YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**TALMUDIC AGGADA**

**By Rav Yitzchak Blau**

The htm version of this shiur is available at:

<http://vbm-torah.org/archive/aggada72/05aggada.htm>

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This week’s shiurim are dedicated by Abe Mezrich

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**Shiur #05: Preparing for Prayer, Concluding Prophetic Books, and Departing from a Friend**

The Rabbis taught: “We do not stand up to pray when we are in a situation of sadness, laziness, levity, chatter, lightheadedness, or idle talk but when we experience the joy of a mitzva. Similarly, a person should not take leave of his friend with chatter, levity, lightheadedness, or idle talk but with a *dvar halakha* (words of Jewish law), just as the early prophets concluded their words with praise and consolation.” And so Mari the son of R. Huna the son of R. Yirmiya bar Abba taught: “Do not depart from your friend except with a *dvar halakha* so that he will remember you” (*Berakhot* 31a).

Three different activities require a setting that creates the right mood – prayer, departing from a friend, and finishing a prophetic book. According to the version in the printed text of the Vilna Talmud, the first demands the joy of a mitzva*,* while the latter two require words of *halakha*. The Vilna Gaon emends the text to read “joy of mitzva” in the context of leaving a friend as well. Presumably, he thought the Gemara’s parallel between beginning to pray and leaving a friend does not work unless both involve the joy of a mitzva. The Gaon also removes the phrase “and so” because Mari does not teach about the joy of a mitzva.

If we don’t accept the emendation, what connects a statement about joy of a mitzva with statements about a *dvar halakha*? Tosafot (31a s.v. *Rabanan*) say that Torah study provides a good example of the joy of a mitzva preceding prayer. If so, the parallel works. Departing from a friend and beginning to pray require different settings, but they share an important commonality; Torah study helps create these settings.

Rashi notes that our organized liturgy fulfills this *gemara*’s mandate. During the morning and evening prayers, we mention the redemption of Israel just before the *Shemoneh Esrei*. During the afternoon prayer, we accomplish the same with Psalm 145. In all three instances, we enter the essential part of prayer by reciting words that inspire happiness and consolation.

Most prophetic books do indeed conclude on an upbeat note, although the Jerusalem Talmud (*Berakhot* 5:1) notes potential exceptions including *Yirmiyahu*. The penultimate chapter of *Yirmiyahu* (chapter 51) ends with the words: “Until here were the words of Yirmiyahu.” If the last chapter represents a separate addition, then Yirmiyahu’s message truly ends at the end of chapter 51. R. Elazar says that *Yirimyahu* ends on a harsh note of reproof since that chapter concludes with the destruction of Babylon. R. Yochanan disagrees and categorizes the destruction of Babylon as consolation.

This debate reveals an ongoing tension within our tradition regarding the downfall of our enemies. On the one hand, the end of oppressors brings us joy; on the other, we are saddened by the deaths of human beings. For example, we celebrate the seventh day of Pesach, the day of crossing the Red Sea and the destruction of our Egyptian enemy, but we say a truncated *Hallel* since many Egyptians drowned (Taz *Orach Chayyim* 490:3). The question of whether Yirmiyahu ends on a positive note reflects this tension.

Maharsha notes that the *gemara* does not use the phrase “*nevi’im rishonim*” (early prophets) in the contemporary fashion; after all, *Yehoshua* and *Shoftim* do not end on particularly positive notes. The entire question does not apply to historical books, but only to those prophetic works consisting of dire warnings and encouraging promises regarding the future. With regard to the latter category, biblical authors made an effort to close with a promising finale. In this Talmudic text, “early prophets” refers to the earlier voices among what we term the “*nevi’im acharonim*” (the later prophets).

R. Kook, in *Ein Aya*, explains the six things that prevent us from entering prayer properly. Prayer depends upon physical and spiritual energy; “laziness” saps the former and “sadness” the latter. An individual praying approaches God with reverence, something destroyed by “levity.” “Chatter” impedes prayer, because prayer is essentially a solitary individual standing before the Master of the Universe. Conversation or “chatter” implies the need for social context, whereas prayer involves finding the spiritual resources within oneself in order to converse with God alone. R. Kook’s point reflects an interesting duality within halakhic prayer. We greatly value praying with the community. At the same time, each person praying stands alone in his or her own four cubic meters. Entering a synagogue, we witness a community of people simultaneously engaged in solitary prayer.

A person must also approach prayer in an intellectually serious manner and not out of “lightheadedness.” Finally, “idle talk” indicates a person unaware of the immense value of speech. Someone who truly valued conversation would be reluctant to waste it on idle maters. Prayer assumes the power and influence of words; those who cannot appreciate this point will struggle to pray well.

One school of thought contends that only action makes an impact in life, whereas words are insubstantial and impotent. In truth, words carry immense power to heal or harm the world. According to both Netziv (*Ha’amek Davar Bemidbar* 20:8, 12) and the Alter from Slobodka (*Or Ha-tzafun* 3: pp. 81-83), this idea explains Moshe’s sin in *Bemidbar* 20. Rashi famously explains that Moshe erred by hitting the rock instead of speaking to it. Ramban and others wonder what difference it makes; drawing water from a rock reflects miraculous providence either way. These two nineteenth century authorities explain that God wanted Moshe to teach the people of Israel the power of words in general or the force of prayer specifically. By hitting the rock, Moshe reinforced the mistaken idea that only action produces results.

R. Kook adds a profound insight into the question of departing from a friend. Most friendships include more serious and less serious topics of conversation. We sometimes discuss grand religious and moral ideas or personal challenges, and we also converse about the latest basketball game or the best place to get a hamburger in Jerusalem. There is nothing wrong with a friendship encompassing all these elements. However, the real question is which discourse reflects the fundamental nature of the friendship. Does the companionship ultimately rest on something trivial or something serious? Our answer determines the worth and quality of the friendship.

Let us posit that the Gemara is not referring to someone saying goodbye to a friend who will see the friend again in another twelve hours, but rather someone leaving for an extended period. Just before the departure, what will they talk about in the precious remaining moments? In a friendship built upon something of substance, those matters will naturally become the topic of discourse in the attempt to squeeze in one more quality conversation before months of silence.

For R. Kook, closing words to a friend indicate the essence of the relationship. This interpretation sheds new light on the analogy to the concluding words of prophetic books. Many prophetic works appear quite harsh, and we might think of prophets as people interested in punishment and frightening the masses. Actually, the prophets wanted the people to have a more fulfilling life; the dire threats were only a means to prod listeners towards a better place. Prophets clarified their essential intentions with their closing words. Had they ended their works with an account of upcoming suffering, we might mistakenly think that such messages are what it is all about. Ending with praise and consolation enhances our appreciation of what truly motivates their prophetic endeavors. Hoshea, Yirmiyahu and others did not castigate the people out of a love of rebuke or a fascination with chastisement. Rather, they cared for the people and desired their material and spiritual improvement. Yet sometimes, these goals require harsh words. The concluding comments of prophetic books emphasize the true nature of the prophetic quest.