YESHIVAT HAR EZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Ein Yaakov - The World of Talmudic Aggada**

**By Dr. Moshe Simon-Shoshan**

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**Lecture #23: Daf 6b**

**Glad Runner**

The Gemara continues discussing the importance of praying in the synagogue by citing another statement of R. Chelbo in the name of R. Huna:

R. Chelbo, in the name of R. Huna, says [further]:

When a man leaves the synagogue, he should not take large steps.

Abaye says: This is only when one goes from the synagogue,

but when one goes to the synagogue, it is a pious deed to run.

For it is said:

“Let us run to know the Lord” (*Hoshea*, 6:3).

Neither R. Chelbo's statement nor Abaye's follow-up statement are particularly striking. At first, it is unclear exactly what sort of “large steps” R. Huna is discussing. However, it quickly becomes clear from Abaye's response that R. Huna means running. The combined message of these two statements is: One should rush to get to the synagogue, but never rush to leave. This may be a message that bears repeating, but it is not especially interesting or original.

The novel aspect of this passage comes only with its final teaching:

R. Zera says:

At first when I saw the scholars running to the lecture on a Sabbath day,

I thought that they were desecrating the Sabbath.

But since I have heard the saying of R. Tanchum in the name of R. Yehoshua b. Levi:

A man should always, even on a Sabbath,

run to listen to the word of Halakha,

as it is said:

‘They shall walk after the Lord, who shall roar like a lion’

(*Hoshea* 11:10),

now, I also run.

In this passage, we learn that according to R. Tanchum, not only is running to study Torah a mitzva, it is even permitted on the Sabbath, when running is otherwise forbidden. Now we see the extraordinary importance which the rabbis attributed to running to serve God. Showing enthusiasm when going to encounter God is even more important than showing proper respect for the Sabbath’s restful sanctity.

Once again, we see in this chapter the close relationship between prayer and Torah study. The passage moves from the topic of running to prayer to running to study, almost as if the two were interchangeable.

If the Talmud had sought simply to teach us that running to a Torah lecture on the Sabbath is permissible and even meritorious, it could easily have cited only the statement that R. Zera makes in R. Tanchum's name. Instead, the Talmud brings this statement in the context of a larger first-person narrative told by R. Zera. In doing so, the Gemara teaches us some larger lessons about learning Torah.

In this story, R. Zera goes through a transformation. At the beginning, he erroneously believes that running to the study session on Shabbat is forbidden. By the end of the story, he has learned that it is actually a mitzvato do so, and he adjusts his behavior accordingly. This story follows a common pattern found in many rabbinic stories. We do not learn *from* the rabbinic protagonist; we learn *with* him. The sages are not all-knowing. Quite to the contrary, they have much to learn, like all of us. One of the most important things we can learn from the sages is an openness and willingness to learn from others and from life experiences. Equally important is the willingness to change our opinions and ourselves on the basis of what we have learned.

This story also traces another transformation of R. Zera. At first R. Zera stands aloof from his fellow scholars, because he sees their behavior as violating the laws of Sabbath. At the end, he approves of their behavior and joins them in their sprint to the *beit midrash* (the study hall). Thus, by receiving halakhic enlightenment from R. Tanchum, R. Zera not only moves from ignorance to knowledge, but from isolation to participation in the community of scholars. This process picks up on a motif found elsewhere in the Gemara, in which the common practice, which appears wrong, ends up being vindicated through some previously unknown teaching.

**A for Effort**

The Gemara concludes this section with a series of adages, the first one of which is recorded in the name of R. Zera:

R. Zera says:

The merit of attending a lecture lies in the running.

Abaye says:

The merit of attending the Kalla sessions lies in the crush.

Raba says:

The merit of repeating a tradition lies in [improving] the understanding of it.

R. Papa says:

the merit of attending a house of mourning lies in the silence observed.

Mar Zutra says:

The merit of a fast day lies in the charity.

R. Sheshet says:

The merit of a funeral oration lies in raising the voice.

R. Ashi says:

The merit of attending a wedding lies in the words

[of congratulation addressed to the bride and bridegroom].

This passage presents a series of proverbs, each in the name of a different *amora*. Each saying follows the general format of "the merit of X lies in Y.” The passage divides into two sections. The first three lines deal with different types of Torah study, and the second four deal with mourning and rejoicing.

Several of these proverbs also share a common ironic theme: the real value of the activity at hand is not what is commonly assumed. Thus the first two proverbs deal with two different types of Torah lessons, the weekly Shabbat lecture and the annual *kalla* (assembly of the Babylonian *yeshivot*)*.* In both cases, we would have thought that the primary merit in attending these events lies in the Torah that one learns there. Rather, we are taught that the physical exertion involved in getting to the lesson is actually primary. It is unclear to what extent we should take these statements literally. Is this simply an exaggerated way of saying that even if one does not remember or understand the lesson, one still receives the *sekhar holakha*? (*Pirke Avot* (5:14) uses the term *sekhar holakha* to describe the reward for traveling to the class, as well as enduring the overcrowding of the study hall at high season.) Or, do these rabbis really mean to say that understanding is truly secondary and that, as a popular filmmaker once said, "ninety per cent of life is just showing up"?

