YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Talmudic Aggadot**

Rav Dr. Yonatan Feintuch

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Dedicated by Steven Weiner and Lisa Wise with prayers for *refua* *sheleima* for all who require healing, comfort and peace –

those battling illnesses visibly and invisibly, publicly and privately.

May Hashem mercifully grant us strength, courage, and compassion.

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Shiur #02: Introductory *Aggadot* of Tractate *Chagiga*, Part II

# In the previous *shiur*, we compared the *derashot* of R. Elazar ben Azarya that appear in the Tosefta and the Babylonian Talmud. Let us review the exposition in the latter:

And he also took up the text and expounded (*Kohelet* 12:11): “‘The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails well planted are the words of the masters of assemblies, which are given from one shepherd.’

“Why are the words of the Torah likened to a goad? To teach you that just as the goad directs the heifer along its furrow in order to bring forth life to the world, so the words of the Torah direct those who study them from the paths of death to the paths of life.

“But [should you think] that just as the goad is movable so the words of the Torah are movable; therefore the text says: ‘nails.’

“But [should you think] that just as the nail diminishes and does not increase, so too the words of the Torah diminish and do not increase; therefore the text says: ‘well planted’; just as a plant grows and increases, so the words of the Torah grow and increase.

“‘The masters of assemblies’: these are the Torah scholars, who sit in manifold assemblies and occupy themselves with the Torah, some pronouncing impure and others pronouncing pure, some prohibiting and others permitting, some disqualifying and others declaring fit.

“Should a man say: How in these circumstances shall I learn Torah? Therefore the text says: ‘All of them are given from one Shepherd’. One God gave them; one leader uttered them from the mouth of the Lord of all creation, blessed be He; for it is written: ‘And God spoke all of these words’. Also make your ear like the hopper and get a perceptive heart to hear the words of those who pronounce impure and the words of those who pronounce pure, the words of those who prohibit and the words of those who permit, the words of those who disqualify and the words of those who declare fit.”

In this *derasha* (homily), R. Elazar b. Azarya expounds the verse as dealing in its entirety with “the words of the wise,” i.e. the Oral Torah (*Torah she-be-al peh*). One of the characteristics is that “the words of the Torah grow and increase,” like plants. This brings us to the next description, which delineates the method of propagation, namely by “the masters of assemblies.” The Talmud, unlike the Tosefta (as we saw last week), associates this with halakhic disputes: “some pronouncing impure and others pronouncing pure, some prohibiting and others permitting, some disqualifying and others declaring fit.” Indeed, the method of propagation, the means by which the Oral Torah flourishes and grows, is through the give-and-take of scholarly debate. This development creates something of a crisis for the students, who struggle with the gap between the Oral Torah that they study — with its multiplicity of views and disagreements — and the unitary, single Torah given at Sinai. Are all of these divergent views God’s Torah? Are they as binding as the Pentateuch? Which among these many views truly expresses God’s word? The difficulty created by this gap is resolved by the *derasha* on the final words of the verse: “which are given from one Shepherd.” All the views spring from one source.

This homily recalls the famous story that appears elsewhere in the Talmud (*Menachot* 29b) about Moshe Rabbeinu, who is unable to follow the debate in R Akiva’s study hall (*beit midrash*). Moshe’s mind is finally set at ease when R. Akiva proclaims that all of the halakhic details, the ones Moshe cannot recall, have their source in a “*halakha le-Moshe mi-Sinai*.” In these two Talmudic stories, the Gemara is concerned with the relationship between the Oral and Written Torahs, as the matters transmitted at Sinai continue to develop and produce details, laws, and disputes. A certain explanation of this response may be found in another *derasha* in the Babylonian Talmud, this one in Tractate *Shabbat*:

The School of R. Yishmael taught: “‘And like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces’:just as a hammer divides into many sparks,so every single word that went forth from the Holy One, blessed be He, split up into seventy languages.” (*Shabbat* 88b)

This *derasha* discusses the fact that one divine statement contains within it manifold potential; thus, it may be split up into various, even divergent, statements.

