YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Talmudic *Aggadot***

**Rav Dr. Yonatan Feintuch**

**Shiur #10: The *Aggada* of the Chashmonaim and**

**the *Aggada* of the Kohen Gadol and Shemaya and Avtalyon**

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In memory of Rebbetzin Miriam Wise, Miriam bat Yitzhak veRivkah z”l,   
whose *yahrtzeit* is on 9 Tevet.

By Rav Yitzchak and Stefanie Etshalom  
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In this week’s *shiur,* we will examine two brief *aggadot*, the first dealing with the conclusion of the period of the Chashmonaim, and the second relating to the *kohanim* who came afterward, toward the end of the Second Temple Period.

1. **The *Aggada* of the Chashmonaim**

The *aggada* recounting the war among the brothers of the Chashmonai family appears in several places in the Babylonian Talmud (*Sota* 49b; *Bava* *Kama* 82b; and *Menachot* 67b), in almost identical form:

1. Our Rabbis taught: When the kings of the House of the Chashmonaim fought one another,
2. Hyrcanus was inside [the city walls] and Aristobulus outside.
3. Each day, [those within the city] would let down to the other party a basket of denarii,
4. And they [in return] would hoist up animals for them for the daily sacrifices.
5. There was an old man there who was familiar with Greek wisdom (or “told them Greek wisdom”).
6. He said to them, ‘So long as they continue performing the [sacrificial] service, they will not be delivered into your hands.’
7. The next day, when [those in the city] let down a basket of denarii, they sent up a pig.
8. When the pig reached halfway up the wall, it stuck its hoofs into the wall,
9. And the Land of Israel quaked over a distance of four hundred *parsa* by four hundred *parsa*.
10. On that occasion it was proclaimed: ‘Cursed is the man who would breed swine,
11. and cursed is the man who would teach his son Greek wisdom.’
12. Concerning this time we have learned: the ‘omer was once brought from the gardens of Tzerifin, and the two loaves [were once brought] from the Valley of Ein Soker.”

Many scholars have approached this *aggada* from a historical perspective, attempting to piece together the historical event upon which the text is based. Indeed, a similar story, with some details changed, is recounted by Josephus in his discussion of the period in question. A full discussion of the historical question lies beyond the scope of this shiur, since our main focus is the story itself, its literary features, and the message that Chazal sought to convey. The story has been analyzed comprehensively by Prof. Yona Frankel[[1]](#footnote-1), and the analysis below is largely based on his work.[[2]](#footnote-2)

1. Literary analysis of the story

Parts of the story

The story comprises three parts: a description of the situation prior to the advice by the old man (lines 1-4); the advice (5-6); and the situation afterward (7-9).[[3]](#footnote-3) There is a parallel between the first and third parts, in terms of both language and content: in each case, one party lowers a basket of denarii and the other party hoists an animal. This parallel serves to emphasize the contrast between the two acts, which also pertains to the contrast in the broader situation: in the first section, there is a siege that seems set to continue indefinitely; in the third section, there is catastrophe that impacts all parties. The middle section provides a causal link between the sections: it is here that we find the turning point in the actions undertaken (the hoisting of a pig instead of a sheep), causing a change in the general situation (an earthquake).

Unity in the first section

The first section describes a siege which is part of the struggle waged between the brothers. The brothers, Hyrcanus and Aristobolus, are the last scions of the Chashmonai dynasty. After them Herod, who represents the Roman rule in Eretz Yisrael, seizes power. The Chashmonai brothers are fighting over the throne, and as part of this struggle one brother fortifies himself in Jerusalem while the other lays siege to the city. Despite the war, they both agree that the daily sacrifice – and presumably the Temple service in general – must continue. To this end they engage in rather surprising cooperation: the party that is outside the city supplies the animals, while the party inside the city transfers payment from the Temple, and offers the sacrifices. This cooperation in the Temple service is all the more paradoxical considering the fact that an important element in the struggle between the brothers concerns the “position” of High Priest, which has been occupied for several generations by rulers of the House of Chashmonai. In any event, their cooperation in this regard expresses a form of unity, which runs counter to their struggle. According to Frankel, their cooperation in the matter of the sacrifices, which expresses religious unity and indicates a proper order of priorities in this area, prevents the struggle from being decided in favor of either side and prevents both sides from suffering catastrophe.

