repent and are redeemed. What is the source? “It is a time of trouble for Yaakov, and from it he shall be saved” (*Yirmiyahu* 30:7). ...

R. Yehoshua said to him, But it is written, “I am the Lord; in its time I shall hasten it.” R. Eliezer….

R. Acha said in the name of R. Yehoshua ben Levi, If you merit it, “I shall hasten it,” and if not, [it will happen] “in its time.”

When R. Yehoshua said… R. Eliezer withdrew. (*Yerushalmi Ta'anit* 1:1, 63d)

The *sugya* in the *Yerushalmi*, then, cites R. Yehoshua ben Levi’s teaching that if Israel are deserving, “I shall hasten it,” and if not, redemption will come only “in its time.” R. Yehoshua ben Levi’s other teaching does not appear here. In other sources from Eretz Yisrael, including some that preceded the *Bavli*, the description of Mashiach as “lowly and riding on a donkey” appears, but not necessarily as a direct quote of R. Yehoshua ben Levi. For instance:

The Sages said… “Donkeys” – this refers to King Mashiach, as it is written, “lowly and riding on a donkey” (*Zekharya* 9:9). (*Bereishit Rabba* 75, Theodor-Albeck edition)

The portrayal of Mashiach in the context of the verse from *Sefer Daniel* – “with the clouds of heaven” – is found in sources from Eretz Yisrael, but none preceding the *Bavli*. For instance, in *Midrash Tanchuma* we find the following:

Who is [referred to by] “clouds”? This is [King] Mashiach…. as it is written, “I saw in the night visions and behold, there came with the clouds of heaven…” (*Daniel* 7:13). (*Tanchuma* [Buber], *Toldot* 20)

In any event, in the sources from Eretz Yisrael, the image of Mashiach as “lowly and riding on a donkey” is not presented as a default alternative or as an inferior option. It is the *Bavli* that juxtaposes the two images, presenting them, in the name of R. Yehoshua ben Levi, as a dichotomy and a hierarchy: a situation of “meriting” and a situation of “not meriting.” In the first instance, Mashiach is associated with the upper worlds, the “clouds of heaven”; in the latter instances, he appears in a less ethereal, more earthly form, “lowly and riding on a donkey.”

The portrayal of Mashiach as "lowly and riding on a donkey" carries through in the next passage of the *Bavli* (following R. Yehoshua ben Levi's teaching about Mashiach), in a short conversation between the Persian king, in Babylonia, and the *Amora* Shmuel:

King Shapur [of Persia] said [mockingly] to Shmuel: You say that Mashiach will come on a donkey; I will send him the riding horse that I have.

Shmuel said to him: Do you have [a horse] with a thousand colors? [I.e., certainly, his donkey will be miraculous.]

The king expresses wonderment over the fact that Mashiach is destined to arrive on a donkey. Would it not be more appropriate and dignified, he asks, for him to ride on a royal horse? Shmuel responds with a question of his own: Do you have a horse of a thousand colors? On one hand, this conversation highlights the arrival of Mashiach on a donkey as something unworthy and not befitting the occasion; on the other hand, it suggests imbuing the donkey with marvelous, miraculous qualities, thereby "elevating" the moment.

But then the story of the encounter between R. Yehoshua ben Levi and Mashiach, following immediately on this exchange, seems to take us – surprisingly enough – in a different direction. R. Yehoshua ben Levi starts off at the entrance to the cave of Rashbi, which, as discussed, is a sort of "gateway to heaven" – recalling the "clouds of heaven." But when he asks Eliyahu where Mashiach is to be found, Eliyahu sends him to the lowly, earthly gates of Rome, where the outcasts and unfortunates of society can be found. This setting is more reminiscent of the portrayal of Mashiach as “lowly and riding on a donkey," as R. Yehoshua ben Levi understands it. This creates an interesting tension between the story of R. Yehoshua ben Levi and his teaching that precedes it, creating an absolute dichotomy and hierarchy of these two places.

It seems that the redactors of the *sugya* seek to challenge the theoretical teachings that appear in the name of R. Yehoshua ben Levi by means of the story about him, which is constructed and molded out of materials taken from elsewhere, especially the parallel *sugya* in the *Yerushalmi* (as discussed in the previous *shiur*). If we read the teachings and the story as a single continuum, we see that R. Yehoshua ben Levi comes to realize that the dichotomy and hierarchy that he posited are not entirely accurate. The story situates Mashiach at the gates of Rome, too, among those on the bottom rung of society in the earthly world, which matches the description of Mashiach as “lowly and riding on a donkey." It is there that he sits, ready to make his appearance once Israel obey God (when they "merit").

This process of gaining perspective on this world is similar to the one undergone by R. Shimon bar Yochai in the story of the cave in *Massekhet Shabbat*. The story of Rashbi is another example of how the use of a story, rather than direct instruction, has several important advantages. It allows the main character to undergo a process of learning, which the readers experience along with him. As noted in the previous *shiur*, in a few places the story also enlists a technique of opacity – which itself is part of the theme that is conveyed to the reader with regard to seeking answers about the time to come.

