YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Talmudic *Aggadot***

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Shiur #21: The Tale of Nechunya the Ditch-Digger (Part II)

# Introduction

# In the previous *shiur*, we saw the story of Nechunya the Ditch-Digger’s daughter (Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Kama* 50a-b) and its parallel in the Jerusalem Talmud (*Shekalim* 5:1, 48d). Now we return to the Babylonian Talmud’s narrative in order to observe its structure, as compared to the version in the Jerusalem Talmud.

# To make it easier for readers, we will consider both versions side-by-side:

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| **Jerusalem Talmud, *Shekalim*** | **Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Kama*** |
| Nechunya the Ditch-Digger, who would dig ditches and caves, knew under which rock a water source could be found and under which rock it was bone-dry, how far down the rock went and how far down the dryness went.  | Our Rabbis taught: It happened that the daughter of Nechunya the Ditch-Digger fell into a large cistern. People came and informed R. Chanina ben Dosa. During the first hour, he said to them, “She is well;” during the second, he said to them, “She is still well;” but in the third hour, he said to them, “She has by now come out [of the pit].” They then asked her, “Who brought you up?” Her answer was, “A ram came to my help with an old man leading it.”They then asked R. Chanina ben Dosa, “Are you a prophet?” He said to them, “I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet.I only said to myself: Shall his seed stumble over the thing to which that righteous man has devoted his labor?” |
| R. Acha said: His son died of thirst. | R. Acha, however, said: Nevertheless, his son died of thirst, as it says, “And it shall be very tempestuous round about Him,” which teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, is particular with those round about Him even for matters as light as a single hair. R. Nechunya derived the same lesson from the verse, “God is very daunting, in the secret counsel of His holy ones, and awesome over all surrounding Him.”  |
| R. Chanina said: Whoever says that the Holy One, blessed be He, is yielding in the execution of justice, that one’s innards will be yielded; rather, He is long-suffering and claims what He is owed.R. Acha said: as it says, “And it shall be very tempestuous round about Him,” which teaches that He is particular with them even for matters as light as a single hair.Said R. Yosa: This is not the source, but rather, “And awesome over all surrounding Him” — the fear of Him is more on those who are close than those who are far. | R. Chanina said: Whoever says that the Holy One, blessed be He, is yielding in the execution of justice that one’s life is yielded, for it is stated, “He is the Rock, His work is perfect; for all His ways are justice.”  |
| R. Chaggai in the name of R. Shemuel bar Nachman says: It happened that a pious man would dig cisterns, ditches, and caves for the passersby. Once his daughter was crossing the river to be married, and she was swept away. All the people came to console him, but he refused to accept their condolences. R. Pinchas ben Ya’ir came to console him, but he refused to accept his condolences. [R. Pinchas ben Ya’ir said]: “This is what you call a pious man?” They said to him: “Rabbi, this is what he did, and that is what happened to him.” He said: “Could it be that he honored his Creator with water and He brings him up short with water?” Suddenly, a tumult was heard in the town and the daughter of that man arrived. Some say she clung to a branch and climbed up; others say an angel came down, with the appearance of R. Pinchas ben Ya’ir, and saved her. | But R. Chana, or as others read R. Shemuel bar Nachmani, said: Why is it written, “Long of sufferings,” and not, “Long of suffering”? [It must mean,] “Long of sufferings” to both the righteous and the wicked. |

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### Nechunya’s Narrative in the Babylonian Talmud

In the Jerusalem Talmud, there are two traditions dealing with two separate characters: Nechunya and an anonymous pious man. In the version of the Babylonian Talmud, these two characters are conflated in the personality of Nechunya the Ditch-Digger.

Such a blending of traditions, particularly when we are talking about ascribing an anonymous tradition to a known personality, is a phenomenon that exists in the Babylonian Talmud in a number of contexts. Y. Heinemann explores this phenomenon, described as “focusing of the plot.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Aside from the distinction concerning the blending of these traditions, the Babylonian Talmud’s version is distinguished from that of the Jerusalem Talmud in a number of additional details, which may be less noticeable to the reader:

1. **Circumstances of the Accident**: The Jerusalem Talmud tells of drowning in a river, and the connection between this catastrophe and the profession of digging cisterns is more generalized.[[2]](#footnote-2) In the Babylonian Talmud, on the other hand, the child falls into a large cistern (*bor gadol*), a manmade device for collecting and holding rainwater, making the connection much more pronounced. Such circumstances for the accident are more appropriate for the *sugya* in the latter source, which is from Tractate *Bava Kama* and which deals with the tort of *bor* and the damages resulting from falling into one, rather than the *sugya* from the Jerusalem Talmud, which is from Tractate *Shekalim* and which does not address issues of damage and liability. Thus, we may observe how the Babylonian Talmud in *Bava Kama* fine-tunes the narrative so it will be a fitting accompaniment to the halakhic discussion there. This point is very significant when we consider how the Babylonian Talmud integrates narrative into various *sugyot*.

