YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Talmudic *Aggadot***

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Shiur #15: The Story of Mar Zutra Chassida and the Stolen Goblet

1. **Preface**

Over the course of the previous *shiurim,* we have examined the literary molding of various *aggadot*. One of the tools we employed was a reading of the biblical chapter of which a verse is cited in the story. For instance, in the *aggada* of Herod in *Bava Batra* (the [first *shiur*](http://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-01-aggada-concerning-herod-and-its-meaning) of the series), Bava ben Buta, in his response to Herod, cites from *Kohelet* 10.[[1]](#footnote-1) When we looked at that chapter, we found that other verses, which were not quoted in that *aggada*, strengthened the *aggada’*s theme. For example, the verse, “I have seen servants upon horses” reinforces the theme of Herod essentially remaining a slave, even after seizing the throne by force. In this instance we are “referred” to the biblical chapter by quotations from the chapter, which appear within the *aggada*. However, there are other *aggadot* that do not cite verses explicitly, but nevertheless allude to a biblical chapter or narrative through language or content. In these instances, a reading of the relevant biblical text can enrich our reading of the story and even offer new insights.

An example of an *aggada* that belongs to this category is the story of the “stolen goblet.” The brief story appears in the second chapter of *Massekhet Bava Metza*, “*Elu metziot*,” which deals with the returning of lost objects to their owners. We will analyze this story, reading it in light of a biblical narrative that shares a certain similarity to it, and see how this reading offers an interesting conceptual perspective to the story.

1. **The story of the stolen goblet and its literary structure**

**The story**

1. Mar Zutra the Pious once had a silver goblet stolen from him from his host.
2. He saw a disciple wash his hands and dry them on someone else's garment.
3. He said, ‘This is the one, for he has no consideration for the property of others.’
4. The man was bound, and he confessed (*Bava Metzia* 24a).

**The literary structure**

The story is a condensed narrative, consisting of just four sentences. Each sentence gives a very brief description of a different occurrence, and together the sentences comprise the plot. Despite the minimal space that it occupies, the story is nevertheless dramatic: there is a tension that extends from the beginning, where the goblet is stolen, until the conclusion, when the thief is discovered. The tension surrounds the question of whether the item and the thief will be discovered, and how, and it reaches its climax in the surprising conduct of Mar Zutra the Pious in the third sentence. He sees a disciple who is doing something that is not right, but seemingly not too terrible, either – simply wiping his wet hands on his friend’s cloak. On the basis of this spectacle, Mar Zutra accuses the disciple of a far more serious crime: the theft of the goblet. In the fourth and final sentence it turns out that his assessment was quite correct; the disciple confesses to the theft, thereby confirming the connection between his overt behavior and his behavior in secret.

The linguistic molding of the story serves to emphasize its content. We discern a play on words in the third and fourth lines: the student who had no consideration (*ikhpat*) for the property of others ends up being bound (*nikhpat*). This may be intended to highlight the progression of events, and clarify that it is his lack of consideration that leads to his capture and binding. There may also be a play on words in the first and second lines, through the use of the words “*agniv*” (stolen)[[2]](#footnote-2) and “*nagiv*” (wipe). Here again, there is a connection between the less serious act (the wiping of the hands) and the more serious one (the theft). These plays on words contribute to the cohesion of the story as a whole around the idea that it expresses – that indeed there was a connection between the “slight” moral lapse on the part of the student and a far more serious one.

In the second sentence, in the description of the student’s “sin,” it seems at first that the expression “washed his hands” is redundant - the fact that he dried his hands would have sufficed for us to understand that he washed. However, these words have their own role in the molding of the tension between the two parts of the story. At first glance, it appears that the student is fulfilling the mitzva of washing his hands, and the drying of them on his friend’s cloak is simply part of that act. This being the case, some would be willing to forgive the student for the trifling lack of consideration that he shows in his performance of the mitzva. This possibility receives an unequivocal response at the end of the story, where the student is accused of theft and he confesses. Perhaps the use of the words “washed his hands” is also meant as an ironic allusion to the idea of “clean [i.e., innocent] hands” and expresses the assumption that the students hands are indeed clean – an assumption that is subsequently disproved.

