YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**TALMUDIC AGGADA**

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The htm version of this shiur is available at:

<http://vbm-torah.org/archive/aggada72/22aggada.htm>

**Shiur #22: Is there Suffering Without Sin?**

R. Ami said: “There is no death without sin, and no suffering without iniquity. There is no death without sin as it says: ‘The sinning soul, it shall die. The son shall not bear the sin of the father; neither shall the father bear the sin of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him’ (*Yechezkel* 18:20). There is no suffering without sin as it says: ‘Then will I visit their transgression with the rod and their iniquity with stripes’ (*Tehillim* 89:33).”

An objection is raised: The ministering angels said before the Holy One, blessed be He, ‘Why did you decree death for Adam Ha-rishon (Adam, the first man)?’ He said to them: ‘I gave him an easy commandment and he violated it.’ They said to Him: ‘But Moshe and Aharon fulfilled the entire Torah and still perished.’ He said to them: ‘There is one event to the righteous and to the wicked, to the good, etc.’ (*Kohelet* 9:2). He (R. Ami) holds according to the following Tanna (scholar during the time of the Mishna). For it was taught: R. Shimon b. Eleazar said: “Moshe and Aharon also died due to their sin, for it is said, ‘Because you did not believe in me’ (*Bemidbar* 20:12).” It follows that had you believed in Me, your time had not yet come to depart from the world.

An objection is raised: Four died due to the serpent's counsel: Binyamin the son of Yaakov, Amram the father of Moshe, Yishai the father of David, and Caleb the son of David. All are known from tradition except Yishai the father of David [whose death due to serpent’s counsel] is derived from an explicit verse. For it is written, ‘And Avshalom set Amasa over the host instead of Yoav. Amasa was the son of a man whose name was Yitra the Israelite that came upon Avigail, the daughter of Nahash, sister to Zeruiah, Yoav's mother’ (*Shmuel II* 17:25). Was she the daughter of Nahash? Surely, she was the daughter of Yishai, for it is written: ‘and their sisters were Zeruiah and Avigail’ (*Divrei Ha-yamim I* 2:16). Rather, it must mean the daughter of one who died due to a serpent’s counsel. Who is the author of this source? Shall we say, the Tanna [who taught] about the ministering angels? But there were Moshe and Aharon as well! Rather, it must surely be R. Shimon b. Eleazar, which proves that there is death without sin, and suffering without iniquity. Thus the refutation of R. Ami is a refutation. (*Shabbat* 55a-b)

Two verses from *Kohelet* express our tension regarding this topic. “There is one event to the righteous and the wicked” conveys that death comes to all, irrespective of their behavior. On the other hand, “There is no person on the earth who does good and does not sin” (*Kohelet* 7:20) implies that all humans violate the Divine command and deserve punishment. R. Ami thinks that all suffering and mortality stem from sin. Ultimately, Tanaitic sources refute R. Ami and indicate that death need not be attributed to sin, since four individuals perished without transgressions.

Some authorities reject the notion that God brings suffering on those without sin, even though multiple Talmudic sources support the idea. For example, the simplest reading of the *gemara* in *Berakhot* (5a) about “afflictions of love” suggests that some suffering cannot be traced back to transgressions. Rambam depicts the idea of “afflictions of love” as a minority position which he discards (*Moreh Nevukhim* 3:17). In fact, *Moreh Nevukhim* 3:17 and 3:24 approvingly cite R. Ami’s position despite our *gemara*’s apparent refutation of his position. Meiri, who often follows Rambam’s views, also insists that suffering stems from iniquity. He deals with the *gemara*’s conclusion by emphasizing greater fluidity and leeway regarding aggadic source material. Despite the conclusion of *Shabbat* 55b, Meiri affirms the philosophical position that sin causes suffering.

Meiri neutralizes the implications of the verse from the ninth chapter of *Kohelet* by arguing that it reflects our perspective rather the reality. In other words, we perceive death as arbitrarily striking the righteous together with the wicked. In truth, everyone sins and deserves the finality of their existence.

Ramban suggests a different way of addressing the apparent conclusion in our *gemara* (see page 274 of *Kol Kitvei Ha-Ramban* II ed. Chavel). Although the Gemara says that both aspects of R. Ami’s position have been refuted, the cited source of disproof only discusses death, not suffering. Perhaps the *gemara* establishes that all death comes from iniquity, but leaves open the question of the source of suffering. Philosophically, this works well because it is not obvious that death presents the same theological challenge to Divine justice as suffering. Perhaps mortality is simply part of the human condition, whereas suffering always relates back to sin.

The eminence of Rambam and Ramban are beyond question; nonetheless, the *gemara* in Shabbat clearly implies that some suffering bears no causal relationship with sin. *Berakhot* 5a and other Talmudic sources support this idea. Beyond the source material, human experience also provides validation for this idea. When we witness very fine human beings undergoing extreme suffering, it seems preferable to admit that not all suffering is caused by sin than to blame the victims and add insult to injury by assuming a sinful cause for their torments.

Tosafot raise the question that if according to *Kohelet* 7:20, all mankind sins, why not trace all death and afflictions back to a sinful cause? They answer that *Kohelet* speaks in generalities about most people, but exceptions exist. For example, four individuals perished only due to the counsel of the snake. Maharsha offers a different answer. Even if we posit that everyone sins, it does not follow that those sins justify death or the depth of suffering. We can acknowledge that each person sometimes religiously fails and still argue that some suffering cannot be justified as a punishment for sin.

Maharsha uses the same strategy to explain the anonymous Tanna who says that Moshe and Aharon did not die due to sin. Seeing as how *Bemidbar* 20 makes it abundantly clear that these two Jewish luminaries sinned in Kadesh, what justifies that Tanaitic position? Maharsha writes that *Bemidbar* 20 connects Moshe and Aharon’s inability to enter the Land of Israel to their misdeed; it does not say their sin brought about their death. However we understand the transgression of Mei Meriva, it may not justify the demise of Moshe and Aharon.

The listing of individuals who died due to the snake is quite striking. We normally do not think of Binyamin, Amram, Yishai, and Caleb as the four greatest Jews in history. Did these four individuals never sin? Were they actually religiously superior to Avraham Avinu and Moshe Rabbenu? Maharsha explains that these four individuals did not sin, yet they were not as significant as Moshe and Aharon. To develop this idea, I would note that none of the four held leadership positions. The only way to eliminate mistakes is to avoid challenges. Anyone who confronts the pressures and difficulties of leadership or parallel hardships invariably stumbles at some point. Thus, Moshe and Aharon were far greater than Yishai and Caleb, even if the former sinned and the latter did not. The deepest religious striving takes on challenges and attempts to positively impact the community, even though that approach guarantees occasional failure.

I would like to end with a question that has perplexed me for years. The four individuals are all closely reacted to more famous fathers and sons. The list includes Moshe and David's fathers, as well as Yaakov and David's sons. Is there some logical connection between these kinds of relationships and the ability to avoid sin? I have no satisfactory answer and would be happy to hear from the readers.