YESHIVAT HAR EZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Ein Yaakov - The World of Talmudic Aggada**

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**Lecture #25: Daf 7a**

**Divine Davening**

The beginning of *Daf* 7a marks the start of a new section of our chapter. Formally, this section is defined by a series of statements presented by R. Yochanan in the name of R. Yosi. Each statement is followed by further rabbinic discussion. Thematically, most of this section focuses on God, particularly on His inner life. Like the earlier discussions of God that we have seen in this chapter, these are quite challenging passages from a theological perspective. This passage also picks up on numerous other themes that we have seen previously in this chapter.

The first statement presents the remarkable notion that God Himself prays:

R. Yochanan says in the name of R. Yosi:

How do we know that the Holy One, blessed be He, says prayers?

Because it says:

‘Even them will I bring to My holy mountain

and make them joyful in My house of prayer’ (*Yishayahu* 56:7).

It is not said, 'their prayer', but 'My prayer';

hence [you learn] that the Holy One, blessed be He, says prayers.

R. Yochanan derives the concept of God praying from a careful reading of the famous verse from *Yishayahu* which prophecies that all will be welcome to serve God in the Temple. In this verse, God is quoted as referring to the Temple as “*beit tefilati.”* This is generally translated as “*My* house of prayer.” However, it could also be translated as “house of *My* prayer.” This translation would suggest that God, not Israel, prays in the Temple.

The notion that God prays is consistent with the rabbinic tendency to imagine God as engaged in a life of Torah and *mitzvot*. We have previously seen the Gemara describe God as wearing *tefillin*. Elsewhere, God is described as studying Torah (see, for example, *Avoda Zara* 3b). It makes sense that God should pray as well. This means not only that God acts like a devout Jew, but that devout Jews act like God. All *mitzvot* are a form of imitating God. This is in sharp contrast to the Rambam, who sees the imitation of God as being accomplished through the development of ethical traits and behavior.

God praying is more problematic than other pious acts attributed to God. To whom does God pray? What does he pray for? As R. Soloveitchik teaches, prayer emerges from the individual’s recognition of his own limitations and dependence on others. To pray is to be human, to be mortal. How then can God pray? These issues are engaged in the next lines of the Gemara:

What does He pray?

R. Zutra b. Tobi said in the name of Rav:

'May it be My will

that My mercy may suppress My anger,

and that My mercy may prevail over My [other] attributes,

so that I may deal with My children in the attribute of mercy and,

on their behalf, stop short of the limit of strict justice.’

God seems to pray to Himself. It is as if God has a split personality. On the one hand, God is all-powerful and controls the outcomes of all events. On the other hand, God intensely identifies with His people to such an extent that He can do no more than pray for their well-being. This recalls the God who suffers with His people, whose cries were heard by R. Yosi in the ruins of Jerusalem (see *Daf* 3a). Furthermore, God is divided between His attributes of mercy and justice, which are in constant conflict. Like humans, there is an inner struggle within God between various aspects of His personality. God feels helpless to impact the outcome of this struggle. So, paradoxically, He prays to his “other self,” the God who is all-powerful and can ensure a positive outcome.

This is assuredly a rather complex and confusing conception of God, which does not fit well into rational philosophical categories. Such depictions do, however, capture the paradoxical richness of Divine encounter in a way that abstract conceptualizations do not.

The Gemara now presents an even more radical account of God’s relationship to prayer.

It was taught:

R. Yishmael b. Elisha said:

I once entered into the innermost part [of the Sanctuary] to offer incense

and saw Akatriel Yah, the Lord of Hosts,

seated upon a high and exalted throne.

He said to me:

Yishmael, My son, bless Me!

I replied:

‘May it be Thy will that Thy mercy may suppress Thy anger

and Thy mercy may prevail over Thy other attributes,

so that Thou mayest deal with Thy children

according to the attribute of mercy

and mayest, on their behalf, stop short of the limit of strict justice!’

And He nodded to me with His head.

This text reflects the mystical world of the *Heikhalot* literature, the visionary mystical texts that reflect the esoteric teachings and practices of the Talmudic period. The voice in passages like this is quite different from the conventional aggadic voice found in the Talmud. Before dealing with the details of this narrative, we must address a historical issue.

As many scholars have noted, R. Yishmael ben Elisha is the Tanna (Rabbi of the Mishna) commonly known simply as R. Yishmael, who frequently debated R. Akiva. Though descended from the high priests, he lived after the destruction of the Temple and never served as high priest himself. He is not to be confused with R. Yishmael, the high priest, who lived several generations earlier. How then could R. Yishmael ben Elisha have entered the Holy of Holies to offer incense? This problem has led some historians to argue that this account is simply historically inaccurate and that it was transmitted by individuals who lacked a basic knowledge of rabbinic chronology. Benovitz, however, suggests that this story does not refer to an actual visit to the Temple, but to a mystical vision, akin to that of Yishayahu’s, in which R. Yishmael saw himself encountering God in the Holy of Holies. This would be consistent with the sort of visionary experiences reported in the *Heikhalot* literature.