The literary molding of the first section likewise expresses a certain unity despite the struggle: the story begins with the kings who “fought one another” (*zeh al zeh*) (line 1), which is a strange formulation, considering that a siege is not a reciprocal action; the party outside the city lays siege to the party inside. The expression “each day” (or “day by day”, in some manuscripts) (line 3) expresses the fixed, ongoing nature of the agreement between them. Likewise, the expressions “would let down” and “would hoist up”, describing the cooperation in the matter of the daily sacrifice, are symmetrical, expressing unity.[[4]](#footnote-4) In particular, the expression “would hoist up for them” emphasizes that the party within the city felt that they were offering the sacrifices on behalf of both sides, and this is another point emphasizing unity.

Greek view vs. Jewish view in sections 2 and 3

The second section recounts the intervention of the old man. This elder, in his wisdom, recognizes that the continued offering of the daily sacrifice is preventing the war from being decided one way or the other. His act – “*la’az lahem be-chokhmah yevanit,*” [[5]](#footnote-5) is interpreted by Rashi to mean that the old man was inside the city, and he spoke with those who were outside the city in Greek – apparently so that those around him would not understand that he was advising to their detriment. Frankel adds that aside from the issue of the language, the old man’s way of thinking and the advice that he gives are characterized as “Greek wisdom”, in the sense of the culture informing them. This elder, according to Frankel, is characterized by a Greek pagan world-view, according to which a person who offers a sacrifice to a god receives personal protection, and therefore the Jews who are inside the city cannot be defeated. The moment the daily sacrifice ceases, the battle will be won, since God – who no longer receives His due – will cease to extend protection to His former devotees. This is a contrast to the Jewish world-view of the narrator, which views the offering of the sacrifice as a positive act of religious cooperation that brings Divine protection to both sides, with no harm coming to either side so long as the battle is not decided. Frankel identifies reciprocity between the sides in this section, too, but here in the negative sense: he understand the “Greek” advice of the old man inside the city as being reciprocated with a “Greek” initiative from the outside – the hoisting of a pig, a typical Greek sacrifice.

According to Frankel, the third section also contains an element of reciprocity, where the pig lodges its hoofs in the clefts in the wall. Just as the two sides were formerly partners in the positive joint decision to continue the daily sacrifice, and this agreement prevented bloodshed for all concerned, so the negative, “Greek” initiative on each side brings suffering to both. This is symbolized by the pig lodging its hoofs halfway up the wall. Indeed, while it seems that the old man’s advice has been taken, the outcome he expected does not transpire, owing to his erroneous perception. This is symbolized he party inside the city, which has ceased to offer up the sacrifice, has not been defeated; rather, a catastrophe befalls everyone.

In summary, according to Frankel, the central theme of the story, interwoven through all its three sections and underlined through its literary molding, is the chasm separating the Jewish world-view held by the narrator and the “Greek” perspective on the religious question of “how a person’s religious actions influence reality.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Both the Jewish view and the Greek view agree that man’s actions have some impact on reality. However, there is a very significant difference of opinion as to the proper religious path to attaining divine favor and influencing what happens. According to the Greek view, as represented in the story, the main aim is for a person to appease the god – in effect, to bribe him, by means of a sacrifice – and thereby to receive his help. The Jewish view maintains that God is just as interested in the person’s religious and moral commitment as in the sacrifice itself.

The Collapse of the Chashmonai Dynasty

We might add another layer to Frankel’s interpretation, paying attention to the symbols that appear in the story. The party outside of the city adopts the old man’s “Greek” advice and wisdom concerning the sacrifice, and stops delivering sheep for the daily sacrifice. However, the matter does not stop there. This party goes a step further and takes another “Greek” action: it hoists a pig, as if for sacrifice in the Temple. While we may assume that the besieging party does not really think that the besieged Jews would offer it up (although if one were to take the Greek view above to an extreme, one might conclude that sacrificing a pig is better than no sacrifice at all), the use of this particular animal is highly symbolic in this *aggada* describing the decline of the Chashmonai dynasty. This debacle is the mirror image of the event which, according to tradition, brought the Chashmonaim to power in the first place: the rebellion started out as a protest against the offering of pigs by the Greeks and Hellenists (as recounted, for example, in *Makkabim* I 1-2). Therefore, it is highly ironic that the resistance to the Greek religious influence in general, and to pigs in particular, brought the Chashmonaim to power, and the re-adoption of those same Greek religious views and customs eventually led to their downfall. When the Chashmonaim themselves abandon the ways of their forebears – Matityahu and his sons – and revert to Greek religious ideas and practices, the justification for their reign is lost.

