YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The teachings of the Maharal**

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**Shiur 05:
The Maharal's Approach to Explaining *Aggadot***

We saw in previous *shiurim* that the Maharal raises questions about *Chazal*’s statements that are different from those that were asked before him; these questions open up new ways of thinking about *Chazal*’s teachings andserve as gateways to understanding the Maharal’s general position. We saw that he constantly seeks to understand why *Chazal* formulated their statements the way they did and not otherwise, and to understand the whole that unites all of the parts in each statement. Using his approach, we can ask questions about other statements of *Chazal* that the Maharal himself did not address.

In this *shiur*, we will try to better understand the Maharal's approach to interpreting Aggada. In order to more fully appreciate the novelty in his approach, we will take a specific *aggada* as an example, examine the teachings of several earlier commentators, and thus better understand the new level opened by the Maharal's approach.

**The Aggada and its Interpretations by the Geonim and Rashi**

The *aggada* we will be studying appears in the Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 28b:

Our Rabbis taught: When Rabbi Eliezer fell ill, his disciples went in to visit him. They said to him: Master, teach us the paths of life so that through them we may merit life in the world to come. He said to them: Be vigilant about the honor of your colleagues, and keep your children from *higayon* [translated as: meditation, speculation, reasoning, or logic], and set them between the knees of scholars, and when you pray, know before whom you are standing, and in this way you will merit life in the world to come.

**“Keep your children from *higayon*”**

Let us first look at Rashi, who represents the commentators who sought to understand the plain sense of the Talmudic text, and at the *Geonim* who had philosophical-rationalist inclinations. In his focus on the plain meaning of the text, Rashi dealt primarily with places where *Chazal*’swords seem unclear. In contrast, the approach of some of the *Geonim* was to address *aggadot* whose content contradicts reason or the plain sense of Biblical verses. Sometimes they rejected such *aggadot* because of their difficulty, and sometimes they offered some type of resolution.

The words of our *aggada* are mostly quite clear, and do not contradict any verses or logic. The one notable exception is the instruction to "Keep your children from *higayon*," which is doubly problematic: its precise meaning is unclear, and its general sense of opposing meditation/speculation/logic/reasoning seems to contradict intelligent thought. This second point is not only difficult for the rationalist thinkers who attach central importance to human reason, but also in light of the fact that the entire corpus of Talmudic discussion seems to be based on logical thought. Both the commentators who sought the plain meaning of the text and those with a more rationalist bent have had to address this element of Rabbi Eliezer’s instructions.

*Otzar ha-Geonim* on tractate *Berakhot* (commentary section, p. 39) brings several interpretations that are found in the literature of the *Geonim*. What they all have in common is their narrowing of the guidance to specific areas, instead of understanding it as a general opposition to logical reasoning and contemplation. Rav Hai Gaon understood the Gemara as referring to the science of logic, though he did not elaborate on the reason for Rabbi Eliezer's opposition. (Perhaps he learned this from the words: "Cursed is the man who teaches his son Greek wisdom" [*Sota* 49b].) Rav Tzemach Gaon explained that the Gemara is referring to contemplation of Biblical passages that can lead to heresy.[[1]](#footnote-1) According to another interpretation cited there, the Gemara is referring to contemplation of the sins of the ancients, which should not be done with young students before they have sufficiently matured. In the view of these *Geonim*, the Gemara does in fact come to guide a person to keep his children away from study and thought, but only with regard to limited areas that present an educational or ideological danger, or at an age when the children are not mature enough to understand and are therefore liable to suffer harm.

Rashi also addressed this instruction, and offered two interpretations: "Do not overly accustom them to studying Scripture, as it is enticing. Another explanation: [Keep them] from the conversation of children." Rashi understands the guidance as calling for keeping one's children away from excessive study of Scripture, or from talking with other children. It seems that what is common to both interpretations is a different understanding of the word "*higayon*." In Rashi’s reading, it denotes not rational analysis and intellectual inquiry, but rather speech, calling out, and conversation. According to this, the passage is not dealing at all with distancing a person or a young child from rational thinking – a teaching that troubled the *Geonim* and moved them to qualify it.