Now let us return to R. Elazar b. Azarya’s *derashot*. The resolution of the problem raised by the *derasha* in *Chagiga* — how one may continue to study Torah — uses different images than those in the Tosefta.The Tosefta, as we saw last week, deals with memorizing, maintaining and recalling the Oral Torah, and its solution is splitting the heart into many chambers, something like various departments or folders for storing the data. This image does not appear in the Talmud at all. In its place we have a directive about listening, “make your ear like the hopper,” and only then may one acquire a perceptive heart. The heart is not for memorization, but for understanding — grasping the different views, and perhaps also absorbing the entirety of their truth: different facets of the same Torah.

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Let us return to the fundamental question: Why does the Talmud cite this *aggada* where it does? As we recall, R. Yehoshua is being told by his students about the *derashot* expounded by R. Elazar b. Azarya. The first *derasha* in the narrative deals with the *Hakhel* ceremony, which is mentioned earlier in the passage. Thus, one could argue that the Gemara ostensibly cites this story about R. Elazar b. Azarya’s *derasha* associatively. Since *Hakhel* is the subject of discussion, and since this *derasha* is cited, which is part of a longer tale about R. Yehoshua’s being visited by his students, the continuation of this narrative is also cited, including additional *derashot* expounded by R. Elazar b. Azarya on that occasion in Yavneh.

However, if we look at the parallel passage in the Jerusalem Talmud, it seems that the matter is not so simple. The following is the text from *Yerushalmi* *Chagiga* (1:1, 75d):

“Everyone is obligated to appear, [except the deaf, the mentally deficient, a minor,]” etc. The *mishna* is [speaking of the obligation of] appearing to offer sacrifices [and therefore excludes minors], but appearing to show one’s face is obligatory even for minors. This is derived from the verse, “Assemble (*Hakhel*) the people: the men and the women and the little ones,” for minors are even older than little ones [and if the little ones are obligated in *Hakhel*, certainly the minors must appear to show their faces].

As it is taught: Once R. Yochanan b. Beroka and R. Elazar Chisma were making their way from Yavneh to Lod, and they went to pay their respects to R. Yehoshua at Peki'in. He said to them: “What new teaching was there at the *beit ha-midrash* to-day?” They replied: “We are all your disciples, and it is your waters we drink.” He said to them: “Even so, it is impossible for a session of the *beit ha-midrash* to pass without some novel teaching. Whose Sabbath was it?” “It was the Sabbath of R. Elazar b. Azarya.” “And what was his passage?” “‘Assemble (*Hakhel*) the people: the men and the women and the little ones’. He opened with it and said: If the men came to learn, the women came to hear, but wherefore have the little ones to come? In order to grant reward to those that bring them.” He said to them: “It is not an orphan generation in which R. Elazar b. Azarya exists.”

This is the first passage in the tractate, which opens by analyzing a minor’s exemption from pilgrimage, mentioned in the first *mishna*. The Jerusalem Talmud limits the exemption for minors; while a minor has no obligation to bring an offering as part of his appearance, he still must ascend to the Temple on each of the three festivals, as he has no exemption from “appearing to show one’s face.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This is derived from the verse about the *mitzva* of *Hakhel*, which mandates the attendance of “the little ones” as well.

The Jerusalem Talmud does not explicitly state why the verse from the *Hakhel* passage is applicable to the *mitzva* of pilgrimage, but we may assume that, as stated explicitly in the Babylonian Talmud, this is based on the introductory verse of the *Hakhel* passage: “When all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God in the Place He shall choose” (*Devarim* 31:11). In other words, the Torah itself associates *Hakhel* with the obligation of pilgrimage, before going on to describe the ceremony.

Afterwards, the Jerusalem Talmud cites the story about R. Yehoshua’s students (with the opening “As it is taught”), apparently in order to prove that the “minor” mentioned in the *mishna* is older than “the little ones” of *Hakhel*. The narrative mentions the initial *derasha* of R. Elazar b. Azarya in the Babylonian Talmud, and it asserts that “the little ones” are invited so that those who bring them may be rewarded; this implies that these “little ones” are incapable of benefitting in any way from attending the *Hakhel* ceremony, which can only be understood as a reference to toddlers, an age younger than the minor of the *mishna*.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In any case, we see that the Jerusalem Talmud does not cite all the story as it appears in the Tosefta, but suffices with quoting the narrative as far as the end of the *derasha* for the issue at hand in the passage: the *Hakhel* ceremony.