This is a sad account that records the tragic end of the Chashmonai dynasty and Chazal’s spiritual interpretation of their fate. It would appear that, more than offering an exact description of the historical events, it was important to Chazal to offer their religious and spiritual interpretation. Their criticism of the last of the Chashmonaim who served as *kohanim* and as rulers is clearly evident in this *aggada*.

In this regard it is worth remembering Ramban’s comment about the Chashmonai kings:

“This was the punishment of the Chashmonaim who ruled during the Second Temple Period. For they were righteous [servants] of the Most High, and had it not been for them, Torah and the commandments would have been forgotten amongst Israel. Nevertheless, they were punished very severely. All four sons of the elder Chashmonai, righteous men who ruled consecutively, despite all their valor and all their success, fell by the sword to the enemy. And ultimately the punishment reached the stage as described by our Sages (*Bava Batra* 3b), “One who says, ‘I come from the House of the Chashmonaim*,’* is a slave” – since they were all destroyed, because of this sin… And all the children of the righteous Chashmonai, Matityahu, were deposed only for this reason – that they ruled even though they were not from the seed of Yehuda and from the House of David, and thus they ‘removed the scepter and the lawgiver’ completely [from Yehuda]. And their punishment was measure for measure, for the Holy One, blessed be He, caused their slaves (Herod) to rule over them, and it was they who destroyed them. And it may also be that they sinned in ruling because they were *kohanim*, and had been commanded (*Bamidbar* 18:7), ‘…You shall keep your *kehuna* for everything that concerns the altar, and within the veil, and you shall serve; I have given your *kehuna* to you as a service of gift, and the stranger who comes near shall be put to death.’ They had no right to rule; they were meant only to perform the Divine service.” (Ramban, *Bereishit* 49:10)

*Chazal* were also critical of the *kohanim* – and especially those who served as *Kohen Gadol* – in the period after the Chashmonaim. We encounter their criticism in a number of different places in the Talmud, including the following:

“Rabba b. Bar Hana said: What is the meaning of the verse, ‘The fear of the Lord prolongs days, but the years of the wicked shall be shortened’? ‘The fear of the Lord prolongs days’ refers to the first Temple, which remained standing for four hundred and ten years and in which there served only eighteen *Kohanim Gedolim*. ‘But the years of the wicked shall be shortened’ refers to the second Temple, which stood for four hundred and twenty years and in which more than three hundred *Kohanim Gedolim* served. Deduct from this total the forty years during which Shimon ha-Tzaddik served, eighty years during which Yochanan Kohen Gadol served, ten years during which Yishmael b. Fabi served (or, as some say, the eleven years of R. Elazar b. Charsum). Count the remaining years and you will find that none of the other *Kohanim Gedolim* completed his year [in office].” (*Yoma* 9a)

This criticism relates, *inter alia*, to the fact that these other *Kohanim* *Gedolim* belonged to the Sadducee sect, which had its origins at the end of the period of Yochanan Kohen Gadol, as we know from the following well-known source (*Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* 11):

“It was said of Yochanan Kohen Gadol that he served as *Kohen Gadol* for eighty years, but in the end he became a Sadducee.”

The previous source testifies to a great number of *Kohanim Gedolim* who “did not complete a year in office”, and it is reasonable to assume that they were representatives of the Sadducee sect. In this context there is another *aggada* that criticizes the conduct of one *Kohen Gadol* at the end of the Second Temple period; we will examine it below.

1. *Aggada* of the *Kohen Gadol* and Shemaya and Avtalyon

In the seventh chapter of *Massekhet Yoma* (71b), we find an *aggada* about a *Kohen Gadol* who encounters Shemaya and Avtalyon at the conclusion of Yom Kippur:

“Our Sages taught: It once happened that as the *Kohen Gadol* came forth from the Temple, all the people followed him, but when they saw Shemaya and Avtalyon, they left him alone and went after Shemaya and Avtalyon. Eventually Shemaya and Avtalyon came to him, to take their leave of the *Kohen Gadol*. He said to them: ‘May the sons of the foreign nations [i.e., converts who came from other nations] come in peace!’ They answered him: ‘May the descendants of the foreign nations come in peace – for they do as Aharon did, but may the descendant of Aharon not come in peace, for he does not do as Aharon did!’”