However, in this case, interestingly, there is some ambiguity, as there may be another reason to change the scene of the action from a raging river to a giant pit of rainwater. As we noted in the previous *shiur*, a *mishna* in the final chapter of *Yevamot* includes the following statement:

R. Meir says: It once happened that a man fell into a large cistern and rose to the surface three days later.

The *gemara* analyzes this statement (121b), as R. Meir and the Sages argue about this case, the former maintaining that it was a natural event, while the latter hold that only divine intervention could have allowed it:

“R. Meir says: It once happened that a man fell into a large cistern” — But it was taught in a *baraita*: They said to R. Meir, “We do not mention miraculous events.”

What miraculous events? If it was the lack of food and water, does not the verse say, “Fast on my behalf, neither eating nor drinking [for three days]”? (*Esther* 4:16)

Rather, it was because he could not have slept, as R. Yochanan said that one who vows not to sleep for three days receives lashes [for swearing falsely] and may go to sleep right away.

What then would R. Meir argue? R. Kahana explained: There were outcroppings over outcroppings.

What then would the Rabbis argue? [The outcroppings] would have been [as smooth as] marble.

What then would R. Meir argue? It is inconceivable that he could not have curled himself up to doze a bit.

Our Rabbis taught: It happened that the daughter of Nechunya the Ditch-Digger fell into a large cistern...

Analyzing this parallel, we must come to the conclusion that is altogether feasible that the circumstances of this accident — at least as the Babylonian Talmud chooses to formulate them — are specifically connected to R. Meir’s account in the *mishna* there of a man who fell into a *bor gadol*, as well as the debate he has with his colleagues about the natural or supernatural facts of the man’s survival.[[3]](#footnote-3)

1. **Identity of the Rescuer**: The Jerusalem Talmud (in the miraculous account) identifies the rescuer as an angel wearing the face of R. Pinchas ben Yair, a central character in the narrative. The Babylonian Talmud recasts the role: “A ram came to my help with an old man leading it.” The appearance of such a character is unprecedented, as far as we know, in the literature of *Chazal*. This wondrous figure[[4]](#footnote-4) does raise some biblical associations, as the aged Avraham takes a ram to replace his son at the Binding of Yitzchak, saving the young man from being a human sacrifice.[[5]](#footnote-5) Arguably, in the Nechunya narrative, this image may represent the Attribute of Divine Mercy, particularly as manifested in the relationship between a father and his imperiled child.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In the Babylonian Talmud, R. Chanina ben Dosa takes the place of R. Pinchas ben Yair. This may be because R. Chanina ben Dosa is famous for praying for others, as in the *mishna* in *Berakhot* 5:5[[7]](#footnote-7) and the corresponding *gemara* (34b),[[8]](#footnote-8) where the following line appears: “They said to him: ‘Are you a prophet?’ He replied: ‘I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet.’”

1. The Babylonian Talmud’s expression of theodicy is a key sentence in the narrative,[[9]](#footnote-9) and it is quite different from that of the Jerusalem Talmud. Respectively, they read:

Shall his seed stumble over the thing to which that righteous man has devoted his labor?

Could it be that he honored his Creator with water and He brings him up short with water?

First of all, the Jerusalem Talmud offers a much more casual connection between the pious man’s activity and the accident that befalls his family, which fits with the plot details there. In the Babylonian Talmud, on the other hand, the comparison is more exact and more focused on the action of the righteous man: Digging cisterns is his profession and his daughter falls into just such a cistern, and this intensifies the paradox that R. Chanina ben Dosa highlights.[[10]](#footnote-10)

