YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**TALMUDICA AGGADA**

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The htm version of this shiur is available at:

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**This shiur is dedicated in memory of Israel Koschitzky zt"l, whose yahrzeit falls on the 19th of Kislev. May the world-wide dissemination of Torah through the VBM be a fitting tribute to a man whose lifetime achievements exemplified the love of Eretz Yisrael and Torat Yisrael.**

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**Shiur #07: Shimshon, Halakha, and Morality**

Mishna: Shimshon went after his eyes. Therefore, the Philistines gouged out his eyes (*Sota* 1:8).

Gemara: Our Rabbis taught: Shimshon rebelled through his eyes, as it says: “And Shimson said to his father: ‘Take her for me because she is pleasing in my eyes’” (*Shoftim* 14:3). Therefore, the Philistines gouged out his eyes, as it says: “And the Philistines seized him and they gouged out his eyes” (16:21). Is it so? Is it not written: “And his father and mother did not know that it was from God” (14:4)? Yet when he went, he went after his own inclination. It was taught: The beginning of his degeneration was in Azza; therefore, he was punished in Azza. The beginning of his degeneration was in Azza, as it says: ‘And Shimshon went to Azza and he saw a female prostitute’ (16:1). Therefore, he was punished in Azza, as it says: ‘And they brought him down to Azza’ (16:21). Does it not say: “And Shimshon went to Timna” (14:1) [and became involved with a non-Jewish woman there before the episode in Azza]? Nonetheless, the beginning of his degeneration was in Azza (*Sota* 9b).

Both the *mishna* and *gemara* mention Shimshon’s punishment for transgressions of the eyes, yet only the *gemara* questions this idea. The *gemara* cites a biblical verse which says Shimshon’s involvement with non-Jewish women was part of the Divine plan, implying that Shimshon’s behavior may be justified. Why does the *gemara* not challenge the *mishna,* when the *mishna* also faults Shimshon? R. Yaakov Reisher explains that Shimshon was interested in three different non-Jewish women, but *Shoftim* onlymentions the Divine hand regarding one of the three, the woman from Timna. Since the *gemara* explicitly refers to that woman, it raises the question of Divine sanction justifying Shimshon’s behavior. The *mishna*, on the other hand, does not say which episode with women brought about Shimshon’s punishment. We cannot challenge the *mishna,* since the last two episodes are not possibly justified by Divine sanction.

The *gemara*’s answer clarifies that we fault Shimshon for the woman from Timna as well, even though their relationship was part of God’s plan for the punishment of the Philistines. This conveys a crucial theological point. Our job is to keep the Halakha and maintain a moral code, while leaving God’s plan for Him to arrange. Whatever the Divine strategy was, Shimson was not supposed to seek out non-Jewish women to consort with.

Our approach above differs from those who try to minimize the shortcomings of our biblical ancestors. For example, R. Dessler states that Shimshon’s involvement with all three women was part of God’s strategy to extract vengeance on the Philistines. According to R. Dessler, Shimshon knew that his impulses were pure; therefore; his interest in foreign woman must have Divine sanction. His only flaw was a touch of arrogance about his own purity (*Mikhtav me-Eliyahu* 2:272-273). It is difficult to accept R. Dessler’s approach. Not even a great individual can assume the holiness of all his impulses. Furthermore, as noted, the Tanakh does not say that the last two foreign women were part of the Divine plan. Moreover, the *gemara* in *Sota* makes it clear that Divine providence does not justify Shimshon’s behavior, even regarding the first woman.

Some *peshat* oriented *rishonim* (early medieval commentators who emphasize the simple, straight-forward reading of the biblical verses)agree with R. Dessler that Shimshon’s involvement with all three women was part of God’s plan. Radak explains that God wanted someone unassociated with the people of Israel to punish the Philistines so that they would not act with vengeance towards Israel. Due to his various romances, Shimson became socially identified with non–Jewish society and was the perfect instrument for this plan (see Radak’s commentary on *Shoftim* 13:4). However, Radak differs from R. Dessler on one fundamental point. Radak says that Shimshon was interested in these women for their beauty and lost his idealistic motivations for the endeavor. This seems closer to the intent of the Sagesthan R. Dessler’s finding fault only in excessive pride.