Turning to the story itself, it is quite different from other descriptions of God that we have encountered. First and foremost, God speaks directly to R. Yishmael. I am not aware of any other depiction of God speaking with one of the rabbis in rabbinic literature. Communications from Heaven are either mediated by Eliyahu the prophet or other intermediates, or come through an impersonal “*bat kol*,” an “echo” from Heaven. In general, the rabbis believe that in the post-biblical era, there are definite limits on the level of contact between a human and God. Our story suggests that even in the times of the Mishna, it was still possible for holy individuals to have full-scale encounters with God, similar to those of the prophet Yishayahu himself.

This story also makes an important twist on the tradition of Divine prayer cited previously. Now, not only does God require prayer, but He needs others to pray on His behalf. The great scholar of Jewish mysticism, Moshe Idel, argues that this passage is evidence that some rabbis believed in “theurgy.” That is, the idea that human actions, most often the performance of *mitzvot,* can have direct impact on God’s nature. As Idel writes about our passage,

This type of theurgy is also found in a famous passage in *Berakhot*… A human activity—blessing—is here understood not only as an expression of a wish but as an actual contribution toward the achievement of this wish: blessing is able to cause the overflowing of mercy, just as the performance of the commandments augments the divine power. (*Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, Yale University Press, 1988).

This passage thus goes several steps further than conventional rabbinic ideas about God and His similarity to humans. God seems to need Israel, just as Israel needs God.

Not surprisingly, these ideas did not sit well with some of the more mainstream rabbis. They sought to deflect attention away from this aspect of the story. Immediately following this story, the Gemara comments:

Here we learn [incidentally]

that the blessing of an ordinary man

must not be considered lightly in your eyes.

The Gemara does not seem to see inherent significance in this story. It therefore seeks out a practical moral lesson to be learned from the story. Possibly the Gemara could not accept the notion that God actually needs human prayers. Hence it assumes that God asks R. Yishmael to pray for Him, not for His benefit, but for our own, in order to teach us a lesson. If God values the blessing of a mortal, how much more so should we. Even if the person offering the blessing may seem lowly to us, we should still welcome his good wishes.

The Gemara’s dominant ethical-halakhic voice thus seeks to domesticate its more radical mystical voice and make it part of a pragmatic conversation about human relationships. We see here a classic example of how the Gemara engages and challenges dissenting voices without actually suppressing them.

**Anger Management**

The previous section makes reference to God getting angry. The phenomenon of Divine anger is well attested to in the Bible. However, it is a particularly troubling theological notion. It is one thing to say God is torn between mercy and justice, two essentially positive attributes, or to describe God as being subject to emotions such as sadness or joy. It is quite another thing to attribute anger to Him, a state that the rabbis frequently condemn in human beings.

The next statement of R. Yochanan in the name of R. Yosi begins a discussion about this difficult notion:

R. Yochanan further said in the name of R. Yosi:

How do you know that we must

not try to placate a man in the time of his anger?

For it is written:

‘My face will go and I will lighten your burden’ (*Shemot* 33:14).

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses:

Wait till My countenance of wrath shall have passed away

and then I shall give thee rest.

The story of the Golden Calf, in which God threatens to destroy the entire people of Israel in His wrath, is one of the central stories that calls for a discussion of God’s anger. R. Yochanan focuses on a verse that refers to the ebbing of God’s anger. According to the *peshat* (the straight-forward meaning of the verse), this verse refers to God’s commitment to Moshe to go forth before the children of Israel as they begin their journey to the Land of Israel. However R. Yochanan understands the phrase *panai yeleikhu*, “My face will go” in a metaphorical manner. He would translate the verse as something like, “My mood will change and I will forgive your sins” (see Benovitz). This verse thus describes God’s anger as something that must be waited out. Though God may get angry at the Jewish people, ultimately He will calm down and forgive them. This statement takes the edge off the notion of Divine anger. God may get angry when Israel sins, but only temporarily.

The first lines of this passage, “How do you know that we must not try to placate a man in the time of his anger?” appear only in printed editions of the Talmud. In the manuscripts of the Talmud, R. Yochanan simply reports his reading of the verse without this introduction. R. Refael Natan Rabinowitz, in his monumental work, *Dikduke Soferim*, argues that this line was added by copyists, who quoted it from the next page of the Gemara.

Despite the late provenance of this line, it seems to me that it fits in well here. In the last section, the Gemara derived a moral lesson from God’s request for a blessing. Now, the Gemara presents a lesson in human relations on the basis of God’s behavior. In both cases, theological teachings are closely linked to moral and interpersonal teachings. God’s humanlike traits serve first and foremost to teach us about our own humanity.

The Gemara continues its investigation of God’s anger:

But is there anger then associated

with the Holy One, blessed be He?

Yes.

For it has been taught:

‘A God that hath indignation every day’ (*Tehillim* 7:12).

And how long does this indignation last?

One moment.

And how long is one moment?

One fifty-eight thousand eight hundred and eighty-eighth part of an hour.