**The rest of the statement**

*Otzar ha-Geonim* does not contain referencesto any other parts of the *aggada*, which accords with the fact that they do not raise logical questions. I have also not found any reference to this *aggada* in the writings of the Rambam. (The relationship between the Rambam and the Maharal will be discussed in the next *shiur*.)

Rashi's commentary includes one additional note on the statement of Rabbi Eliezer. Regarding the guidance, "and when you pray, know before whom you are standing," Rashi explains: "so that you may pray with reverence and concentration." It seems that Rashi is addressing another difficulty with a simple reading of the *aggada*: What is the meaning of Rabbi Eliezer's guidance; who does not know that he is praying to God?! In answer to this question, Rashi clarifies that this line amounts to more than the mere information that one prays to God; it comes to shape an awareness of reverence and concentration that will accompany the entire prayer. Rashi's explanation adds understanding and meaning to the statement, and clarifies the content of the knowledge to which Rabbi Eliezer directs his students.

**The Maharal's Explanation**

The Maharal explains most of the *aggada* in his book *Netivot Olam*, *Netiv ha-Avoda,* chap. 2.[[2]](#footnote-2) He refers there to two more places where his explanation is completed; I will insert these references in square brackets within the passage. In my analysis of the Maharal's interpretation, I will separate the two parts of his words.

***Netiv ha-Avoda*, chap. 2**

That which he said: "Be vigilant about the honor of your colleagues" – we explained this above in *Netiv ha-Torah*, also in the chapters, why it is that honoring one's colleagues brings a person to life in the world to come, and there it is well explained.

[That which he said: "Be vigilant about the honor of your colleagues" – we already explained this in chapter "Rabbi says," why it is that because of this one merits the world to come: For everything is because of the supreme quality that God created man in the image of God, for this quality reaches the world to come, because it is impossible for anything to be above this quality that man was created in the image of God, and just as we explained this in connection with: “Beloved is man in that he was created in the image” of God, for this quality and level are not for the angels, and since this level is not for the angels, therefore it reaches the world to come, and when one honors this image of God, he adheres to the world to come, because he gives honor to man who was created in the image of God. And we already explained in connection with: “Beloved is man in that he was created in the image” of God, that this image is a supernal light that shines upon man, as was explained there, and this light is the light of the world to come, when you understand it with wisdom (*Netiv Ahavat ha-Ra*, chap. 1)].

And similarly, that which he said: "Know before whom you are praying," this too is clear, because prayer involves attachment to Him, may His name be blessed, as we explained above, because “one who makes his voice audible in prayer, he is among those of little faith” (*Berakhot* 24b), and prayer is the direct path by which man ascends to God, may His name be blessed, as it is stated: "The prayer of the upright is His desire" (*Mishlei* 15:8). These words allude to how far a person's prayer reaches, to the will of the Most High, and therefore, with this one merits the world to come.

And he said: "And keep your children from *higayon*," meaning: It is the way of people to teach their children phraseology and speech, which is called *higayon*, from the root *haga.* The *Arukh*, s.v. *hag*, explains [that it refers to] one who interprets a verse as it is, and this involves speech alone – as we do, that we teach the young ones only to recite the verse. Therefore, he said: "and set them between the knees of scholars," to teach them wisdom, and this will bring them to the world to come, as this is included in what they said: "There are three who will inherit the world to come: one who brings up his sons to the study of Torah…" (*Pesachim* 113a), as we explained above.

[And this matter requires an explanation, why a person merits the world to come through these three things. Know that the world to come is separate [from the material], this being the essence of the world to come. As they said in many places: "In the world to come there is no eating nor drinking, but the righteous sit with their crowns on their heads and delight in the radiance of the *Shekhina*" (*Berakhot* 17a). And a person who does these three things tends to be separate from the material, and therefore he is fit to become a member of the world to come… And one who brings up his sons to the study of Torah, which is of the intellect, and he brings up his sons to Torah, and is drawn to the separate intellect, and for this reason as well he is worthy of the separate world to come (*Netiv ha-Torah*, chap. 10]).

And because [Rabbi Eliezer] said that he would teach them the paths of life – that is, the path that ascends from down below to up above until it reaches the level of the world to come, and this is called "the paths of life" – therefore he mentioned these things, for they are the paths of life.