Despite the brevity of this *aggada*, it includes a few different subjects and messages. One subject is the proper attitude towards proselytes, and the message that great sensitivity should be shown towards them, including refraining from mentioning their background. Another related subject is the supposed connection between a person’s lineage and his achievements. The message in this regard is that greatness is not necessarily dependent on venerable lineage; rather, a person has to mold himself and his behavior. The story also includes a message about the caution that the *Kohen Gadol*, just like any representative of the community before God, must exercise in his performance of the Yom Kippur service, to ensure that succeeding in his mission will not cause him to become arrogant. Perhaps the story also conveys covert criticism of the public insensitivity towards the *Kohen Gadol*, although the end of the story shows that even in this sort of situation, the *Kohen Gadol* is expected to conduct himself in a more noble and forgiving manner.

All these elements are bound together within this *aggada* when it is read by itself, without any context. However, a reading within its context in *Massekhet Yoma* places the focus on a different subject. Let us review a discussion that appears slightly before this *aggada*:

“When the man who led [the he-goat] away [to Azazel, on Yom Kippur] would meet the *Kohen Gadol* afterwards in the street, he would say to him: ‘Sir, *Kohen Gadol*, we have fulfilled your request.’ If he met him in his house, he would say to him: ‘We have fulfilled the request of Him Who grants life to all who live.’ Rabba said: When rabbis in Pumbedita would take leave of each other, they would say: ‘May He Who grants life to all who live, grant you a long life […].’ R. Berekhia also said: ‘If a man wishes to offer a libation upon the altar, let him fill the throat of Torah Sages with wine […]’.”

The story starts with the *Kohen Gadol* who has just finished performing the Yom Kippur service, and the words addressed to him by the man appointed to lead the he-goat to Azazel. Immediately thereafter, there is a sudden change of subject, recording the words with which Torah scholars part from one another. They use the same expression that was used by the appointee over the he-goat led to Azazael: “He Who grants life”. The sharp change of focus may be connected to Chazal’s criticism of the *Kohanim* *Gedolim* at the end of the Second Temple Period, causing them to view Torah Sages – especially after the Destruction – as a replacement (at least for as long as the Temple would stand in ruins) for the *kohanim* who had not fulfilled their role properly. The view of the Sages as an alternative is strongly emphasized in the words of R. Berakhia, near the end of the discussion. R. Berakhia describes the wine that a person pours for the Sages as a replacement for the wine libation on the altar, in a reality where the altar no longer exists.[[7]](#footnote-7) Later on, there is another statement by R. Berakhia concerning a person’s obligation to ensure that his progeny will occupy themselves with Torah.

The next section in the Gemara is the story about the *Kohen Gadol* and Shemaya and Avtalyon. A reading of the story in the context of the discussion preceding it focuses us on the words of Shemaya and Avtalyon: “May the descendants of the heathen come in peace – for they act as Aharon did, but may the descendant of Aharon not come in peace, for he does not act as Aharon did.” This *Kohen Gadol* is an example of *Kohanim* *Gedolim* who do not act as Aharon did. Parallel to him are the Sages, who act as Aharon did – and therefore, as the text insinuates, might serve as a sort of alternative to the *kohanim* following the Destruction.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. Y. Frankel, *Darkhei ha-Aggadah ve-ha-Midrash*, Givatayim, 1991, pp. 236-239; *Midrah va-Aggadah*, Tel Aviv, 1996, pp. 354-357. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Frankel also addresses the parallel account by Josephus, and the historical approach; see Frankel, *Midrash va-Aggadah*, pp. 346-353; 357-361. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Lines 10-12 are not part of the actual plot (cf. Frankel, *Midrash va-Aggadah*, p. 354). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cf. Frankel, ibid. p. 356. However, one might question this, since these terms are used in the third section, too, where the unity is broken. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In Sotah 49b [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Frankel, *Darkhei ha-Aggada*, p. 239 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Similarly, see Tosefta Bava Kama 7,6: “And this may be deduced as follows: If stones, which do not see and do not hear and do not speak, and concerning the atonement that they effect between Israel and their Father in heaven, the Torah says, ‘You shall not lift iron [weapons] over them’, then Torah scholars, who are an atonement for the world, should certianly not be harmed by any form of danger.” In this Tosefta, Torah scholars (bnei Torah) are presented as an alternative to the stones of the altar. Perhaps in this context, the use of the same term – “bnei Torah” – is a play on words involving the entities that are being compared to one another: “avanim” – “banim.” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)