In the concluding lines cited above, the *gemara* asks, why say that Shimshon’s moral downfall began in Azza, when it seemingly started in Timna. The Talmud does not fully explain the reasoning behind its answer that the true downfall happened in Azza. Rashi provides an explanation that appears explicitly in the Jerusalem Talmud (*Sota* 1:9). Shimshon married the women in Timna, whereas he had a fling with the woman from Azza. In truth, this distinction emerges clearly from the biblical account. Shimshon asks his parents to get him the Philistine woman from Timna as a wife. “And he came up, and told his father and his mother, and said: 'I have seen a woman in Timna of the daughters of the Philistines; now therefore get her for me as a wife’” (*Shoftim* 14:2). Contrast this with: “And Shimshon went to Azza, and saw there a harlot, and went in unto her” (*Shoftim*16:1). The former scenario involved marriage and the latter did not.

However, this distinction does not clearly indicate that Shimshon’s religious descent began in Azza, since this answer assumes that a one night stand is worse, an assumption challenged by Maharsha. In strict halakhic terms, marrying a non-Jew reflects a biblical violation, whereas relations with a non-Jew do not (*Avoda Zara* 36b, Rambam *Hilkhot Isurei Bi’ah*, Chapter 12). Why say that the degeneration is in Azza, when the Timna episode includes a more serious transgression? Maharsha answers that the woman in Timna converted to Judaism, so marrying her involved no halakhic prohibitions.

Though this approach lacks biblical grounding, it has support in Rambam’s great code. Rambam writes that both Shlomo and Shimshon converted the non-Jewish women they married. Since these women converted for the sake of marriage and not due to religious convictions, Scripture portrays them as non- Jews (*Hilkhot Issurei Bi’ah* 13:14-16). When Shimshon’s parents complain that he should prefer a Jewish wife (*Shoftim* 14:3), they complain about her origin, even though the woman Shimshon selected had converted. R. Zvi Hirsch Chajes presents Rambam’s idea as a precedent for Maharsha.

If we follow the simple reading which depicts the woman in Timna as a non-Jew, why does the *gemara* not view that first episode as the beginning of Shimshon’s degradation? Halakhically, is not the marriage at Timna worse than the one night stand in Azza? Perhaps Jewish law offers a more complex assessment. A Jewish man who publically engages in relations with a non-Jewish woman can be killed on the spot. Pinchas’s actions in *Bamidbar* 25 serve as the model for this concept known as “*kanaim pogim bo”* (zealots hurt him.) Furthermore, Rambam contends that the punishment of *karet* (the most severe punishment) falls upon anyone who engaged in this act and was not killed by a zealot *(Issurei Bi’ah* 12:6). Arguably, this indicates that Halakha evaluates such a sexual relationship in an extremely negative light, although we must admit that the law enabling a zealot to apply vigilante justice applies specifically to a public violation.

Rambam adds another point that makes this type of sexual violation more stringent. The most serious forbidden relations, such as incest and adultery, produce *mamzerim* (bastards) who are still Jewish children; the offspring remain the children of their parents. By contrast, a Jewish man who fathers a child with a non-Jewish woman produces a non–Jewish child. In a profound sense, the child is not his (*Issurei Bi’ah* 12:7). While this factor renders the act of sexual relations with a non-Jew more severe, it does not explain why the *gemara* in *Sota* apparently considers these sexual relations worse than intermarriage.

A much simpler answer appears in R. Yitzchak from Karlin’s *Keren Ora.* He writes: “Even so, *zenut* (literally prostitution, here referring to sexual relations with a non-Jew) is considered a bigger degradation.” In other words, Maharsha’s question exhibits an overly technical approach to Halakha. True, marrying a non-Jew violates a more stringent prohibition, but a person who desires marriage exhibits a far more refined religious personality than someone only interested in a quick fling. In the former case, a man wants to find a life partner in order to build a family together. In the latter, the fellow wants to enjoy pleasure while avoiding responsibility. Therefore, Shimshon’s fling in Azza is a far more grievous degradation than his marriage in Timna, irrespective of the halakhic prohibitions involved.

*Keren Ora* reminds us that a full Jewish evaluation of any act must certainly build upon the Halakha, but cannot be restricted to explicit laws. Moral assessment includes a more comprehensive range of factors.