The Gemara’s question seems to confirm my contention that it is inappropriate for God to get angry. The Gemara challenges the notion of God getting angry, and demands a source from the Bible to prove it. As Benovitz points out, the type of Divine anger to which the Gemara refers undergoes a shift at this point in the passage. Previously, the Gemara referred to God getting angry in response to Israel’s misdeeds. This is an essentially human type of anger. Humans generally get angry in response to some provocation. This type of anger also has a moral component. God does not get angry for no reason; He does so only when there is legitimate justification.

Now the Gemara introduces the notion that God gets angry every day, at the exact same time, regardless of what is happening on Earth. This reflects a very different conception of God. God hardly resembles us humans. Rather, He seems to function like a regular natural phenomenon, or a piece of machinery, on the basis of which one can set one’s watch. Previously we saw such an idea in the depiction of God as roaring in the Heavens at the exact same times every night. This is a very different notion of God than the biblical and philosophical conception to which most of us are accustomed. Yet, for the rabbis it seems that God’s regularity was an important part of His identity.

The Gemara here uses this notion to limit the troubling idea of God getting angry. God cannot get angry at any time. Most of the time, He is merciful. God only gets angry at one set time of the day. Furthermore, God’s timeslot for anger is infinitesimally short. (Assuming a sixty minute hour, it comes out to .006 of a second!) Though God may get angry in theory, in practice His anger is not something to worry about.

The belief that God works on a regular schedule is most frequently associated with a magical worldview. As we saw in our discussion of demons, the Talmud, in some ways, embraces magical approaches to the world. However, the rabbis were clearly ambivalent about magic. The discussion quickly leads to the topic of that most accomplished and evil of all magicians, Bilam.

And no creature has ever been able to fix precisely this moment

except the wicked Bilam,

of whom it is written:

‘He knoweth the knowledge of the Most High’ (*Bamidbar* 24:16).

Now, he did not even know the mind of his animal;

how then could he know the mind of the Most High?

The meaning is, therefore, only that

he knew how to fix precisely this moment

in which the Holy One, blessed be He, is angry.

And this is just what the prophet said to Israel:

‘O my people,

remember now what Balak king of Moab devised,

and what Bilam the son of Beor answered him …

that ye may know the righteous acts of the Lord’ (*Mikha* 6:5).

What means

'That ye may know the righteous acts of the Lord'?

R. Eleazar says:

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel:

See now, how many righteous acts I performed for you

in not being angry in the days of the wicked Bilam?

For had I been angry,

not one remnant would have been left

of the ‘enemies of Israel.’[[1]](#footnote-1)

And this too is the meaning of what Bilam said to Balak:

‘How shall I curse, whom God hath not cursed?

And how shall I execrate, whom the Lord hath not execrated?’

(*Bamidbar* 23:8).

This teaches us that He was not angry all these days.

If a person knew the exact time at which God gets angry, he could use this information to his own advantage to manipulate God. Such a person could use this opportunity to pray for evil things to befall his enemies. Since he succeeded in catching God in a bad mood, he could guarantee that God will unleash His wrath on his enemies. The Gemara seems to accept that in principle it would be possible to control God through such esoteric knowledge. However, it assures us that such magical practices are impossible. It is impossible for a person to determine the exact time at which God gets angry. The only person who has ever possessed such knowledge is Bilam. He is long gone.

Thus far we have described Bilam as a magician. However, the Torah actually portrays Bilam as both a magician and a true prophet of God. Sometimes the rabbis embrace this notion of Bilam as a prophet, such as when the Midrash declares that Bilam was as great a prophet as Moshe (*Sifrei Devarim* 357). Here, however, the Gemara rejects the possibility that Bilam was a prophet. When the Torah says Bilam had “knowledge of the Most High,” the rabbis reject the possibility that this refers to true knowledge of God, of the sort a prophet might have. Rather, the Gemara takes this to refer to a more technical sort of knowledge, the exact time of God’s anger.

The Gemara goes on to further eviscerate the notion that God can be manipulated through knowledge of His immutable habits. It seems that God is in full control of his anger. When Bilam tried to exploit his knowledge of God’s anger to destroy Israel, God simply refused to cooperate. The more conventional image of God, as a Being who is in full control of His feelings and actions, is thus restored.

The Gemara now returns to the question of how long God’s anger lasts:

And how long does His anger last?

One moment.

And how long is one moment?

R. Abin (some say R. Abina) says:

As long as it takes to say *rega* (“moment”).

And how do you know that He is angry one moment?

For it is said:

‘For His anger is but for a moment,

His favor is for a lifetime’ (*Tehillim* 30:6).

Or if you prefer, you may infer it from the following verse:

‘Hide thyself for a little moment

until the indignation be overpast’ (*Yishayahu* 26:20).

This passage introduces the biblical verses that underlie the entire discussion thus far. These verses emphasize that God’s wrath is fleeting compared to His mercy. Most importantly, they use the term *rega,* “moment,” to refer to God’s anger.

To be continued.

1. This is a euphemism for “the people of Israel.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)