YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**TALMUDIC AGGADA**

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The htm version of this shiur is available at:

<http://vbm-torah.org/archive/aggada72/04aggada.htm>

**Shiur #04: Sin and Punishment**

The Rabbis taught: Croup comes into this world for tithes [as a punishment for eating untithed fruit]. R. Elazar the son of R. Yossi says: “For *lashon ha-ra*.”…The question was asked: Did R. Elazar the son of R. Yossi mean exclusively for *lashon ha-ra* or also for *lashon ha-ra*? Come and hear: When the rabbis entered the vineyard in Yavne, R. Yehuda, R. Elazar the son of R. Yossi, and R. Shimon were present. The following question was raised before them: Why does this affliction begin in the intestines and finish in the mouth? R. Yehuda the son of R. Ilai, the first speaker on all occasions, answered: “Even though the kidneys advise, the heart understands, and the tongue formulates, the mouth finishes it.” R. Elazar the son of R. Yossi answered: “Because they eat impure [or non-kosher] foods.” Do we really think it is for eating non-kosher foods? Rather, it is for eating untithed foods. R. Shimon answered: “It is for the sin of neglecting Torah study.” They said to him: “Women will disprove this theory [they suffer from this ailment even though they are not obligated to study Torah].” [He responded:] “They prevent their husbands from studying.” [They said to him:] “Gentiles will disprove it.” [He responded:] “They prevent the Jews from studying.” [They said to him:] “Children will disprove it.” [He responded:] “They prevent their fathers from studying.” [They said to him:] “School children will disprove it.” There it is as R. Guryon said… “When there are righteous people in the generation, they are seized for the sins of the generation. When there are no righteous in the generation, school children are seized for the sins of the generation”...Thus, we see that R. Elazar meant also for *lashon ha-ra* (*Shabbat* 33a-33b).

Those turning to this Talmudic page usually focus on the subsequent story of R. Shimon bar Yochai hiding from the Romans in a cave. In fact, the Gemara introduces that story as an explanation for how R. Yehuda became the “first speaker on all occasions.” However, the section cited above merits its own analysis. Three sages adopt positions explaining why people suffer from croup, each of which sees the illness as punishment for sin. R. Yehuda identifies the relevant sin as *lashon ha-ra*, R. Shimon as neglect of Torah study, and R. Elazar mentions both *lashon ha-ra* and eating untithed produce. R. Shimon’s focus on Torah study coheres with the story that follows in the Gemara where R. Shimon leaves the cave and looks angrily at Jews who are busy farming. For this sage, Torah study reflects an absolute value that should trump all other activities (see also R. Shimon’s famous position in *Berakhot* 35b).

How did the Gemara know that R. Elazar could not possibly refer to eating impurefoods as a cause of croup? Rashi interprets the phrase as referring to non-kosher foods and explains that while non-kosherfood is forbidden, it does not entail a death penalty. Therefore, such a sin could not possibly bring on serious illness. This approach forces us to say that *lashon ha-ra* can be a capital crime, since the Gemara accepts slander as a reasonable cause of croup. Rashi tries to justify this assumption, but it remains a difficult position. Alternatively, eating “impure foods” refers to ritually impure foods. If so, the Gemara’s rejection makes sense; since there is no prohibition of eating impure foods, such an act could not possibly inspire Divine wrath.

The Gemara mentions many counterexamples to disprove R. Shimon’s theory, but does not attack the other sages. Several commentators note that we could address similar challenges to both R. Yehuda and R. Elazar. After all, how could non-Jews or children receive punishment for either *lashon ha-ra* or eating untithed fruit when they have no religious obligations regarding these acts? Yet non-Jews and children do unfortunately contract croup. Maharsha explains that non-Jews could observe the laws of slander and tithes but are prohibited from studying Torah; therefore, neglect of Torah study is a more problematic explanation for suffering of non-Jews.

Maharsha makes an important point, but he does not answer the question. Whether or not Halakha forbids non-Jews to speak *lashon ha-ra*, non-Jews who avoid such discourse demonstrate fine character and positive religious values. Thus, it makes sense that the ideal of not talking negatively about others also relates to non-Jews. However, arguing that they would deserve croup for violating an ideal which is not obligatory for them remains quite a leap. Maharsha reminds us that Judaism cares about the content of non-Jewish conversation, but he does not fully explain why non-Jews are stricken with croup.

Ben Yehoyada offers a different explanation for this Divine punishment of non-Jews. Slander can bring deadly consequences and Halakha certainly forbids non-Jews to murder. According to this view, some forms of *lashon ha-ra* would be forbidden to non-Jews as an extension of the murder prohibition. Regarding untithed produce, Ben Yehoyada suggests that non-Jews are held responsible for eating stolen food. The Noahide laws include a prohibition against theft, so for non-Jews keeping kosher means avoiding eating stolen items.

The preceding section of *Shabbat* 33a matches various ailments with the transgressions that cause them. This *gemara* seems to endorse a very straightforward notion of cause and effect, which allows for easy identification of the sins that bring about particular illnesses. I would like to suggest that the Talmudic give and take regarding R. Shimon’s position emphasizes the difficulty of this simplified perspective. After R. Shimon states that neglect of Torah study brings croup, the Gemara notes a host of categories of people who suffer from croup absent the sin of neglecting Torah study. R. Shimon’s explanation does not seem to cover women, non-Jews, and children. Additionally, *Sefat Emet* notes that the illness of children creates a much broader problem since their tender years should relieve them of responsibility for any sin. Granted, the Gemara finds ways to connect these groups of individuals with neglect of Torah, but the Gemara clearly struggles to maintain R. Shimon’s theory.

What happens when we arrive at the suffering school children? There, the Gemara thinks that the old answer that they prevent parental study does not work easily. Why not? Rashi says that they do not hinder their fathers. Busy and productive in the school building, these children do not stop their fathers from studying Torah. Alternatively, children who are themselves deeply engaged in Torah study cannot be charged with causing neglect of Torah, even if they occasionally create unwarranted interruptions for their fathers.

In the end, the Gemara concludes that the children receive punishments for the sins of the generation. Which sins? While we could claim that the sin of the generation is neglecting Torah, the Gemara does not clearly say so. I posit that the Gemara gives up on exclusively linking this illness with a specific sin. Divine providence and the natural order work in complex ways, and we have no simple formula for identifying one sin as the only cause of a given illness. R. Shimon attempted to link all cases of croup with negligence regarding Torah study but, following repeated challenges, he was forced to concede that other causes exist.

This *gemara* concludes that people do not always suffer for their own sins; sometimes they suffer for others’ sins. But this *gemara* still maintains a general connection between sin and punishment. Other Talmudic sources take matters one step further, providing alternate models to the sin and punishment nexus as an explanation for all suffering. We certainly affirm belief in Divine providence and justice. Nonetheless, we reject a simplistic assessment of the world’s working which assumes we can easily explain why the sick suffer.