Along similar lines, when Mar Zutra says, "The merit of a fast day lies in the charity," he is dispelling the common notion that the important thing about a fast day is fasting. Rather, he echoes the prophet *Yeshayahu'*s words (58:5-7):

Is such the fast I desire,

A day for men to starve their bodies?

Is it bowing like a bulrush

And lying in sackcloth and ashes?

Do you call that a fast,

A day when the Lord is favorable?

No, this is not the fast I desire.

To unlock fetters of wickedness…

It is to share bread with the hungry,

And take the wretched poor into your home…

Mar Zutra argues that fasting is secondary on a fast day; the important thing is doing deeds of loving-kindness.

In light of this pattern, we suggest that the other proverbs in the list, some of whose meaning is obscure in the first place, should also be read ironically as suggesting that the most important part of the activity at hand is not as obvious as one thinks. Thus Raba states "The merit of a legal teaching (*shemata*) lies in the understanding (*sevara*) of it.” We can understand this statement in light of a line in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Pesachim* 34b (see also Tractate *Menachot* 52a). R. Yirmiya responds to a teaching that he just heard in the name of the Babylonian rabbis as follows: "Silly Babylonians! Because they dwell in a land of darkness, they engage in dark (obscure) discussions (*shematteta*)." R. Yirmiya disparages the Babylonian rabbis for presenting legal teachings that are not straightforward. Our passage may be seen as a Babylonian response to this charge. Contrary to common opinion, legal teachings are not meant to be easily understood. Rather, they are meant to be complex, and the student gains merit by deciphering them.

Along similar lines, we can understand R. Papa's declaration that *"*the merit of attending a house of mourning lies in the silence observed," as negating the popular understanding that the purpose of a *shiva* visit is to offer words of comfort to the bereaved. R. Papa tells us that words are often insufficient to comfort the bereaved, and it is better merely to join the mourner in silence.

**Turn, Turn, Turn**

The Gemara continues presenting traditions of R. Chelbo in the name of R. Huna regarding the synagogue:

R. Chelbo in the name of R. Huna said:

[Printed editions read "R. Huna says:" See Benovitz.]

Whosoever prays at the rear of a synagogue is called wicked.

For it is said:

‘The wicked walk round about’ (*Tehillim* 12:9).

Abaye says:

This only applies where he does not turn his face towards the synagogue,

but if he does turn his face towards the synagogue,

there is no objection to it.

The first issue to resolve is what does R. Huna mean when he says that one should not pray *achorei bet ha-knesset*, translated here as "at the rear of the synagogue." Rashi comments as follows:

Synagogue entrances were always in the east.

As it is taught in *Tosefta* *Megilla* (see 3:22),

Like the Temple and Tabernacle,

[Synagogues] face west, and their rear is to the East,

So that one who prays to the rear of the synagogue

And does not turn his face towards the synagogue

Appears to deny He whom the congregation is praying before.

According to Rashi, "praying at the rear" means standing in the back of the synagogue and facing the door. By doing so, a person effectively turns his back to God. This is reminiscent of the scene described in *Yechezkel*, when God shows the prophet a vision of the Temple overrun with idolaters (8:16):

Then he brought me to the inner court of the House of the Lord

Between the portico and the altar,

Were about twenty-five men,

Their backs to the Temple of the Lord,

And their faces to the east;

They were bowing low to the sun in the east.

The behavior condemned by the Gemara as evil recalls how the idolaters turned away from God and worshipped nature in the book of *Yechezkel*. This reading, however, has a few problems. First, Rashi assumes that R. Huna's initial statement only makes sense according to Abaye's caveat that standing in the back of the synagogue is only problematic if one also faces the rear. Generally, when a rabbi qualifies an earlier statement using a phrase like, "This only applies where," he implies that the original statement could be understood otherwise. Optimally, we would want an explanation of R. Huna that does not depend on Abaye's gloss.

Furthermore, one gets the sense that R. Huna refers to an actual practice taking place in his day. Did people actually come to synagogues and pray facing backwards in the days of the *amoraim*? It seems hard to imagine, but perhaps we are missing some historical context.

Benovitz, in his commentary, gives another reading, which is already suggested in earlier commentators. Praying "at the rear" of the synagogue refers to those who stand just outside of the synagogue. By doing so, a person separates himself from the community within the synagogue. Abaye adds that standing outside the synagogue is only a problem if the person does not face the same direction as the community. But if one faces the same way as those inside the synagogue, one retains one’s place in the prayer community even while standing outside the physical structure of the synagogue.

This teaching is followed up by a brief anecdote emphasizing the severity of such behavior.

There was once a man

who prayed at the rear of a synagogue

and did not turn his face towards the synagogue.

Elijah passed by

and appeared to him in the guise of an Arab.

He said to him:

Are you standing with your back to your Master?

and drew his sword and slew him.

