YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Talmudic *Aggadot***

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Shiur #12: *Aggadot* of the Elderly Planters (Part II)

Introduction

# In most of the previous *shiurim*, we have dealt with the broad context of narratives in the Babylonian Talmud. In the current *shiur*, we will analyze stories that appear in the *midrashim*, and we will see that, concerning them as well, there is an importance to reading the tale in its broader context. We will see how this reading sheds light on the narrative, its plot, and its messages.

Like the stories in the previous *shiur*, the stories we will deal with in this *shiur* include the motif of an elderly planter who toils without any guarantee of benefiting from the fruit of his labor. However, the narrative now takes a sharp left turn.

In the previous *shiur*, we read of Choni Ha-Ma’agel and his decades-long nap. This was the external narrative, the framing device around the internal narrative of Choni’s encountering a man planting a carob tree. The man tells Choni that while it is true that he may never enjoy the yield of the carob tree, he has a moral imperative to plant, since he was born into a world full of carob trees, and he intends to leave such a world behind for the coming generations.

This narrative is designed to teach a certain lesson. The reader gleans this lesson through the character of the protagonist, Choni in this case; the reader sees through his eyes, hears though his ears, and experiences through his adventures. Through Choni, the reader encounters a thoughtful man who takes into consideration what lies beyond his personal interests – the world as it was in the past, when he was born into it, and the world as it will be in the future, when he leaves it for the coming generations. However, as we saw in the previous *shiur*, the story’s protagonist, Choni, fails to grasp this message; indeed he may be incapable of comprehending it at all. However, the audience — in this case, we the readers — receive the message loud and clear, through the experiences of Choni.

We find a similar situation in other contexts in the literature of *Chazal*: a hardworking old man who plants without any expectation of eating the fruit of his labor.

In fact, the story appears in a number of places. One is in *Kohelet* *Rabba*, a midrashic compendium that was compiled, apparently, toward the end of the sixth century or in the seventh century, at which point the Babylonian Talmud was already extant. Below is the first part of the story:[[1]](#footnote-1)

Once Hadrian — may his bones be ground to dust! — was walking along the road near Tiberias, and he saw an old man planting fig trees.

“How old are you?” asked Hadrian.

“A hundred years old,” the man said.

“A hundred years old, and you are still digging up the earth to plant trees!” said Hadrian. “Do you truly expect to eat the fruit of those trees?”

“If I am worthy, I will eat,” answered the old man. “But if not, as my ancestors toiled for me, so I am toiling for my descendants.”

Hadrian told him, “By your life, should you have the good fortune to eat its fruit, let me know.”

In due course, the plants produced figs, and the old man said to himself, “Now is the time to inform the king.” What did he do? He filled a basket with figs, and he went up and stood at the palace-gate.

There he was asked, “What do you want?”

He replied, “Go and tell the king: An old Jew whom you once met wishes to greet you.”

The guards went and told the king, “An old Jew wishes to greet you.”

He said, “Bring him in!”

When the old man entered, the king asked, “What do you want?”

The planter replied, “I am the old man whom you met when I was digging up the ground to plant trees, and you said to me that if I was fortunate enough to eat of the fruits I should inform you. Behold, I have been worthy to eat of them, and these figs are the fruit they produced.”

Hadrian thereupon said, “I order that his basket be emptied of the figs and filled with dinars.”

His attendants asked him, “You display all this honor to this old Jew?”

And Hadrian answered, “His Creator has honored him, so shall not I?”

This story is composed of two parts. The first part is familiar to us, as an old man plants a tree. When the Caesar asks him whether he will live to enjoy the fruit, he responds that should he not live that long, the coming generations will benefit, just as the preceding generations toiled on his behalf. The Caesar has difficulty grasping this message, as we may observe in his parting words: “By your life, should you have the good fortune to eat its fruit, let me know.”

We should note that the Caesar does not care about the possibility that the old man’s descendants will enjoy the fruit of his labor and that he is acting in their interests. Hadrian cares only about the longshot that the old man himself will benefit.

When this does, in fact, come to pass and the old man eats of the tree, the Caesar pays him with gold in exchange for his yield. Perhaps he is only rewarding the old man for his gesture. However, it appears that there is something beyond this. It seems that the Caesar is quite pleased by the fact that the old man has managed to benefit from the work of his hands, and this pleasure encourages him to be generous and present a gift of gold.

In any case, according to the narrative, the discussion revolves around the question of whether a person invests only for oneself or whether there is value in investing solely for the benefit of others. Ironically, each side finds its position justified. The old man works hard knowing that the benefit may be enjoyed by others only, and he is content with his lot. The Caesar, on the other hand, wants to see if the old man will live to enjoy the fruit; according to his worldview, this is the ultimate goal, and this is what he hopes to see. This aim is realized, and so Hadrian is satisfied as well.

The conflict within this narrative seems to revolve around a moral-ethical question: Should a person care about oneself only, or about others as well? In certain respects, this recalls the Choni story that we previously saw, as the elderly planter in that story says, among other things, “I found [ready grown] carob trees in the world; as my ancestors planted these for me, so I too plant these for my children.”

