YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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UNDERSTANDING AGGADA

By Rav Yitzchak Blau

In Loving Memory of

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לע"נ יהודה פנחס בן הרב שרגא פייוועל ז"ל

כ"ב אב תשכ"ח – י' אב תשע"ב

Shiur #6b: Eulogizing, Teaching and Authenticity

When Rav Huna passed away, they wanted to place a Torah scroll on his bier.

Rav Chisda said to them: "You are now going to do for him something which he thought was incorrect during his lifetime?" For R. Tachlifa said: "I saw that Rav Huna wanted to sit on a bier, and a Torah scroll was on it. He placed a vessel on the floor, and moved the Torah to it." Apparently, [R. Huna] held that it is forbidden to sit on a bed that a Torah scroll is resting upon.

His bier would not fit out the door, so they wanted to lower it from the roofs. Rav Chisda said to them: "We learned from him that the honor for a sage is to go out the regular entrance."

They wanted to switch him to a different bier. R. Chisda said to them: "We learned from him that the honor for a sage is to go out in his original bier." … They expanded the entrance and took him out. (*Moed Katan* 25a)

The early part of this story reflects the tension between wanting to honor a great talmudic sage by asserting his intimate relationship with the Torah, and yet trying to maintain a sense of the unique honor reserved for a Torah scroll. The second part of the story requires further elucidation. Although the halakhic details prohibiting switching biers or exiting the building in an awkward fashion are certainly valuable, they may contain an aggadic message as well.

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik offers a brilliant metaphorical reading in his eulogy for R. Hayyim Ozer Grodzinski ("*Nossei Ha-tzitz Ve-hachoshen*" in *Divrei Hagut Ve-ha'arakha*). According to R. Soloveitchik, the physical inability to move R. Huna's bier outside reflects a metaphorical inability to convey the greatness of Rav Huna to the masses waiting outside the door. The simple artisans and farmers could not understand the complexity and depth of this great personality. It is in this sense that the bier could not fit through the door.

The eulogizers thought that they could solve this problem by making the masses feel the loss through easy emotion and cheap sentiment. They would wail and cry as they spoke about the tribulations, sufferings, and death that await all of mankind. The members of the audience would be filled with a fear of their own mortality and cry with great emotion. These eulogizers wanted to bring R. Huna out to the masses through the roofs of shallow emotions and false tears. R. Chisda insisted that the sage must be brought out through the main door. A roundabout way of achieving emotional impact was no substitute for authentic recognition of a special personality.

The eulogizers then suggested a different strategy. If they could not rely upon emotions, they could still portray R. Huna in a way that the masses would find appealing. They could depict R. Huna as a public figure, as a great diplomat and politician, as a skilled orator. They could move him to a new bier that would easily find its way outside.

R. Chisda taught them that we refuse to distort a rabbinic portrait in order to achieve popular recognition. Either the populace will learn to appreciate R. Huna as he truly was, or he cannot be taken out to them at all. The only remaining option is to break down the door and expand the opening. Expand the emotional range and intellectual depths of the listeners! Fight against the darkness of ignorance and falsehood! Show them the personality of a truly great man!

The last few sentences, paraphrased from Rav Soloveitchik, impact both the narrow issue of portraying great individuals, and the broader issue of education in general. Regarding the narrow issue, contemporary eulogies and biographies tend to reduce all *gedolim* to one fixed form, with no sense of the color and vibrancy of each individual personality. No one is willing to share an authentic portrait of greatness with the masses.

Regarding the broader issue, every educator faces the temptation of appealing to his or her students through a cheap appeal to emotion (such as a gratuitous mention of the Holocaust), or of presenting something differently than it really is. R. Chisda reminds us that teachers must aim to expand the capabilities of their students, rather than compress the subject matter that they are attempting to convey.