And he said that if they want to ascend along the paths of life, they should start below and ascend upward: "Keep your children from *higayon*" –this is like the beginning of the path, because he speaks first of a child who is to be educated. "And be vigilant about the honor of your colleagues" – this is a further ascent on this path, as he speaks of one's colleagues. "And know before whom you are praying" is the end of the path that ascends to God, may He be blessed; this is the complete ascent. Therefore he mentioned these three things, for through them a person ascends to God, may He be blessed.

And know that it would have been appropriate to say first that they should keep their children from *higayon*, which comes first, except that he started with colleagues, for one’s colleague is like himself, and precedence should be given to that which is like himself.

And you must understand that these three things are the paved and straight path, and constitute completely the paths to the world to come that ascend to the supreme level, and this is enough.

**Analyzing the Maharal's explanation**

The first thing that stands out in the Maharal's words, in contrast to those of his predecessors, is the fact that the Maharal interprets the entire *aggada*, line by line. There is no element that does not need explanation. This phenomenon is not unique to his interpretation of this *aggada*, but is typical of the Maharal's interpretations of *aggadot* in general. It is important to understand the reasons for this, among the Maharal's general principles as well as in relation to the content of this specific *aggada*.

The Maharal sees profound Divine wisdom in *Chazal*’s *aggadot*. They are not composed of simple folk content, as one might mistakenly think when looking at certain passages (such as the stories, for example), but rather reflect the depth of the Torah’s worldview – which is itself a revelation of Divine wisdom – rooted in the tradition of the prophets (see also the introductionto *Gevurot Hashem*).

In light of this fundamental understanding, the primary role of a commentator is not to resolve difficulties regarding the plain meaning of the passage, nor to reconcile logical contradictions, as we saw with Rashi and the *Geonim*, though this is sometimes necessary as well. The main role of the commentator is to expose the conceptual depth found in the *aggada* before him. Even an *aggada* like ours, which at first glance and for the most part seems simple and understandable, contains within it deep, essential content.[[3]](#footnote-3) This depth is found in every element of the *aggada*.

The need to explain the unique essence of each of Rabbi Eliezer’s instructions does not derive *only* from the Maharal's overall perception of *midrashim*; there are also internal reasons in this *aggada* itself to do so. Rabbi Eliezer's instructions are not merely important spiritual instructions for life, but provide a concise response to the quest for the path that leads to life in the world to come. What is unique about these words of advice, that turns them into conduits leading to life in the world to come? What is it about them that is not found in any other pieces of Torah counsel?

The first part of the Maharal's commentary is entirely dedicated to answering these questions. However, before we turn to the Maharal's explanations, it should be noted that the commentators mentioned above did not reckon with these questions, even though such a reckoning seems to be dictated by the very content of the *aggada*. Apparently, these commentators were satisfied with the fact that all of Rabbi Eliezer's teachings are significant moral and religious teachings. Consistent behavior of this kind confers cumulative merits, which can lead to life in the world to come.

However, in the Maharal's opinion, this is not enough. From his perspective, we must understand the essential connection of each of the instructions to the essence of the world to come. This demonstrates another element in the Maharal's methods of interpretation that we have already encountered: the Aggada as spiritual wisdom is constructed in a specific manner, based on internal spiritual systems and on an examination of the essential content of each and every element. Its contents are built on the principles of deep and precise wisdom, not on general assessments and reasoning.[[4]](#footnote-4)

When Rabbi Eliezer's disciples seek the paths of life through which they will merit life in the world to come, they want to know how to encounter this spiritual quality in this world, and thereby shape themselves in such a way that they will belong, more and more, to the world to come. Accordingly, it is not enough that Rabbi Eliezer mentioned matters of important religious value, in order to understand how they constitute a path that leads a person to the world to come. Quite the opposite. The spiritual essence of each of the instructions, and its connection to the world to come, is the central point that needs to be explained in the *aggada*. This, according to the Maharal, is the main point, and anyone who does not deal with this aspect misses the boat. Achieving profound understanding of the passage requires delving into the spiritual principles of existence, and therefore the Maharal explains in great detail how each and every one of Rabbi Eliezer's instructions is intrinsically connected to the spiritual level of the world to come and therefore also leads to it.