Naturally, the Babylonian Talmud could have done the same; the reason for it to cite the entire narrative, with all the various *derashot* by R. Elazar b. Azarya, further adding the story of R. Eliezer and R. Yossei b. Durmaskit, is far from self-evident. Moreover, in contrast to the Jerusalem Talmud, in the Babylonian Talmud the *derasha* about the *Hakhel* ceremony is not an integral part of the halakhic debate, and the exposition is cited only incidentally as it deals with the topic.

It is still possible to argue that the Jerusalem Talmud abridges, while the Babylonian Talmud parenthetically includes the entire story. However, if we look more closely at the *sugya* and the story, we may point to the various connections between them, from which we can understand that citing the entire story, as well as the following story concerning R. Eliezer, is no mere incidental measure on an associative-technical basis. Thus, we now turn to examine the wider context of the story in the *sugya*.

**Introductory Passages of Tractate *Chagiga***[[3]](#footnote-3)

The first *mishna* in the tractate analyzes the *mitzvot* of pilgrimage, listing all who are exempt from this command:

All are bound to appear except the deaf, the mentally deficient, a minor, a person of ambiguous sex (*tumtum*), the androgynous (hermaphrodite), women, un-emancipated slaves, the lame, the blind, the sick, the elderly, and whoever cannot ascend on foot.

In the first passage (2a), the *gemara* attempts to infer from the phrasing of the opening of the *mishna*, “All are bound to appear,” that there must be some who might have theoretically been excluded, but are in fact included in the *mitzva*. A number of suggestions are made and rejected, leaving one central case that is accepted – one who is blind in only one eye.

What does “all” come to include? It comes to include a man who is blind in one eye; and it is contrary to the opinion of the following Tanna. For it is taught: Yochanan b. Dahavai said in the name of R. Yehuda: A man who is blind in one eye is exempt from appearing [at the Temple], as it is said: "*yireh*" (He will see), "*yeira'eh*" (He will be seen). As He comes to see, so he comes to be seen; just as [He comes] to see with both eyes, so also to be seen with both eyes.

There is an ambiguous word in *Shemot* 23:17 – “Three times a year, all of your males *yreh* before the Lord” – which could be vowelized "*yireh*" (He will see) or "*yeira'eh*" (He will be seen). Indeed, on this basis, the *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Yishmael (Masekhta De-Khaspa* 20) excludes those who are blind (in both eyes). A central element of pilgrimage is that of seeing or appearing; for this reason, there is an exemption for those who are blind (according to some views, even if this impairment only exists in one eye).

The second passage deals with the exclusion of the deaf from this *mitzva*, as they are excluded from many *mitzvot* in the famous “trinity” of exemption: the deaf, the mentally deficient, and minors. However, in the same paragraph in the *Mekhilta*, there is an explicit exclusion for the deaf, based on the verse concerning *Hakhel* (*Devarim* 31:11): “You shall read this Torah facing all of Israel, in their ears.”

“In their ears”: this excludes the deaf.

The Babylonian Talmud here also discusses partial disability. If the individual is both deaf and mute, the Talmud explains that he would be excluded for the reason usually applied to the "trinity": a lack of competence. However, the Talmud goes further and states that even one who is deaf but not mute is exempt, based on another verse from the *Hakhel* passage (ibid. v. 12): “That they may hear.”

For it is written: “That they may hear and that they may learn.” And it is taught: “That they may hear,” [this] excludes one that can speak but not hear; “and that they may learn,” [this] excludes one that can hear but not speak.

These are the halakhic passages that open the tractate, and afterwards the stories under discussion are cited: R. Yehoshua’s disciples who tell him about R. Elazar b. Azarya’s *derashot* in Yavneh, and the story told as a result, that of R. Eliezer and R. Yossei b. Durmaskit.

Let us ask again: are these stories inserted in the passage only due to some associative link, because both in the first story and in the passage a *derasha* about the *Hakhel* ceremony is expounded?

