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**Talmudic *Aggadot***

Rav Dr. Yonatan Feintuch

Shiur #32: Moshe on High (Part II)

# Introduction

# In the [previous *shiur*](http://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-31-moshe-high-part-i), we began to discuss the *aggada* in which Moshe ascends on high. We saw that based on the content and form, the *aggada* may be split in two different ways, and these divisions are not complementary. In the current *shiur*, we will propose an explanation for this phenomenon.

According to the first division, the first part of the *aggada* (lines 1-6) deals with the tension between the Oral Torah and the Written Torah. We have seen how, in response to Moshe’s question about tying crowns to the letters, God engages with him, answering at length, with generosity and openness. He allows him to watch Rabbi Akiva’s lecture, and despite Moshe’s momentary crisis because he doesn’t understand Rabbi Akiva’s words, he is comforted. Most of this segment is conducted, in any case, in a pleasant and open environment.

At the base of this segment of the narrative stands the problem of the chasm between the developing and innovative Oral Torah and the original given by Moshe at Sinai. This is a question that certainly concerns *Amora’im* and the authors of the narrative, whose main occupation is exploring the Oral Torah. Thus, they confront the troubling question: What authority or legitimacy could this enterprise possibly have if an ambiguous gap exists between it and the Written Torah given at Sinai? This question does not remain hanging; in the story, it gets a type of answer that is comforting, and one may say that just as Moshe is comforted, between the lines we may glean that the mind of the author, who is also troubled by the question, is settled as well.

This resolution of both the difficulty and the cognitive dissonance in the first segment stands, of course, in direct and sharp opposition to the second segment, which ends in a totally different way: “Be silent, for this is My design.” No openness prevails here; God does not share here, but rather conceals. In the second segment, there is another question at issue than in the first. The question here is about God’s ways or attributes, His considerations and the manner in which He runs the world. Specifically, the second question in this part is the classic question of theodicy, why the righteous suffer in a way that seems to contradict the attribute of justice. It is amazing to see how at the moment that Moshe asks these questions, God’s tone changes. Moshe tries to understand, and twice he hears the harsh and peremptory reply: “Be silent, for this is My design.” This leaves no role for Moshe to play.

What is the link between the segments? Why does the author juxtapose in one narrative two very different questions, which are answered in such different ways?

Jeffery Rubenstein, as referenced in the previous *shiur*, has already written that this story may be seen as a *midrash* on the verses in *Parashat Ki Tisa* after the Sin of the Golden Calf (*Shemot* 33:12-23), when Moshe asks to be granted a peek into God’s ways and his request is answered only partially. Indeed, there as well, in the second half of *Shemot*, there is a juxtaposition between the Giving of the Torah through Moshe and the questions about the ways of God, “Teach me your ways.” Moshe receives the Torah on Mount Sinai, and there he stands and seeks to know God’s ways, and he merits a partial vision in the cleft of the rock.

Moshe said to the Lord, “You have been telling me, ‘Lead these people,’ but You have not let me know who You will send with me. You have said, ‘I know you by name and you have found favor with me.’If You are pleased with me, teach me Your ways so I may know You and continue to find favor with You. Remember that this nation is Your people…”

And the Lord said to Moshe, “I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name.”

Then Moshe said, “Now show me Your glory.”

And the Lord said, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim My name, the Lord, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for no one may see Me and live.”

Then the Lord said, “There is a place near Me where you may stand on a rock. When My glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove My hand and you will see My back; but My face must not be seen.”

Indeed, one of the central words in these verse, “Now show me,” appears three times in our aggadic passage in different conjugations (lines 4 and 9).

The following *midrash* outlines Moshe’s requests by expounding *Shemot* 33:

R. Yochanan further said in the name of R. Yossei: Three things did Moshe ask of the Holy One, blessed be He, and they were granted to him.

He asked that the Divine Presence should rest upon Israel, and it was granted to him. For it is said (v. 16): “[How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people] unless you go with us?”

He asked that the Divine Presence should not rest upon the idolaters, and it was granted to him. For it is said (v. 16): “What else will distinguish me and your people [from all the other people on the face of the earth?]”

He asked that He should show him the ways of the Holy One, blessed be He, and it was granted to him. For it is said (v. 13): “Teach me your ways.”

Moshe said before Him: “Master of the Universe, why is it that some righteous ones prosper and others are in adversity, some wicked ones prosper and others are in adversity?”

He replied to him: “Moshe, the righteous one who prospers is the righteous one who is the child of a righteous one; the righteous one who is in adversity is a righteous one who is the child of a wicked one. The wicked one who prospers is a wicked one who is the child of a righteous one; the wicked one who is in adversity is a wicked one who is the child of a wicked one…”

Now this is in opposition to the saying of R. Meir. For R. Meir said: Only two [requests] were granted to him, and one was not granted to him. For it is said (v. 19): “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy” – though they be undeserving; “and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion” – though they may be undeserving.(Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 7a)

In the view of R. Yossei, God is ready to explain His considerations of universal justice to Moshe, but in the view of R. Meir, in whose path the author of our *aggada* seems to tread, God restricts this area from Moshe. This position is expressed in the following *midrash*:

Thus, Moshe says to the Holy One, blessed be He, “Teach me your ways,” and He did so, as it says, “He teaches his ways to Moshe” (*Tehillim* 103:7).