According to the Maharal, in order to understand why Rabbi Eliezer's instructions lead to the world to come, one must first delve into the concept of the world to come itself. The simple understanding of the world to come is a functional understanding of it as the place where a person will be rewarded for the merits he accumulated in this world. The Maharal clarifies that when we speak of the world to come, we are speaking of a reality with a spiritual quality that is superior in its very essence, and not merely one whose function is different from that of the reality of this world. "Know that the world to come is separate [from the material], this being the essence of the world to come"; "[these] constitute completely the paths to the world to come that ascend to the supreme level."

Identifying the essence of the world to come allows us to properly understand the path that leads to it. The path to the supernal world does not pass through the simple accumulation of enough merits recorded in a ledger; rather, it passes along a course in which a person encounters manifestations of that higher dimension already in this world, or is raised from here to a certain level of contact with this higher dimension. In this way, a person shapes his spiritual stature to become fit for the world to come. The world to come is a different spiritual quality. Rabbi Eliezer's disciples asked him for precise instructions concerning the world to come when he was standing on its threshold – not for general moral and religious instructions, which they had probably already learned from him. From this perspective, it is necessary to clarify how each of the three elements appearing in the *aggada* brings us to encounter a spiritual quality that is higher than the sensory experience of this world.

**The details of the *aggada***

The Maharal reviews the three instructions given by Rabbi Eliezer and explains what it is about each of them that brings us into contact with a higher spiritual quality than the experience of this world – the supreme spiritual level that belongs in its essence to the world to come, which is beyond our earthly-material reality. The Maharal is not satisfied with the conventional religious or moral value of these three statements, but reveals the spiritual depth hidden behind their simple appearance. The philosophical significance of each element deserves extensive consideration. I will briefly clarify the main points and refer to the most important places where the Maharal expanded in his explanation.

We will begin with the instruction to "be vigilant about the honor of your colleagues." This vigilance could be understood as a matter of courtesy, or above that, as moral guidance for building proper interpersonal relationships, but in the Maharal's opinion it stems from a much deeper level. Human dignity is derived from the Divine element in man – the image of God in him. Man is an exceptional creature in the world: although he lives his life as part of the natural material world, he possesses a separate spiritual level, inherent in him by virtue of his creation in the image of God. It is this level that gives him potential to belong to the world to come, and a real possibility of reaching this world at the end of his life. The Maharal teaches that this spiritual dimension in man finds expression already in this world – in the light of his countenance, in encounters with his fellow human beings, in his ability to penetrate the physical dimension and encounter the spiritual light radiating from him. All this depends on and finds expression in his showing appropriate honor to others. Vigilance about the honor of one's colleague expresses the ability to free oneself from the simple, natural perspective, which identifies a person as part of this world, and reach an awareness of the image of God in that person.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The second instruction, “When you pray, know before whom you are standing,” which Rashi explained as aimed at filling one's prayer with reverence and concentration, is also explained by the Maharal as directing man to a higher spiritual perspective. Prayer is not just a way for man to seek his worldly needs, out of a proper attitude of respect and reverence for his God. Rather, prayer opens up a channel of spiritual attachment to the supreme will of God.[[6]](#footnote-6) Through prayer, a person merits liberation from this visible world and connection to the hidden supernal world, something that finds expression in the prohibition to make one's voice audible in prayer. Praying aloud reveals that the petitioner does not understand the hidden gate that prayer opens before him. He continues to be entirely connected only to this world, which is revealed and small, and therefore he is considered to be one of little faith. Such prayer cannot bring a person to the world to come – even if he achieved full concentration while praying and recited his prayer with reverence.

The Maharal understands the two instructions, "keep your children from *higayon*” and “set them between the knees of scholars" as connected to each other. The purpose of both is to direct the focus of the children's education from speech and memorization to learning and wisdom. In this, the Maharal follows Rashi's interpretation of the term "*higayon*." What does he add?