This does not appear to be the case, because there appear to be other links between the *aggada* and the halakhic debates preceding it. First of all, the motifs of **hearing and seeing**, which take center stage in the halakhic discussions in the passage, appear in these *aggadot* in a prominent manner. For illustrative purposes, let us briefly recount these tales, placing emphasis on these motifs.

Our Rabbis taught: Once R. Yochanan b. Beroka and R. Elazar Chisma went to pay their respects to R. Yehoshua at Peki'in. He said to them: “What new teaching was there at the *beit ha-midrash* to-day?” They replied: “We are your disciples, so it is your waters we drink.” He said to them: “Even so…” They answered: “The passage of *Hakhel*.” “And what exposition did he give thereon?” “‘Assemble (*Hakhel*) the people: the men and the women and the little ones’. If the men came to learn, the women came to **hear**, but wherefore have the little ones to come? In order to grant reward to those that bring them…”

And he also took up the text and expounded: “‘The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails well planted are the words of the masters of assemblies, which are given from one shepherd…’ ‘The masters of assemblies’: these are the disciples of the wise, who sit in manifold assemblies and occupy themselves with the Torah, some pronouncing impure and others pronouncing pure, some prohibiting and others permitting, some disqualifying and others declaring fit. Should a man say: How in these circumstances shall I learn Torah? Therefore the text says: ‘All of them are given from one Shepherd’... Also **make your ear like the hopper and get a perceptive heart to hear the words** of those who pronounce impure and the words of those who pronounce pure, the words of those who prohibit and the words of those who permit, the words of those who disqualify and the words of those who declare fit…”

For it is taught: Once R. Yossei b. Durmaskit went to pay his respects to R. Eliezer at Lod. Said the latter to him: “What new thing was taught in the *beit ha-midrash* today?” He replied: “They decided by vote that in Ammon and Moab the tithe of the poor should be given in the seventh year.” Said [R. Eliezer] to him: **“Yossei, stretch forth your hands and receive your eyes.” He stretched forth his hands and received his eyes.** R. Eliezer wept, saying, “‘The secret of the Lord is with those that fear him and he will show them his covenant.’ Go and tell them, ‘Do not be anxious about your vote. I have received from Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, **who heard it** from his master, and his master from his master**, a rule to Moshe from Sinai,** that Ammon and Moab give poor man’s tithe in the Sabbatical year.’” What is the reason? Many cities were conquered by those who came up from Egypt, which were not conquered by those who came up from Babylon; since the first consecration held [only] for the time, but did not hold for the future [permanently], therefore they were left in order that the poor might be sustained upon them in the seventh year. It is taught: When his mind was calmed, he said: “May it be granted that Yossei's eyes be restored.” And they were restored.

The motifs of seeing (eyes) and hearing (ears) are prominent in these stories. This indicates that it is no casual association of *derashot* about *Hakhel* that places these tales in the middle of this *gemara* passage. Moreover, some of these motifs are peculiar to the Babylonian Talmud and absent from the parallels in other sources. For example, we have seen previously that in the Tosefta, R. Elazar b. Azarya’s third *derasha* commands:

Also make your heart into chambers within chambers, wherein you may place the words of Beit Shammai and the words of Beit Hillel, the words of those who pronounce impure and the words of those who pronounce pure.

The Babylonian Talmud, on the other hand, instructs:

Also **make your ear like the hopper and get a perceptive heart to hear the words** of those who pronounce impure and the words of those who pronounce pure…

Only the latter source, the Babylonian Talmud, speaks of ears and hearing.

Similarly, the Mishnaic recounting of the second story (*Yadayim* 4:3) states:

Once R. Yossei b. Durmaskit went to pay his respects to R. Eliezer at Lod. Said the latter to him: “What new thing was taught in the *beit ha-midrash* today?” He replied: “They decided by vote that in Ammon and Moab the tithe of the poor should be given in the seventh year.” R. Eliezer wept, saying, “‘The secret of the Lord is with those that fear him and he will show them his covenant.’ Go and tell them, ‘Do not be anxious about your vote. I have received from Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, who heard it from his master, and his master from his master, **a rule to Moshe from Sinai,** that Ammon and Moab give poor man’s tithe in the Sabbatical year.’”