Indeed, Professor Yona Fraenkel claims that the similarity of the narratives is anything but happenstance.[[2]](#footnote-2) In his view, the story in *Kohelet* *Rabba* is influenced by the story in the Babylonian Talmud. Fraenkel points to an earlier version of the story that appears in *Vayikra* *Rabba*. This work appears to have been edited in the fifth century, before the Babylonian Talmud was compiled, unlike *Kohelet* *Rabba*, which was compiled only after the Babylonian Talmud was complete — and thus was influenced by it.

Indeed, in the earlier incarnation of the story in *Vayikra* *Rabba*, the elderly man voices a different claim, which totally changes the tenor of the story:

Once Hadrian — may his bones be ground to dust! — was walking along the road near Tiberias, and he saw an old man planting fig trees. “Old man, old man,” he said, “had you but risen early, you would not be working so late; had you toiled in your youth, you would not be toiling in your dotage.”

He replied, “**I did rise early, and I still work late, and what He desires, He has wrought.”**

Hadrian told him, “By your life, should you have the good fortune to eat its fruit, let me know.”

In due course, the plants produced figs, and the old man said to himself, “Now is the time to inform the king.” What did he do? He filled a basket with figs, and he went up and stood at the palace-gate…

Although the stories are quite similar, *Vayikra* *Rabba* and *Kohelet* *Rabba* portray the dialogue differently, both on the part of Hadrian and on the part of the old man. *Vayikra* *Rabba* does not discuss investing in future generations just as previous generations invested on our behalf. The debate is not ethical, but rather religious or theological: How is the world run and (perhaps) how do reward and punishment operate?

As Fraenkel explains, Hadrian sees the world as operating under simple and technical rules. Whatever a person has is the result of personal action and management. If one works, one will definitely see the profits of such toil. Thus, if an old man is out planting, this is conclusive evidence of dissipated youth. Had he been industrious in his youth, he would no doubt be enjoying greener pastures at the end of his life; he would certainly not have a hoe in one hand and a sapling in the other. Hadrian draws a straight line from personal actions to personal results, which leads him to rebuke the elderly planter.

However, the old man’s worldview is very different, shaped by a religious conceptualization that sees reality as far more complex. Man must work, man must toil – but it is wrong to expect direct results, or indeed any necessary relationship between investment and return on it. God acts as He sees fit, not always in lockstep with human action and not always in ways that the human mind can comprehend. Thus, human activity is not focused on a certain result; rather, a person should do the right thing regardless.

As I understand it, there is a double meaning here, both concerning the direct consequences of human activity and the reward that God gives for it.

The direct, practical results of human activity do not always correspond to one’s efforts and actions. Reality is complex, and God does not always repay a person in proportion to one’s actions, at least on the level that we may perceive the matter.

Hadrian’s pagan conceptualization is quite different. In Greco-Roman theology, the gods respond to offerings brought to them. This leads the Caesar to conclude that in the reality of this world, he has the capacity to bring about whatever result he desires. Indeed, his overwhelming powers often allow him to do just that.

Moreover, we must consider who the elderly man’s interlocutor is in this story, namely Hadrian. This may give a nationalistic symbolism to the story. Hadrian is the emperor who cruelly puts down the Bar Kokhba revolt. He gets the results he wants by bringing in massive legions to put down the rebellion, a result that the Jews certainly do not want. However, this is in the short term; in the long term, already in the era of the composition of this *midrash*, Hadrian and his dynasty are no more, while the legacy of the Torah study of R. Akiva, his colleagues, and his students lives on, yielding fruit long after the revolution they perished in is history.

As we mentioned above, Fraenkel explains the difference between the story in *Vayikra* *Rabba* and the one in *Kohelet* *Rabba* based on the penetration of the Babylonian Talmud’s formulations and motifs into the later midrashic works from the Land of Israel, such as *Kohelet* *Rabba*. However, if we analyze the broader context of the *midrashim*, we may find another reason for this distinction.

The broader context of the *midrash* in *Vayikra* *Rabba* is the following verse:

When you enter the land and plant any kind of fruit tree, regard its fruit as forbidden. For three years you are to consider it forbidden; it must not be eaten. (*Vayikra* 19:23)

The *midrash* takes the first clause and reinterprets it: “When you enter the land, you shall plant every kind of fruit tree.” It then juxtaposes this with a verse from *Iyov* (38:36): “Who has put wisdom in the inward parts? Or who has given understanding to the rooster?” The verses are interwoven to teach the following lesson:

When a hen’s young are little, it collects them, puts them under its wings, warms them, and grubs for them. But when they are big, if one of them wants to get near her, she pecks at its head and says to it: Go grub in your own dunghill. So when the Israelites were in the wilderness for forty years, the manna came down, the well spurted up, the quail was always at hand for them, and the Pillar of Cloud journeyed before them. When they entered the Land of Israel, Moshe said to them: Each one of you must now take his spade and go out and plant trees. “When you come into the land, you shall plant every kind of fruit tree!”