According to the Maharal, the goal of seating one’s children “between the knees of scholars” is to direct them to learn the wisdom of the Torah. Wisdom leads to life in the world to come. How? The world to come in its very essence is separate from the material world: there is no eating or drinking in it, but only spiritual life in the radiance of the *Shekhina*. The Torah is a revelation of the Divine intellect to man, which makes it, too, separate from the material world – hence the power of the Torah to bring man to life in the world to come. The Maharal expands on this principle in many other places.[[7]](#footnote-7) According to him, the wisdom of the Torah is distinct from earthly human reason, and the Torah’s *mitzvot* remove man from living according to natural needs dictated by the reality of this world, according to which he is seemingly supposed to live as a member of this world, and direct him to live according to a higher system of commandments, derived from Divine, spiritual wisdom.

In conclusion, the Maharal explains all three elements as essential spiritual foundations that bring man together, even while in this world, with the Divine dimension beyond it – and therefore they lead to life in the next world, which is the actualization of the separate spiritual world. As we have already noted, each of these three elements has a profound dimension that requires additional explanation, and the Maharal expands upon them in other places; here, he only notes their main principles.

The specific *aggada* we have been discussing has specific content that derives from the fact that the world to come is at its center, but it is characteristic of the substance that the Maharal strives to reveal in his many explanations. *Aggadot* in general aim to remove man from the material and sensory perspective that characterizes our world, and to bring him to encounter the superior qualities of existence. The Maharal depicts the *aggadot* of *Chazal* in general in a way that is very reminiscent of the central content found, in his understanding, in the words of Rabbi Eliezer: "And they are all precious, orderly, brilliant words that teach man wisdom and fear of God… to the point that if a person walks in their ways, there are those who walk among those who stand above" (*Be'er ha-Gola*, p. 50). The words, "those who walk among those who stand above," allude to the level of the ministering angels. According to this statement, our passage is not the only *aggada* that deals with this. Studying the *aggadot* of *Chazal* in general, and shaping one's personality in accordance with their wisdom, brings one to awareness of and a sense of belonging to a higher spiritual world.

**The *aggada* as a whole**

In the second part of the Maharal's commentary, we encounter another distinct element of his method of interpretation. The Maharal is not satisfied with understanding every detail of the *aggada*; he also strives to understand its overall structure. This structure is not limited to an organizational or literary function, but has a primary conceptual function. The order and structure of the details of the passage reveal its overall arrangement, its course, and the single idea that is constructed from all of its particulars. The details are not just a collection of points. They were carefully chosen so that together they would compose an overall picture.

The Maharal reveals different types of organization within different statements of *Chazal*. In the case before us, the order deciphers the road map leading to the world to come: What are the stages and intermediate stations along this road, according to what principle are these stages arranged, and how do they complete the task together? The details of our *aggada* are the steps of a ladder standing on the ground with its top reaching heaven. The legs of the ladder offer guidance concerning a child who is just beginning the educational process; the middle step offers guidance concerning the relationship with one's colleague, who is a mature person and an individual of standing; and its top offers guidance concerning God and cleaving to Him, which is the highest level that a person can reach. The three instructions turn towards three directions that complement each other: man's relationships with one who stands opposite him (a colleague), with one who is below him (a child), and with one who is above him (God). All the instructions together build a spiritual level in man that elevates him above this world, so that he becomes purified and worthy of the world to come. The child, the colleague, and God form a comprehensive whole[[8]](#footnote-8) in the realm of the relationships of one who desires the world to come.

**Summary**

This *shiur* explored an *aggada* that speaks of the instructions Rabbi Eliezer gave his disciples, during his illness, regarding the paths of life that lead to the world to come. We reviewed the ways in which the *Geonim* and Rashi related to this *aggada*, and from there we considered the interpretation of the Maharal. Setting the interpretations alongside each other helped us to focus on the Maharal's general approach to the Aggada and its interpretation, through this sample.

Let us briefly summarize the main principles addressed in this study:

1. The Maharal's approach is to interpret each and every detail found in any *aggada*. This stems from some related principles:

a. *Aggadot* contain the depth of the Torah's worldview; therefore, the commentator's role is to reveal the depth behind each element, not just to explain the *aggada*’s plain meaning and resolve any logical objections raised against it.

b. *Aggadot* reveal Divine wisdom. Their contents express the essential spiritual dimension; its simple moral and religious dimensions are not enough to exhaust its profundity. *Chazal* did not speak in assessments and speculations, but with incontrovertible and precise wisdom, whose explanation requires that one be very exacting.