**The main character and subject of the story**

What is the focus of the story? Theoretically, we might read it with a focus on the disciple, his actions, and the process that he undergoes (a covert sin – theft, followed by a “lighter” sin of lack of consideration for his friend’s property, which leads to the discovery of the more serious sin). However, it would seem that the narrator deliberately chooses to focus our attention not on the disciple, but rather on Mar Zutra, his actions, and his thoughts. If we look at the beginning of the story, we find that the syntax of the first sentence is rather strange: it recounts that a goblet was stolen from “the host,” and therefore we would expect the subject of the sentence to be either the goblet or the host. Instead, the narrator creates a strange and clumsy sentence in which Mar Zutra the Pious is the subject: “Mar Zutra the Pious had a silver goblet stolen from him from his host.” From this point onward, Mar Zutra is the subject of each of the sentences comprising the story. The act carried out by the student in the second sentence is described from the perspective of Mar Zutra. The story goes on to describe the actions of Mar Zutra that lead to the confession by the thief. This structure emphasizes the involvement of Mar Zutra, his sensitivity and his concern for the possessions of others – as expressed in his concern for the host who had his silver goblet stolen. Our initial impression from the first sentence is that it is Mar Zutra himself who is the victim of the theft, and this alludes to his level of concern for the property of his host. The actions that follow prove this concern. This trait is, of course, contrasted with that of the student, who “had no consideration.”

The righteous Sage in this *aggada* has two main characteristics. The first is his sensitivity with regard to the property of others. This is expressed in his efforts to find the thief and restore the goblet to its owner, as well as in the fact that he is troubled by a “mild” act of inconsideration which most people would probably have accepted with equanimity. More importantly, however, the reader becomes aware, over the course of the stages of the story, of Mar Zutra’s keen discernment. By the end, we realize that this close attention to small details that others might not notice also includes much more: Mar Zutra’s “seeing” is an inner seeing; it penetrates the outer façade that is visible to all, and arrives at the true significance of that façade. Hence, he is able to conclude, truthfully and accurately, from the student’s “lesser” misdeed that he is also guilty of the more severe crime. The conclusion we draw is therefore not that any minor manifestation of inconsideration necessarily conceals a more serious criminal character. The story is built on the combination of a student who is indeed guilty of immoral behavior of both lesser and greater severity, and a Sage of the caliber of Mar Zutra the Pious, who possesses a unique gift of “seeing” which allows him to penetrate the inner recesses of a person’s character.

1. **The biblical story serving as background to the *aggada***

At the climax of the story we find another literary element. The theft of the silver goblet and the discovery of the thief recall the biblical story of Yosef and his brothers (*Bereishit* 44). In this story, Yosef orders that his silver goblet be hidden in Binyamin’s sack, as the brothers make ready to return to Yaakov in Kena’an. Yosef then commands his servants to set off in pursuit of the brothers, and to accuse them of stealing the goblet, which is duly discovered. The presence of the goblet in Binyamin’s sack puts the brothers in a very difficult position, since their top priority in this journey is to bring Binyamin home safely to his father.

The theft of the goblet is staged by Yosef, and as such it is not a real crime. However, even the brothers, who are unaware of this, understand that in fact, the theft of the goblet does not stand alone as an incidental sin for which they have been caught. Yehuda’s first words to Yosef show that the brothers regard the whole incident as an allusion to their far more profound guilt: the kidnap and sale of their brother. “And Yehuda said, What can we say to my lord… God has found out the iniquity of your servants…” (44:16). This pronouncement is a continuation of a statement by Reuven earlier in the story, drawing a connection between the difficulties that the brothers are now experiencing in Egypt and their terrible crime of so many years previously: “Did I not speak to you, saying, ‘Do not sin against the child’… and now, behold, even his blood is required.” (44:22)

A reading of the story of the stolen goblet in the Gemara, in light of the biblical narrative, sheds new light on Mar Zutra’s conduct. This reading reinforces the link that Mar Zutra makes between the drying of hands on someone else’s cloak and the theft. This projection of the lesser misdeed onto the greater one might at first seem surprising. However, the story of Yosef’s goblet, in which a lesser misdeed (in the biblical context, the “theft” of the goblet was, relatively speaking, the lesser misdeed) hints to a grave sin, serves to underline and justify Mar Zutra’s penetrating perception.[[3]](#footnote-3) Moreover, Mar Zutra’s accurate perception is awarded an interesting dimension of reinforcement from a different verse in the biblical story – the words of Yosef himself: “Did you not know that a man such as I could certainly divine?” (44:15) In view of the connection between the two stories, these words might be projected onto Mar Zutra, too.