1. **Order of the Statements Following the Incident**: In the Jerusalem Talmud, immediately after the statement that Nechunya’s son died of thirst, we have a number of formulations of the idea that God is no pushover. The sequence creates a sense in the reader that Nechunya is a sinner. In the Babylonian Talmud, at first some statements are cited in the matter of God’s exacting standards with “those round about him.”[[11]](#footnote-11) These statements better explain the death of the son of “that righteous man,” Nechunya. Only after R. Acha and R. Yosa[[12]](#footnote-12) have had their say does R. Chanina weigh in: “Whoever says that the Holy One, blessed be He, is yielding in the execution of justice…”[[13]](#footnote-13) If the rearranging of these statements in the Babylonian Talmud is purposeful, this is likely tied to the more positive character of Nechunya in the Babylonian Talmud, created by the blending of these narratives. If Nechunya is a righteous man, the statements about those surrounding God, for whom His standards are so much more exacting, are more fitting than R. Chanina’s statements, whose proximity to the narrative is likely to indicate that Nechunya committed a grievous but unknown sin.
2. **The Final Statement**: The statement, “R. Chana [Chagga], or as others read, R. Shemuel bar Nachmani,” in the Babylonian Talmud seems to parallel what we find in the Jerusalem Talmud as “R. Chaggai in the name of R. Shemuel bar Nachman.” The Babylonian Talmud attributes another statement to this sage,[[14]](#footnote-14) but the Jerusalem Talmud has no parallel in *Shekalim*. In *Ta’anit* (2:1, 65b), however, the Jerusalem Talmud does record such a statement, juxtaposed with that of R. Chananya:

**R. Shemuel bar Nachman says in the name of R. Yonatan: It is not written, “Long of suffering,” but rather, “Long of sufferings” — he is long-suffering with the righteous and long-suffering with the wicked.**

R. Acha and R. Tanchum Be-Rabbi Chiya say in the name of R. Yochanan: It is not written, “Long of suffering,” but rather, “Long of sufferings” — He is long-suffering before He claims what He is owed, and He is long-suffering as He claims what He is owed.

R. Chanina said: Whoever says that the Holy One, blessed be He, is yielding in the execution of justice, that one’s innards will be yielded; rather, He is long-suffering and claims what He is owed.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

**The Contrasting Viewpoints of the Two Talmuds**

These points indicate that if the narrative in the Babylonian Talmud had a source from the Land of Israel similar to that in the Jerusalem Talmud, this tradition underwent a number of alterations, which apparently appeared at different stages of its being passed down in Babylonian until it was integrated into the *sugya* in the Babylonian Talmud. Two separate narratives about two different characters in the tradition of the Land of Israel are united in the Babylonian Talmud into one story about one character. Some of the plot details have been altered, and it appears that even the statements and *derashot* that appear following the stories have themselves been subjected to a certain amount of processing, which is difficult to conclusively ascribe to certain people or times. Furthermore, we have seen that it may be that the context of the narrative in the Babylonian Talmud in *Yevamot* influenced part of the plot.

What of the version in the Babylonian Talmud? Some of the differences in its narrative appear to emanate from literary format considerations, to polish the story, to make it coherent, and to make it flow better. However, in other points, the Babylonian processing expresses itself in the different shape of the character of Nechunya. The Jerusalem Talmud presents him as the consummate professional, a Temple officeholder, and — as noted above — the description is totally neutral. The Jerusalem Talmud tells us that his son died of thirst, and if we add to this R. Chanina’s statement about how uncompromising God is, we may understand that he sinned in some unknown manner. The man whose daughter is rescued due to his actions is not Nechunya, but a certain pious man.

In the Babylonian Talmud, on the other hand, Nechunya is “that righteous man” whose life’s work is digging cisterns for the public, and therefore his daughter is saved from drowning. However, because the Babylonian Talmud has a unified story, there is an interesting phenomenon in it that does not exist in the Jerusalem Talmud. On the one hand, we find R. Chanina ben Dosa wondering, “Shall his seed stumble over the thing to which that righteous man has devoted his labor?” and the rescue of Nechunya’s daughter; on the other hand, we have the tragedy of his son’s death from dehydration.[[16]](#footnote-16) It appears that the Babylonian Talmud is aware of this tension, prefacing the latter with, “R. Acha, however, said: Nevertheless, his son died of thirst,” while the Jerusalem Talmud does not.

It appears that the positon of Rabbi Acha and his colleagues, at least as it is presented in the Babylonian Talmud, is that when push comes to shove, the Holy One, blessed be He, is particular with those closest to Him even for matters as light as a single hair. This overwhelms the objection, “Shall his seed stumble over the thing to which that righteous man has devoted his labor?” This is at least true when the righteous are themselves guilty of some misstep.[[17]](#footnote-17)

**The Message in *Bava Kama***

What, then, is the message of Nechunya’s narrative in the *sugya* of the Babylonian Talmud? The broader context there is the tort of *bor*. In the context of this debate, the law of exemption for one who digs a cistern and hands it over to the public is raised. This is a statement on the legalistic plane, and Nechunya the Ditch-Digger exemplifies such a practice.