The topic of the *midrash* is the distinction between youth and maturity, a topic that also arises in the narrative when Hadrian rebukes the old man for not working in his youth, which compels him to work in his old age. The *midrash* sees matters like this: Initially, the parent protects the children, seeing to all their needs. Everything required is immediately dealt with, and the world of the children is an orderly one. When a person attains maturity, he encounters a less ordered world, in which uncertainty increases. In such a world, actions do not guarantee consequences, and the consequences that do come about do not always meet one’s expectations.

The same is true of the Jewish People, as the parable is explained: The Generation of the Wilderness grows up in a comfortable reality, in which all of their needs are immediately and absolutely met. The constant providence means all results are direct and proportionate to their actions. However, once they enter the Land of Israel, reality changes. The distance from the Divine Presence dictates a different reality, in which the world is managed in a manner that reveals less and conceals more of God’s hand. Naturally, this means that each person must expend effort with the realization that the results are not guaranteed.

Hadrian’s story follows this homily, and it raises a similar concept, now voiced by the old man. He does not work with the expectation of certain results; he recognizes the gap between him and God. All he can do is his work; God will do whatever He sees fit.

Let us consider the verse expounded by *Vayikra* *Rabba* in its original context. As we noted, the subject of this verse in *Vayikra* is not a *mitzva* of planting trees; rather, it is the prohibition of consuming the yield of a tree for the first three years of its life (*orla*).

Theoretically, we might say that the connection is simply technical; the verse happens to talk about planting fruit trees, and the story is about someone who is planting fruit trees. However, there may be a deeper link. The prohibition of *orla* requires one to tend to the fruit tree for three years with no recompense; this is echoed by the old man planting his trees without any intent of enjoying their fruit himself. The *mitzva* of *orla* requires a great deal of faith and understanding that some efforts never have concrete results for the people who expend them.

On the other hand, the broader context of the story is quite different in *Kohelet* *Rabba*. In *Kohelet*, the verses being expounded relate to the question of a person who toils only for the fruits to be given over to others. In the beginning of chapter 2 of the book, the author describes all of his endeavors, including: “I made for myself gardens and orchards, and I planted in them trees bearing every type of fruit” (v. 5). However, the author is disappointed and disheartened. His toil and labor are for naught, as he will die and others will inherit the fruit — and those heirs may be nothing more than fools!

I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish? Yet they will have control over all the fruit of my toil into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. So my heart turned to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. (*Kohelet* 2:18-20)

The conclusion is one of despair; the author gives up. Even though there are many distinctions, his point of view bears a certain similarity to that of Hadrian: there is no point in labor whose fruit will go to a future generation.

However, *Chazal* in the *midrash* (*Kohelet* *Rabba* 1:20) turn the verse on its head: “So my heart turned to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun” becomes: “‘So my heart turned to despair,’ but I reconsidered, for just as others toiled for me, I toil for others.” *Chazal* reinterpret the “turning” in the verse not as a spiral of despair, but as a reversal, a rethinking of the matter. Indeed, this sentence echoes the words of the old man in *Kohelet* *Rabba*, differing from his reply in *Vayikra* *Rabba*: “As my ancestors toiled for me, so I am toiling for my descendants.”

This is the view of *Chazal*, their interpretation of the verse and of life itself. This interpretation differs from the simple meaning of the verse, and it is certainly different from the view of the author of *Kohelet*, who is a king. It may be that this *midrash*, which goes on to cite the story of Hadrian and the old man, sees a certain similarity between the argument that the elderly planter has with the Caesar (as we noted, Hadrian is not convinced and does not change his position) and the internal debate that takes place, according to the *midrash*'s interpretation, in the head of *Kohelet*, who is both an elderly man and a King.

It may be, as Fraenkel writes, that the narrative in *Kohelet* *Rabba* draws the words of the old man from the story of Choni in the Babylonian Talmud. However, analysis of the broader context of the story in *Kohelet* *Rabba* answers this “literary question.” This is not some subconscious influence of the Babylonian Talmud; this is not mere borrowing. Rather, this is a more sophisticated endeavor. The editors wanted to modify the story of the elderly planter for the specific context in *Kohelet* *Rabba*, so they appropriated the formulation of the story of Choni in the Babylonian Talmud, interpolating it in place of the words that appear in *Vayikra* *Rabba*.

**Conclusion**

We have seen that in the *midrashim*, just as in the Talmuds, we must consider the influence of the broader context on the focus and message of a given *midrash*. In this case, by changing just one sentence that the elderly planter says, the focus of his debate with the Roman emperor shifts decisively. Each of the *midrashim*, *Kohelet* *Rabba* and *Vayikra* *Rabba*, cites the story in a different context, and in the framework of this context, the story takes on a different significance and transmits a message appropriate for that context.

Translated by Yoseif Bloch

1. The second part of story deals with the old man’s neighbor, and it is not relevant for our discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Y. Fraenkel, *Midrash Ve-Aggada* (Tel Aviv, 1997), pp. 821-825. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)