“Now show me your glory” — Now show me the attribute by which You rule the world.

He said to him: You cannot fathom My attributes. (*Midrash Tehillim* [Buber], ch. 25)

There are additional sources in *Chazal* from which it arises that God does indeed include Moshe in the debate about His attributes and management of the world, as the following *midrash* indicates:

“And Moshe made haste, and bowed his head toward the earth, and worshipped” (*Shemot* 34:8). What did Moshe see?

R. Chanina ben Gamla said: He saw long-suffering [as one of His attributes] (ibid. 34:6).

The Rabbis say: He saw [His attribute of] truth (ibid.).

It has been taught in agreement with the one who holds that “he saw long-suffering”:  When Moshe ascended on high, he found the Holy One, blessed be He, sitting and writing “long-suffering.”

He said to Him, “Master of the Universe! Long-suffering to the righteous?”

He replied, “Even to the wicked.”

“The wicked shall perish!” he said (*Tehillim* 37:20).

He said, “Now, see what you are asking.”

When Israel sinned, He said to him, “Was it not you who said I should be long-suffering towards the righteous only?”

“Master of the Universe!” he said to Him. “Was it not You who said it is even for the wicked?”

Immediately,he cried out to Him (*Bamidbar* 14:17), “And now, I pray you, let the power of the Lord be great, according as you have spoken.” (Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 111a-b)

As stated above, in the story we are dealing with in the Babylonian Talmud, as opposed to other *midrash*im we cited above, the two separate segments that deal with two separate questions are woven together: the question of the gap between the innovative nature of the Oral Torah and the immutable tradition of the Written Torah, and the question of theodicy and the ways in which God runs the world.

Are these two issues juxtaposed for the simple and convenient reason of setting, i.e. the Torah is given upon Sinai and Moshe seeks to understand God’s ways on Sinai? If so, we have an agglomeration of two disparate issues, with the only justification for their association being a relatively external factor. Could this really be true?

This seems to be belied by the effort invested in the tight, intricate literary structure. As we have mentioned above, this structure is painstakingly elaborate, and therefore it does not appear that this is a mere agglomeration of ideas.

Indeed, we may see how the authors of the Babylonian Talmud build the narrative by borrowing elements from other narratives and other *midrashim*, using it as building blocks for the narrative.

The introductory phrase “When Moshe ascended on high” appears in many, many *midrashim*, and the question of tying crowns to the letters is found in another source, as we saw in the previous *shiur*.

Similarly, as we saw in the previous *shiur*, another *midrash* uses the terminology about R. Akiva, expounding a verse in *Shir Ha-Shirim* in the same way: “His locks are curled” — This, said R. Chisda in the name of Mar Ukva, teaches that one may expound upon each stroke mounds and mounds of laws.” This example is also a building block in our story in *Menachot*.

We also find Moshe feeling powerless when he cannot understand R. Akiva’s lecture, which appears in a number of other sources:

“And the Lord spoke unto Moshe: Go, get you down” (*Shemot* 32:7). What is meant by “Go, get you down”?

R. Elazar explained it in the following way:

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moshe: “Moshe, descend from your greatness. Have I at all given to you greatness save for the sake of Israel? And now Israel have sinned; then why do I want you?” Immediately Moshe felt powerless and he had no strength to speak. When, however, [God] said, “Let Me alone that I may destroy them” (*Devarim* 9:14), Moshe said to himself, “This depends on me!” and immediately he stood up and prayed vigorously and begged for mercy.

It was like the case of a king who became angry with his son and began beating him severely. His friend was sitting before him but was afraid to say a word until the king said, “Were it not for my friend here who is sitting before me I would kill you!” He said to himself, “This depends on me!” and immediately he stood up and rescued him. (Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 32a)

Here as well, Moshe feels weak and impotent, and only afterwards does he see the indication that he in fact has power, which allows him to recover his confidence and regain his strength.

Moshe’s challenge, “This is Torah, and this is its reward?” appears in two other places as well. The first is in the context of Elisha ben Avuya, who becomes the apostate Acher after having a crisis of faith:

Others tell a different story. Once Elisha saw in a dog’s mouth the tongue of R. Yehuda the Baker, dripping blood. “This is Torah,” he said, “and this is its reward? This is the tongue that faithfully declared the Torah’s words? This is the tongue that never tired of speaking Torah? This is the Torah, and this is its reward? Clearly enough, there is no reward. Clearly enough, there is no resurrection.” (Jerusalem Talmud, *Chagiga* 2:1, 77b)

However, there is another source about R. Akiva himself in the Babylonian Talmud:

When R. Akiva was taken out for execution, it was the hour for the recital of the *Shema*, and while they combed his flesh with iron combs, he was accepting upon himself the kingship of heaven.