However, immediately afterward, the *gemara* cites the story of Nechunya’s daughter falling into a *bor*, which seems to indicate that the message here is not merely on the legalistic plane. Digging a cistern and turning it over to the public is more than a legal loophole excusing one from liability should any passersby fall into that pit. This is not a neutral act, but rather a *mitzva*, demonstrating concern for the public welfare.

Thus, it may be that there is an attempt to allude to a more general statement: When we are talking about the public domain, there is more to discuss than liability and exemption, damage, and indemnification — despite the fact that deep into Tractate *Bava Kama*, one might get that impression, as its main preoccupation is torts and damages. The public domain is the sphere in which one may contribute to the welfare of the community. However, as one embarks on such endeavors, there are hazards, as exemplified by the story of Nechunya’s daughter. This danger may lead one to be dissuaded from digging cisterns to benefit the public. Therefore, the narrative comes to emphasize that there are limits when it comes to how cautious one should be about potential damage resulting from one’s activity in the public domain.

In other words, the legal side of the tractate stresses to a great extent the obligation to be circumspect in the public domain, to avoid any activity that may endanger another’s person or property. However, over-cautiousness of this sort could neuter any attempt to take positive action for the pubic welfare, due to the concern that one might cause damage. This is true not only for physical activities, such as digging cisterns, but any activities, such as taking a leadership role or contributing in any manner to the community. Therefore, the discussion about digging and handing over to the public, together with the Nechunya narrative, stresses that even if some damage were to occur, it is not only that the excavator would be exempt from liability, but the actions of such an individual should guarantee protection from any damages likely to result from such activity.

In the *sugya*, there is a general call not to hesitate to follow the example of Nechunya, who digs for the public welfare and acts correctly from a legalistic or halakhic point of view. Such a message is certainly more emphasized in the context of the narrative in the Babylonian Talmud, which deals directly with the tort of *bor*, than in the context of *Shekalim* in the Jerusalem Talmud, which deals with a totally different topic, that of the officeholders in the Temple.

However, as one continues reading in the *sugya* in the Babylonian Talmud, it appears that the picture is, in fact, more complex. As we noted, the *aggada* of Nechunya is composed of two parts, with a certain dialectic between the segments. The story of his daughter’s rescue from the cistern indicates that a person’s positive actions are supposed to keep tragedy from befalling that person or that person’s family — at least, catastrophes directly tied to the good acts performed. However, in the second part, which is composed of Amoraic statements, another direction is indicated, that of the Attribute of Justice (*Midat Ha-Din*), as due to its exacting nature, the son of “that righteous man” dies of thirst even though his father spent his life bringing water to the nation. In other words, even when there is a general link between the domains, this is not enough to provide absolute protection for a good actor, due to other considerations taking precedence.

Indeed, based on the way the sequence of events differs between the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud, it does not appear that the son dies due to Nechunya’s sin, certainly not a major transgression. His son dies in spite of his father’s righteousness and activity, not because of them. However, here another principle comes into play, the one mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud immediately after the narrative: God’s exacting standards for his intimates. Here, the Babylonian Talmud demonstrates an additional principle that presents its own opportunity and its own cost. The righteousness of Nechunya apparently brings him very close to God. There is a danger inherent in this intimacy that is quite reminiscent of standing on the edge of a *bor*. Such closeness is absolutely necessary in order to drink of its waters, as one who does not draw near cannot hope to quench his thirst. However, the closer one comes, the greater the danger of falling in. Therefore, those who come closest must exercise the highest degree of caution, more so than others.

These deep and complex messages are created by the Babylonian Talmud by combining two separate tales found in the Jerusalem Talmud into a unified but complex whole.