The basic message of this story is clear. Standing at the rear of the synagogue is such a severe sin that a man was once struck down where he stood just for doing so. However, the details of this story remain obscure.

First, as Benovitz notes, most manuscripts omit any reference to Elijah. Rather, in these versions an actual Arab comes and slays the man. This obviously changes the story significantly. In the printed versions, Elijah kills the man in a direct act of Divine retribution. Elijah is a messenger of Divine wrath, as he often is in the Bible. Elijah appears as an Arab traveler, like Odysseus returning to Ithica, in order to hide his appearance on earth from onlookers. On the other hand, in the manuscripts' version, the man who stands at the back of the synagogue is struck down by a man with no name. What is the significance of this man? I would like to suggest that the Arab in this story represents a radical outsider. Even to this high desert drifter, this Jew's behavior was scandalous and demanded a violent response. The moral would be: If even this Arab understood how outrageous such behavior is, how much more so should we.

This brings us to the second difficulty in the story. The meaning of the Arab's statement to the man before he kills him, *kadu bar kayymat kamei marakh* remains obscure. The last words of the sentence mean "you stand before your Master." However, the first words, *kadu bar,* have defied interpretation. Here the entire line is translated as, "Are you standing with your back to your Master?" This translation probably is based on R. Sherira Gaon's interpretation of *kadu bar* as an Arabic phrase meaning "behind.” Rashi, on the other hand, understands the term as referring to the "two powers,” i.e. a dualistic heresy implied by one who prays with his back to God. Benovitz argues for a literal reading of these words as "now, outside," which would suggest a translation of "Now, you stand before your Master outside?" This reading assumes that the man's fundamental sin is praying outside the synagogue, as Benovitz suggested earlier.

The Gemara now concludes this section with a discussion of the second half of *Tehillim* 12:9, the verse whose opening words were cited previously to condemn praying at the back of the synagogue:

One of the scholars said to R. Bibi b. Abaye

(some say: R. Bibi said to R. Nachman b. Yitzchak):

What is the meaning of:

When vileness is exalted among the sons of men? (*Tehillim* 12:9)

He replied to him:

These are the things of supreme importance

which nevertheless people neglect.

R. Yochanan and R. Eliezer both interpret:

As soon as a man needs the support of his fellow-creatures

his face changes color like the kerum,

as it is said:

'As the kerum is to be reviled among the sons of men.' (an alternate translation of *Tehillim* 12:9)

What is the 'kerum'?

When R. Dimi came [from Palestine] he said:

There is a bird in lands beyond the sea (lit. the cities of the sea).

whose name is kerum,

and as soon as the sun shines upon it,

it changes into several colors.

R. Ammi and R. Assi both say:

[When a man needs the support of his fellow-beings]

it is as if he were punished with two [opposite] punishments,

with fire and water.

For it is said:

When Thou hast caused men to ride over our heads,

we went through fire and through water (*Tehillim* 66:12).

This passage offers two interpretations of a difficult biblical phrase, *kerum zulut benei adam.* These interpretations are followed by an interpretation of another verse from *Tehillim*, which we will not deal with here. The most problematic part of *Tehillim* 12:9 is the term *kerum.* The first opinion breaks this word into two parts, the prefix *ke* meaning "like" and the root *rum*, meaning "high.” These rabbis further understood the term *zulut* as meaning something like "cheapen," as in the word *zol*. They translate the entire verse as "[When] people degrade things that are high (important), evildoers surround them."

The second interpretation takes *kerum* to be the name of an exotic bird whose feathers change colors in the sunlight. The term *zulut* is taken to mean "others,"as in the word *zulat*. These rabbis render this part of the verse as "[When] people [become dependent] on others, [their faces change colors like] a *kerum.*”

Soncino identifies the *kerum* with the family of birds known to ornithologists as *Paradisaeidae* ("Birds of paradise"). This seems unlikely because, at least according to Wikipedia, these birds are native to the islands of the Pacific Ocean. It would be impressive indeed if the rabbis had knowledge of such distant shores, which even the most intrepid travelers of the day were unlikely to have reached. Steinsaltz more plausibly identifies the bird with the *Lamprotornis splendidus* ("The Splendid Glossy-starling") which is native to western, central and eastern Africa. As the name suggests, this bird has a metallic sheen, which according to Steinsaltz, changes color in the sun.

But the question of identifying the exact species to which the Gemara refers is of secondary importance. Indeed, the rabbis may not have had exact or even reliable knowledge on this matter. More interesting here is the way in which the Gemara introduces a new type of "voice" into this passage. The Gemara generally is made up of mixing different voices from various sources. This passage mixes two of the most common voices in the Talmud: the prophetic voice of the biblical text and the midrashic voice of the rabbis who interpret and expound upon the Bible. Now a third voice is introduced from beyond the *Beit Midrash*. It is the voice of sailors and adventurers who regale their audiences with tales of the wondrous flora and fauna of lands far, far way. This exotic voice adds richness and texture to the Gemara's discourse.