When the Babylonian Talmud cites the same story, it adds a striking detail:“**‘Yossei, stretch forth your hands and receive your eyes.’ He stretched forth his hands and lost his sight”** — which means: “lose your eyesight.” This is unique to the Babylonian Talmud, echoing the issue of hearing, which R. Eliezer cites as a halakhic source: “I have received from Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, who heard it from his master…”

Regardless, we see that the motifs of seeing and hearing are very significant in the tradition of the Babylonian Talmud, and this strengthens the connection between the halakhic debates preceding the stories and the stories themselves.[[4]](#footnote-4)

However, there is another significant point that ties the narrative to the halakhic discussion. The Talmudic stories open with disciples going to “pay their respects” to their masters. This is stressed in the Babylonian Talmud, while in the parallels it differs: Mishna *Yadayim* omits this detail, while the Tosefta de-emphasizes it, as R. Yehoshua’s disciples pay their respects as a detour as they make their way from Yavneh to Lod. Paying respects (*kabbalat panim*) in the Babylonian Talmud is the impetus for the journey, and indeed this practice does recall the *mitzva* of pilgrimage, which requires: “all of your males must appear before (*et penei*) the Lord, the Lord God of Israel.” This is yet another link between the narrative and the law, alluding to the fact that the editors of these passages attached great significance to integrating these stories within it. The narrative was not thrown in due to some technical association.

But what is the meaning of the links between the stories and the halakhic discussions? What is the theme that arises from these narratives appearing after these two legal debates?

One possible explanation[[5]](#footnote-5) ascribes symbolic significance to the seeing and hearing in this passage. In the story about R. Eliezer, the hearing symbolizes the halakhic tradition handed down from one generation to another, which R. Eliezer prefers as a halakhic source. Seeing can be understood as symbolizing the innovative and creative halakhic determination employed by those sages who expound the biblical texts, as R. Yossei describes to R. Eliezer the scholarly activity in Yavneh concerning the laws of tithing in the sabbatical year. R. Eliezer asserts that reliance on tradition is preferable to exegetical innovation, and this desire is reflected by R. Yossei’s losing his sight.

This symbolic approach is mirrored in the halakhic debate, which explains what the narrative and legal sections have in common: there is opposition in the *gemara* to the exemption of one who is blind in one eye from the *mitzva* of appearing (i.e. being seen), which deemphasizes the sense of sight and the eyes in this *mitzva*. On the other hand, it expands the exemption for the deaf, so that even one who can speak but cannot hear is excluded, which makes the sense of hearing and the ears more of an integral part of the *mitzva* of pilgrimage.

This is one interesting and original way to explain the connection between the narrative and legal sections of this Talmudic passage. God willing, in the next *shiur,* we will suggest an alternative explanation.

1. We will deal with the concept of “showing one’s face” at length below. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Although the *Penei Moshe* commentary indicates that the story of R. Yehoshua’s disciples and R. Elazar b. Azarya’s *derasha* is cited incidentally, the words, “As it is taught,” indicate that this is meant as a proof text; see Radbaz’s commentary ad loc. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Recently, this passage and its connections to the stories discussed have been spectacularly analyzed at length and in detail by R. Yitzchak Ben-David in his Master’s thesis, *Gibushah Ha-Hilkhati shel Mitzvot Ha-Re’iya Ve-Ha’aliya Le-Regel Be-Sifrut Chazal, Le-Or Ha-Oleh min Ha-Mikra U-Mitekufat Bayit* *Sheni* (Hebrew University, 2009). Some of what follow below relies on his interpretations there, and I will cite him infra. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. R. Ben-David, supra fn. 3, analyzes the significance of motifs and their unique appearance in the Babylonian Talmud. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. R. Ben-David, supra fn. 3. I will not specify all the details of his analysis, but I will try to briefly summarize some of his words. Naturally, I refer the readers to the article itself in order to peruse his sweeping, detailed, and deep analysis of the halakhic and aggadic sections. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)