His disciples said to him, “Our teacher, even to this extent?”

He said to them, “All my days I have been troubled by this verse [in the *Shema*], ‘with all your soul’ (*Devarim* 6:5) [which I interpret] – even if He takes your soul. I said: When shall I have the opportunity of fulfilling this? Now that I have the opportunity shall I not fulfill it?” He prolonged the word *echad* (“the Lord is one”) until he expired while saying it.

A Divine Voice went forth and proclaimed, “Happy are you, Akiva, that your soul has departed with the word *echad*!”

The ministering angels said before the Holy One, blessed be He, “This is Torah, and this is its reward? [He should have been] from among those who die by your hand, O Lord.”

He replied to them: “They receive their portion during their lives.”

A Divine Voice went forth and proclaimed, “Happy are you, R. Akiva, that you are destined for the life of the World to Come.” (Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 61b)

From this story, which deals with the cruel death of R. Akiva, the authors of the *Menachot* narrative could have borrowed the descriptions as well as the angels’ question, here voiced by Moshe: “This is Torah, and this is its reward?”

However, unlike the narrative in *Berakhot,* in which the angels ask this question of theodicy and even get some sort of answer, when Moshe asks this he is blasted with, “Be silent, for this is My design!” This underscores and intensifies the lack of openness that Moshe encounters on the part of God, as he searches for the meaning of divine justice and theodicy.

In any case, what do the authors intend? They invest so much noticeably in building and shaping the story in *Menachot*, fusing these two topics together, but they present two wildly divergent responses.

It appears that the story expresses a message about the complexity of human interaction with the divine. Unlike the biblical story of the Giving of the Torah, the first part of the narrative in *Menachot* is not just about transmitting a text. Rather, God calls on man to become a true partner in this essential enterprise of crafting and developing the Torah. Man has a great and impressive cooperative role in this endeavor. Studying Torah means forming a partnership, and when a person innovates and creates while delving into the text, the partnership is even greater. God wants to give human beings the feeling that they are partners in this project. This is the very apex of human achievement.

However, when the issue is running the world, man is not invited to become God’s partner, which naturally minimizes the human role. Perhaps the goal is to keep humankind from the arrogance and hubris that may arise from the cooperative endeavor of Torah study; alternatively, it may be that the human mind is too limited to grasp such a thing. In any case, this is where a human being must feel small.

It appears that both of these questions trouble *Chazal*. These are questions that lie at the core of every Jew’s humanity, as we can see in the crafting of this narrative. The first question is resolved, settling their minds; conversely, the second question remains unresolved.

It seems that the structure of the narrative may be explained in the same way, as we noted in the previous *shiur*. On the one hand, in terms of content, it may be split up among the two topics, the first six lines versus the last seven lines. These two segments are more or less equal, with wildly divergent questions and tones. On the other hand, if we consider the form and language, this division is shattered, as we saw in the previous *shiur*. What is the significance of these differences?

It appears that the message is that the authors could not absolutely distinguish between these topics; they could not be satisfied with the answer for one question while being disappointed with the lack of resolution for the other. Life ultimately is one human existence, and things get mixed together. Practically, we may perhaps say that some sort of chaos is created, just as the general structure of the narrative — the two halves together — are chaotic. The feeling of maximizing human potential through partnering with God in Torah study mixes with the feeling of minimizing human capacity to understand the rules by which the universe operates. They run together. This point may have some positive aspects to it, as it prevents a person from feeling godlike, from exhibiting hubris. On the other hand, this chaos also delimits and shrinks the human stature. In any case, the experience is complex, and this is what the narrative declares.

Perhaps we can connect these two sides to the two central elements of the story of the Garden of Eden: the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and the Tree of Life. The former, symbolizing the Torah, ultimately provides an opening for human activity. Humankind eventually acquires knowledge of good and evil (even if initially this is done sinfully and without permission), and a central issue in the Torah is distinguishing between good and evil. However, the Tree of Life, which may perhaps symbolize in our context understanding life and controlling it, remains out of man’s grasp…

It would appear fitting to conclude, in light of the ideas raised here, with a chapter of *Tehillim* that reflects these two viewpoints of humanity – the same one cited by the angels in the *aggada* we saw last week in their argument to keep the Torah in heaven, and then to let Moshe take it down to earth:

What is mankind that you are mindful of them,
    human beings that you care for them?

You have made them a little lower than the angels
    and crowned them with glory and honor.
You made them rulers over the works of your hands;
    you put everything under their feet:
all flocks and herds,
    and the animals of the wild,
the birds in the sky,
    and the fish in the sea,
    all that swim the paths of the seas.

Lord, our Lord,
    how majestic is your name in all the earth! (*Tehillim* 8:5-10)

Translated by Yoseif Bloch