The graphic portrayal of Mashiach situated among the afflicted and suffering also draws our attention to places like this in the world, at the margins of society, which require repair. Most people are blind and deaf to the existence of such spaces in our everyday lives, but Mashiach sits right there, with the aches and pains and difficulties of the weaker members of society, thereby perhaps hinting to the type of work in the world that could hasten his arrival.

Mashiach makes his arrival dependent on the verse: "Today – if you will listen to His voice." Perhaps, in light of the reading proposed here, we might view this voice, to which we must be attentive, as emerging not only from the clouds of heaven, but also from the lowest parts of the earth. According to the story, the "clouds of heaven" and the image of Mashiach "lowly and riding on a donkey," which R. Yehoshua ben Levi sets down as a dichotomy, are actually two sides of the same idea: the voice of Mashiach, or the voice of God, jumping between the two of them. As we saw in the previous *shiur*, the story diverts R. Yehoshua's gaze (and ours) from heaven to earth, and imbues what is going on in this world, "today," with significance and meaning that should be at the center of our religious activity. A reading of the story in its broader context serves to emphasize this message even more strongly, as a process that R. Yehoshua undergoes.

**Today**

There is another theme in the story that is also connected to the context in the *sugya*. In the story, R. Yehoshua ben Levi learns that it is best to leave off calculating when Mashiach will come (and matters pertaining to the time to come in general). This relates to the discussion preceding the story in the *sugya*, concerning the time of redemption. In this regard, the *sugya* presents different perspectives. On one hand, there is detailed attention to the number of years of the world's existence – for instance:

Rav Katina said: For six thousand years the world will exist; [then] for one thousand [years] it will be in ruins, as it is written, “And the Lord alone shall be exalted on that day” (*Yeshayahu* 2:11).

Abaye said, “For two thousand [years the world] will be in ruins, as it is written, “After two days He will revive us; on the third day He will revive us, and we shall live in His Presence” (*Hoshea* 6:2).

It is taught in a *beraita* in accordance with the opinion of Rav Katina: Just as the seventh year abrogates [debts] one year out of every seven, so the world ceases [its regular existence] for a thousand years out of every seven thousand, as it is written, “And the Lord alone shall be exalted on that day,” and it is written, “A psalm, a song for the day of Shabbat” (*Tehillim* 92:1), (meaning,) a day that is entirely Shabbat. [All of these calculations are based on the equation between one day and a thousand years,] based on the verse: “For a thousand years in Your eyes are like yesterday when it is past” (*Tehillim* 90:4).

The school of Eliyahu taught: For six thousand years the world will exist: two thousand years of chaos, two thousand years of Torah, and two thousand years – the days of Mashiach. And owing to our many sins, causing [this time frame] to increase, [the years] that elapsed since then [and which should have been the era of Mashiach] have elapsed.

Eliyahu said to Rav Yehuda, brother of Rav Sala Chasida: The world will exist for no less than eighty-five Jubilee cycles, and in the final Jubilee year, the son of David will come. (*Sanhedrin* 97a-b)

On the other hand, there are also statements opposing such calculations; for instance:

R. Zeira, when he would find Sages engaged in [discussion of the time of the redemption], he would say to them: Please, do not delay it [by your calculations]. For as we are taught: Three things come in the midst of distraction, and these are they: Mashiach, finding [a lost article], and the [sting of a] scorpion. (Ibid. 97a)

What is the meaning of the verse, “And it declares [*ve-yafeach*] of the end, and does not lie” (*Chavakuk* 2:3)? R. Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of R. Yonatan: May those who calculate the time of the redemption be cursed [*tipach*]. For they would say that once the end [of days that they calculated] had arrived, and [Mashiach] had not come, he would no longer come at all. Rather, [it is proper to] wait for his [coming], as it is written [in the same verse in *Chavakuk*], “Though it tarry, wait for it.” (Ibid. 97b)

It seems that the story of R. Yehoshua ben Levi reflects an embracing of the second approach – arguing that it is best to leave aside the calculations and the attempt to determine when exactly redemption will happen, and to engage instead in "today" – obeying God every day, focusing on doing good that day.

A look at the *sugya* in general, and the story as part of that entirety, reveals the full message of the *sugya* by means of the combination of the theoretical teachings and statements on the subject of redemption and Mashiach, on one hand, and the story, on the other.

In the next *shiur*, we will look at a well-known Chasidic story that maintains a dialogue with this Talmudic narrative.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

1. On this story see the important and meticulous analysis of Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative, Art, Composition and Culture*, Baltimore and London 1999, pp. 105-138. One of the important points arising from his analysis is that this formulation, in which Eliyahu stands at the entrance to the cave, is unique to the *Bavli*; it has no parallel in the *Yerushalmi* (in fact, Eliyahu does not appear in the parallel there at all). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rashi interprets this teaching, like the first one, as addressing the speed with which Mashiach's presence will become apparent: if they merit, it will be like the swift passage of clouds ("I shall hasten it"); if not, it will happen slowly, like the plodding of a donkey. However, the dichotomy of "high" and "low" seems to be a simpler understanding. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)