Further principles we saw in the Maharal’s commentary to our sample *aggada* include:

2. Identifying the conceptual focus of a passage and deepening it. In our case, the Maharal identifies the world to come as the organizing element of the passage, which requires understanding how each component is connected to the whole.

3. Elevating each and every element to its essential or intellectual spiritual significance.

4. Explaining the structure of the *aggada* (based on the definition of its framework) as reflecting the conceptual course of the passage and the single idea expressed through the entirety of its parts.

(Translated by David Strauss; edited by Sarah Rudolph)

1. We can derive a general direction for understanding his view from an example he brings, although he ultimately approves of this one and explains why: "But one can speculate about: 'Right would you be, O Lord, were I to contend with You' (*Yirmeyahu* 12:1), since an answer is given there: 'If you have run with the footmen…' (ibid. v. 5)." A question is raised here about the principle of providence, consideration of which could lead to heresy and the denial of that principle. But since the prophet himself brings an answer to the question, the guidance to refrain from study does not include those verses. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The wording and order of the *aggada* as it appears in the Maharal differs slightly from the wording and order in the Babylonian Talmud, since the Maharal is quoting from the *Ein Yaakov.* However, when he explains the order of the various elements of the *aggada*, he explains it in accordance with the order in which it appears in the Babylonian Talmud. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In general, *Chazal*’s perspective involves contemplation of the essence of things: "This is a great rule regarding the words of the Sages, that they seek the unique essence of a matter, as we have explained in many places in the work *Be'er ha-Gola* and in the work *Gevurot Hashem*" (*Netzach Yisrael*, chap. 6, p. 41). See previous *shiurim* in this series. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. "For there is no doubt that the words of the Sages are very profound, and that the words of the Sages were not said as an estimation or a suggestion, as some think and interpret the words of the Sages. Rather, all of their words are exceedingly profound words of wisdom. Therefore, the interpretation of their words as well requires great understanding and study, and not just an initial impression" (end of the introduction to *Derekh Chaim*; this principle appears in many places in the book, and we will discuss it later in the series). According to the Maharal, the difference between Divine wisdom and estimation is expressed, among other things, in the precision of the former, as can be seen from the following: "We have already told you many times that the words of the Sages should not be interpreted as a general estimation. If he said that seven traits characterize a sage, the number certainly comes to tell us that it is precisely seven, that it is fitting that there be seven traits in a sage, no more and no less" (*Derekh Chaim*, p. 240). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Maharal expands on the explanation of this principle in *Derekh Chayyim*,in his commentary to the statement: "Beloved is man in that he was created in the image of God" (*Avot* 3:14), a *mishna* that we will examine later in the series. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Rabbi Eliezer's use of the term *de'u* ("know") reinforces the link between prayer and cleaving to God (*deveikut*), for one of the conventional explanations of the word *da'at* is *deveikut* – as the Maharal himself writes in *Tiferet Yisrael*, chap. 10: "For one who has reached the level of knowledge is one who fully cleaves to God." The Maharal expands on the explanation of this principle in several places in *Netiv ha-Avoda.* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Throughout the book *Tiferet Yisrael*, and in *Netiv ha-Avoda.* Of course, his words about Aggada that we saw at the beginning of the chapter also express the same perception of the wisdom of the Torah. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Maharal always seeks the organizing principle that encompasses the entire picture, because it is the unifying axis of its many details. This does not mean that all of the fundamental components of the picture are always present in a passage, but rather that the framework of the passage encompasses a complete set of planes of reference. Within this framework, it is of course possible to increase or decrease the level of detail of the components, just as the zoom feature of a camera can be increased or decreased, or just as one image can be divided into two, three, or any other number of internal parts. For example, sometimes the Maharal will divide his discussion of man using the framework of body and soul (as we saw in one of the previous *shiurim*); sometimes he uses the framework of body, soul, and mind; and sometimes he uses the framework of body, soul, mind, and property, or the like. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)