Translated by Yoseif Bloch

1. Y Heinemann, *Darkhei Ha-Aggada*, pp. 28-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Essentially, the only connection between these two elements is that both are water sources. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Indeed, the similarity between the stories is reinforced by the element of time: Nechunya’s daughter is rescued after **three** hours, while this man climbs out after **three** days. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Indeed, the insertion of this savior figure may also be influenced by the *sugya* in *Yevamot*, as the discussion there is about what constitutes a miraculous event; introducing a clearly fantastical figure emphasizes and intensifies the idea of a supernatural event (although there is a miraculous event in the version from the Land of Israel as well). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rabbeinu Chananel and Rashi ad loc. both explain the term in this way, although rather than *ayil* (ram), the *gemara* uses the unusual term “*zakhar shel recheilim*,” literally meaning “a male of the ewes.” Cf. *Arukh*, *Zakhar* II (*Arukh Ha-Shalem*, Vol. III, p. 291). There may be something shared by the two stories of Nechunya and of Avraham; a father almost loses his child, but divine intervention saves the latter at the last moment. On the other hand, there are many important distinctions, as in Avraham’s case, God is the one who tests him by ordering him to bring Yitzchak up on the altar in the first place, while in Nechunya’s case, it may bea divine punishment, one which ultimately is carried out through the death of his son by dehydration. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Rashi states that Nechunya’s daughter was protected by the merit of the Binding of Yitzchak. As the Maharsha ad loc. explains, this is based on the midrashic tradition that the Binding of Yitzchak “will be seen” throughout the generations to forgive Israel (*Bereishit Rabba* 56:10). Another possibility is that this ram recalls Amos, who was both a shepherd and a prophet, as the declaration which R. Chanina ben Dosa makes, “I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, comes from his book (7:14-15): “I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but I am a shepherd, and I also tend sycamore-fig trees.But the Lord took me from tending the flock and said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. It was said of R. Chanina ben Dosa that he used to pray for the sick and afterwards declare: “This one shall live, but that one shall die.”

They asked him: “How could you know such a thing?”

He replied: “If my prayer is fluent in my mouth, I know that it is accepted; if it does not, I know that it is rejected.” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Our Rabbis taught: Once the son of Rabban Gamaliel fell ill, so he sent two scholars to R. Chanina ben Dosa to ask that he pray for him.

When he saw them he went up to an upper chamber and prayed for him.

When he came down he said to them: “Go, the fever has left him.”

They said to him: “Are you a prophet?”

He replied: “I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but I learned this from experience. If my prayer is fluent in my mouth, I know that it is accepted; if it does not, I know that it is rejected.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A similar phrase appears on *Megilla* 16a and *Nidda* 52a; however, I have not found a meaningful thematic connection between the Nechunya narrative and those descriptions. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Although we are not compelled to say that the cistern the daughter falls into is one of Nechunya’s projects, the connection is still strong enough. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The Babylonian Talmud combines the two statements of R. Acha, one about the death of Nechunya’s son and one about God’s exacting standards for His intimates, which are separated in the Jerusalem Talmud. It may be that this is a purposeful juxtaposition, placing the biographical fact about the tragic end of Nechunya’s son next to the principle of divine retribution, thus strengthening the impression that Nechunya, described in the Babylonian Talmud as righteous, belongs in the category of those who are “round about” God. The death of his son would therefore indicate an exacting punishment for a minor offense. On the other hand, it may be that the Babylonian Talmud sees the tradition from R. Acha as an inseparable whole.

In the Jerusalem Talmud as well, the reader is left in some doubt. Ostensibly, it appears that the Jerusalem Talmud takes R. Acha’s two statements as independent, but it may be that its redactors were the ones to interrupt R. Acha’s words with those of R. Chanina, juxtaposing his statement about God’s unyielding nature to the report of the son’s death, indicating a severe transgression, more so than having R. Acha’s two statements together, which would allude to attributing the death of Nechunya’s son to a minor offense that God takes seriously because of the sinner’s proximity to the Divine Presence, as mentioned above. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Cited in the name of R. Chanina (this is what reliable manuscripts have, although it is R. Nechunya who appears in the printed version; this may be an interpolation from the name of the protagonist of the narrative). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. To this the *gemara* adds a verse from *Devarim* 32 (which does not appear in the parallelsource; its exact role in this context requires further analysis). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This may be because the narrative of the pious man had already been blended with that of Nechunya. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. In *Pesiketa De-Rav Kahana* (24:11, Mandelbaum Edition, Vol. II, p. 363), these statements appear with some variations in which *Amora’im* offer each. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The Tosafists (s.v. *davar*) already take note of this, and they explain that the son does not die due to the exact same thing that the righteous man so exerted himself for – i.e. he does not fall into a *bor*. Nevertheless, it does not sit well that a man who dedicated his life to making sure others did not go thirsty should have his son die of thirst. Cf. *Torat Chayim*, ad loc. s.v. *af*. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. It may be that according to the Babylonian Talmud, the righteous man has not yet sinned when his daughter falls into the water, so God does not treat him in an exacting manner. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)