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**TALMUDIC AGGADA**

**By Rav Yitzchak Blau**

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**FESTIVAL OF FREEDOM: ESSAYS ON PESAH AND THE HAGGADAH**

**by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik**

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**Shiur #19: Hypocrisy and Embarrassment**

Anyone unconcerned with the honor of his Maker should not have come into this world. What does this refer to? R. Abba said: “This is one who looks at a rainbow.” R. Yosef said: “This is one who sins in secret.” “One who looks at a rainbow,” as it is written: “Like the appearance of the rainbow that shines in the clouds on a day of rain, such was the appearance of the surrounding radiance. That was the appearance of the likeness of glory of the Lord.” (*Yechezkel* 1:28). R. Yosef said: “This is one who sins in secret,” in accordance with R. Yitzchak, for R. Yitzchak said: “Whoever sins in secret, it is as if he pushed away the legs of the Divine Presence, as it says, ‘Thus says the Lord: The heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool’ (*Yeshayahu* 66:1).” Is it truly so? Did not R. Elai the Elder say: “If a person sees that his inclination is overpowering him, he should travel to a place where they do not know him, dress in black, wrap himself in black, and do what his heart desires, and not profane the Divine name in public.” There is no contradiction. One source discusses a person who can subdue his inclination; the other describes a person who cannot subdue his inclination (*Chagiga* 16a).

The Gemara lists examples of indifference to God’s honor, beginning with R. Abba’s example of looking at a rainbow. Since Yechezkel identifies the rainbow’s appearance with the glory of God, it is inappropriate to gaze at this phenomenon. Reluctance to look at the rainbow conveys the difficulty of approaching and comprehending Divinity. As R. Yosef Karo notes, it cannot be fully forbidden to look at rainbows, since Halakha includes a blessing of praise upon seeing one (*Berakhot* 59a). He distinguishes between the verbs “*roeh*” and “*mistakel*.” The latter, a prolonged and intense gaze, is problematic when looking at a rainbow. The former, a quicker glance of appreciation, is appropriate (*Beit Yosef Orach Chayim* 229).

The idea that a rainbow symbolizes the Divine Presence may influence our understanding of the covenant God makes with Noach. Why does a rainbow indicate that God will never bring another deluge? Ramban explains that the rainbow is the bow of a weapon that God turns away from humanity, signifying that He will not fire upon us again (commentary on *Bereishit* 9:12). R. Yosef Bekhor Shor suggests, based on *Yechezkel*, that the rainbow symbolizes God’s glory; its appearance shows Divine favor and affirms God’s enduring affection for humanity (commentary on *Bereishit* 9:13).

Meiri seems to understand R. Abba in a more symbolic fashion. R. Abba speaks of those who investigate certain unsolvable metaphysical mysteries represented by the rainbow. This understanding would fit with the broader theme of the *mishna* that this *gemara* comments on, which cautions against asking “what is above, what is below, what is before, and what is after” (*Chagiga* 11b). According to this reading, the Gemara says nothing negative about physically looking at a rainbow; it only cautions against the wrong kind of intellectual speculation.

R. Yosef provides another example of indifference to the glory of God –sinning in secret. After all, someone who sins in secret fears the disapproval of human society, but not that of his Creator. Along the same lines, a famous *gemara* explains why a burglar pays double, whereas a mugger does not. Only the thief hypocritically maintains a respectable face in society, while not caring that God knows the truth about his transgressions. At least, the mugger treats God and mankind with the same indifference (*Bava Kama* 79b).

At first glance, R. Yosef’s teaching seems to contradict that of R. Elai, who prefers that people sin in secret. Before discussing the *gemara*’s resolution, it is important to note that some commentaries refuse to take R. Elai at face value. Would a sage ever explicitly endorse sin? Rabbenu Chananel explains that the arduous journey, combined with dressing in black, will help a person conquer his inclination. Being away from the comforts of home may also help motivate a person to escape his spiritual quicksand. Thus, R. Elai does not counsel sinning in private; rather, he offers a strategy for conquering difficult temptations.

We appreciate the motivation for this interpretation but, as Tosafot note, it is not the simple reading of R. Elai, who instructs the person to “do what his heart desires” in the new location. These words seem to describe actual sinful behavior, not desisting at the last minute. One version of Rabbenu Chananel’s interpretation deals with this problem by suggesting that R. Elai spoke of actions that are not technically sinful, but which provide a likely environment for sin. For example, a person finds himself excessively drawn towards overindulgence in eating and drinking or wild party music. R. Elai tells such a person to go indulge in his steaks, beer and music elsewhere, in the hope that this person will stop his deterioration before moving to concrete acts of sin.

Rif (*Moed Katan* 9a) understands R. Elai as promoting sin given the specific context, but says that we reject his position. We affirm the remarkable human ability to withstand great temptations and overcome religious obstacles. As our sages say: “Everything is in the hands of heaven, except for fear of heaven” (*Berakhot* 33b). Human moral and religious choices belong in the category of fear of heaven, in which human freedom reigns, not determinism or compulsion. If so, we would advise a struggling individual to find the wherewithal to escape sin, rather than tell him to go violate religious principles in private.

Like Rif, Tosafot explain R. Elai as speaking of real transgressions, but they do not say that Halakha rejects this position. Let us now return to our *gemara*’s answer and work out the implications. Someone who could conquer his inclination, but chooses to sin in private, is indeed a hypocrite and indifferent to God’s watchful eye. R. Yosef sharply criticizes such a person. However, we can imagine a different type of personality, who very much wants to avoid sin, but finds he is unable to do so. In that case, sinning privately reflects genuine shame, rather than hypocrisy or caring more about human opinion than that of God. Sinning in private can either reflect something ugly or something refined. For some individuals, sinning in private stinks of hypocrisy and reveals a blasé attitude about the Divine judge. For others, it reflects authentic embarrassment about religious shortcomings.

In what sense does the person who sins in secret push away “the legs of the Divine Presence”? Rashi (*Chagiga* 16a) explains that this person denies God’s providence over the world, since he acts as if God will not notice his transgressions behind closed doors. Maharal, in his *Chiddushei Aggadot* on Kiddushin (40a), questions Rashi’s assumption. The sinner in private might admit that God sees all, but yet prefer that his peers not know about his indiscretions. If so, he does not push away the Divine Presence via denial of its providential eye. Maharal offers a profound alternative interpretation. Someone who sins in private pushes God away because the Divine does not dwell together with sin. Pushing God away is less of an issue in public, because the Divine Presence is more acutely manifest in the quiet spaces of life. The solitude of being home alone or in a silent spot in the woods provides an excellent opportunity to encounter God. In that sense, misusing the opportunity afforded by privacy in order to commit a sin pushes away the Divine Presence.