One final point: the story in the Gemara should also be read against the background of the ironic words that Yosef has his servants address to his brothers: “Why have you repaid good with evil” (v. 4)? This reading strengthens the link between the two narratives and illuminates Mar Zutra’s motives in seeking the thief: he feels that the theft of the host’s goblet by one of the guests is a matter of “repaying good with evil.”

1. **The context of the *aggada* within the *sugya* and the chapter**

Our brief *aggada* is located in the *sugya* discussing the first Mishna of the second chapter of *Bava Metzia* (*elu metziot*):

“These found items belong to the finder, while these others must be announced. These found items belong to the finder: if one finds scattered fruit, scattered money… This is the view of R. Meir…

R. Shimon ben Elazar says: New [never-used] merchandise (*anfuria*) need not be announced.”

The *sugya* in which the *aggada* appears (*Bava Metzia* 23b) focuses on the last part of the Mishna and explains R. Shimon ben Elazar’s opinion:

“’R. Shimon ben Elazar says…’ – What is meant by the term ‘*anfuria’*? R. Yehuda said in the name of Shmuel: new vessels which the eye has not sufficiently noted….”

Thus, the Gemara cites the opinion of R. Yehuda in the name of Shmuel in order to explain that ‘*anfuria’* refers to new items which are not yet sufficiently familiar to their owner that he would be able to identify them as his own just by seeing them. The Gemara goes on to explain that we are speaking of a situation where the items have no special identifying marks, and therefore there is no possibility of claiming them on that basis. A learned scholar may claim a lost article even in the absence of identifying marks, by virtue of his visual recognition of it - i.e., he is relied upon to recognize his property with certainty. However, even this possibility is limited to objects “which the eye has sufficiently noted” – i.e., where the scholar has had the opportunity of becoming sufficiently familiar with the object. Where new items are concerned, the required familiarity has not been established, and therefore the item cannot be returned to the scholar in accordance with this law solely on the basis of his visual recognition. The Gemara adds another teaching of R. Yehuda concerning the criterion for who may be considered a learned scholar, and its interpretation by Mar Zutra connects it to the law of “visual recognition:”

“For R. Yehuda said in the name of Shmuel: In the following three matters, learned scholars deviate from the truth: in learning (i.e., concealing their knowledge of a certain topic out of modesty); in sexual matters (i.e., concealing the details of their marital relations, out of modesty); and in hospitality (i.e., concealing the fine quality of the hospitality offered to them by a certain host, out of consideration for him, in order to spare him a deluge of guests seeking similar treatment). What is the practical significance of these three categories? Mar Zutra said: These are the criteria for discerning [the caliber of] a scholar to whom an item may be returned solely on the basis of his visual recognition of it. One who conceals the truth only in these three matters – we return the item to him; one who conceals the truth in other matters as well – we do not return it to him.”

Mar Zutra explains that the criteria enumerated by Rav Yehuda establish the level of integrity that a scholar must have in order to belong to the category of those to whom we may return an object solely on the basis of his visual recognition (in the absence of identifying signs). Immediately after this clarification comes the *aggada* about the stolen goblet.

1. **The connections between the story and the halakhic discussion, and their contributions to both**

There are several linguistic links between the story of the goblet and the halakhic discussion that precedes it:[[4]](#footnote-4)

1. The name ‘Mar Zutra’ – Admittedly, there is no way of knowing whether the Sage who offers the teaching and the main character of the story are the same person – and it is reasonable to assume that they are not, since only in the *aggada* is he referred to as “the Pious.” Nevertheless, the appearance of the same name creates a linguistic link.
2. The term “host” is mentioned in the halakhic discussion as one of the categories concerning which a scholar is permitted to deviate from the truth, while in the story the goblet is stolen from the “host.”
3. We might point to a more general link in the fact that both the story and the halakhic discussion deal with the returning of money/property to its owner.

It seems that a reading of the story within the context of the *sugya* reinforces the thematic connection between the story and the *sugya.* As noted above, at the center of the story is Mar Zutra the Pious, whose uprightness causes him to view any inconsideration towards the property of others in a serious light. His character is linked quite naturally to that of the Sage as presented in the halakhic discussion, who is very careful to tell the truth. In general, Mar Zutra may be viewed as the sort of Sage to whom the *sugya* refers. However, beyond this general connection, a reading of the story within the context of the discussion about the “visual recognition” of a Sage when it comes to restoring lost property serves to highlight the fact that Mar Zutra’s conduct is likewise based on a sort of “visual recognition.” He employs a sense of intuition or a level of perception that penetrates the outer wrapping of reality. Mar Zutra the Pious **sees** the student wiping his hands on his friend’s cloak – an expression of his close attention to the tiniest details in the realm of property, arising from his sensitivity to the slightest violation in this regard. However, his “seeing” not only discerns minor actions that others do not notice; it is a seeing that penetrates the person he is looking at, gaining insight into the internal ramifications of that which is visible on the outside. This seeing, which might be referred to as a sort of inner “visual recognition,” is what allows him to state quite confidently that the student who wipes (*menagev*) his hands is also the thief (*ganav*).[[5]](#footnote-5)

The Sage’s practice (mentioned in the halakhic discussion) of not stating the whole truth when speaking of his “host,” thereby expressing his gratitude toward him,[[6]](#footnote-6) is also connected to the story. This trait is also expressed in the actions of Mar Zutra in the story: he tries to bring benefit to his host and to reverse the ingratitude of the student who stole the goblet. As noted, this point is also emphasized through the biblical story in the background, in which Yosef asks (in relation to his goblet), “Why have you repaid good with evil?"

On the other hand, the description of the penetrating perception of Mar Zutra in the story sheds light on the concept of the Sage’s “visual recognition” in the halakhic discussion that precedes the story, and adds a new ethical dimension to the law permitting the return of an item to a Sage on the basis of his visual recognition. In light of the story, it seems that the returning of an item in circumstances of visual recognition concerns not only the formal plane, where a person who is known to speak the truth in many spheres can be relied upon when claiming an article that is in the public domain – even without any objective proof in the form of identifying marks. Rather, this type of person's visual recognition is also qualitatively better than other people's, thus it may be relied on to return an item, while for other people such recognition is not sufficient. In other words, it is not just a question of trust, it is the question of how reliable one's visual recognition of one's items is.

The same concept works in the opposite direction, too: one who receives his article back on the sole basis of his visual recognition of it should be someone like Mar Zutra the Pious. He should have qualities that lead him to engage in restoring lost articles to their owners, and to do so on the basis of that same intuition, or “visual recognition.”

It seems that Mar Zutra the Pious’s conduct also contributes a broad conceptual message to the chapter of “*elu metziot*” as a whole. His efforts to restore the stolen item to its owner – which, by law, he is altogether exempt from – and the gravity with which he views the inconsideration shown towards the property of others, offer an important model for the moral standards demanded by the commandment of restoring a lost article to its owners, which is the subject of the chapter.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

Summary: This article analyzes a short story about Mar Zutra, who keenly identifies the thief of stolen object.

Tags: Mar Zutra, seeing, Yosef, lost items, visual recognition, goblet, steal, host, Sage

1. See *Bava Batra*, 3b-4b [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Although it must be noted that in most manuscripts of this *sugya* a different verb appears, also denoting theft, such that the play on words does not arise. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Another link between the two narratives is to be found in the fact that in the sale of Yosef and the subsequent events, Yosef’s garments play an important role (the striped coat that is removed from him, and the garment that is torn and remains in the hands of Potifar’s wife) – recalling the garment used to wipe the student’s hands. The dipping of Yosef’s coat in blood may also recall the wiping of water on the fellow student’s cloak. In addition, it should be borne in mind that Yosef is, in a certain sense, a “lost article” – or, to state it more accurately, a “stolen article” – which ultimately returns to its “owner” – Yaakov. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. These links are noted by S.Y. Friedman, *Ichui Parshiot Semukhot be-Suyiot ha-Bavli,*” Protocol of the Seventh World Congress of Jewish Studies, 3 (5741), p. 252. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Another connection between the story and the halakhic discussion might be the phenomenon of projection, or induction, from one moral realm to another, which they share: in the halakhic discussion, on the basis of the Sage deviating from the truth in three areas only, we induce the license to return a lost article to him on the basis of his visual recognition alone. In the story, Mar Zutra the Pious sees a moral defect in a student in one area, and induces a defect in a different area – although, obviously, in the story the gap between the two areas is far greater and more obvious. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cf. Rashi: “If someone asks him whether his host welcomed him with a happy countenance and he says ‘No’, this is a good trait – so that he [the host] will not be inundated with ill-mannered people who will come to him constantly, and exhaust all his wealth.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)