YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**TALMUDIC AGGADA**

**By Rav Yitzchak Blau**

The htm version of this shiur is available at:

<http://vbm-torah.org/archive/aggada72/02aggada.htm>

**Shiur #02: Two Spirits in a Graveyard and the Perils of Poverty**

The sons of R. Chiyya went out to the village and forgot their learning. They were struggling to remember it. One said to another: “Does father [who was deceased] know of our difficulty?” He said to him: “How would he know? Does it not say ‘His sons receive honor and he does not know’ (*Iyyov* 14:21)?” The other answered: “And does he not know? Does it not say ‘But his flesh grieves him and his soul mourns for him’ (*Iyyov* 14:22)?” And R. Yitzchak said: “The worm hurts the dead like a needle in live flesh.” They said: “They know their own pain, but not those of others.”

And do they not? Did we not learn the following? There was a story of a pious man who gave a coin to a pauper during years of famine. His wife became angry with him, and he went to sleep in the cemetery. He heard two spirits talking to each other. One said to the other: “Let us go travel in the world and hear from behind the curtain what punishment is coming to the world.” She said to her: “I cannot because I am buried in a mat of reeds. You go and tell me what you hear.” She went out and came back. Her friend said: “What did you hear behind the curtain?” She said to her: “I heard that anyone who plants at the time of the first rainfall will have their crops struck by hail.” He [the pious fellow] went and planted during the second rainfall. The entire world’s crops were stricken but not those of this fellow.

The next year, he went to sleep in the cemetery. He heard two spirits talking to each other. One said to the other: “Let us go travel in the world and hear from behind the curtain what punishment is coming to the world.” She said to her: “I cannot because I am buried in a mat of reeds. You go and tell me what you hear.” She went out and came back. Her friend said: “What did you hear behind the curtain?” She said to her: “I heard that anyone who plants at the time of the second rainfall will have their crops struck by blight.” He [the pious fellow] went and planted at time of the first rainfall. The entire world’s crops were struck by blight but not those of this fellow.

His wife asked him: “How come last year, everyone’s crops were stricken except yours, and now everyone’s crops were blighted except yours?” He told her the whole story. They said: “It was not many days before a quarrel developed between the pious fellow’s wife and the mother of that [deceased] girl. She said to her: ‘Come and I will show you your daughter buried in a mat of reeds.’”

The next year, he went to sleep in the cemetery. He heard those spirits talking to each other. One said to the other: “Let us go travel in the world and hear from behind the curtain what punishment is coming to the world.” She said to her: “Leave me be. The words passed between us are heard among the living.”

We see that they [the deceased] know [what happens in this world]. Perhaps another person passed away and went and told them. (*Berakhot* 18b)

I am often asked whether or not I think fantastical aggadic stories truly happened. To a great degree, this inquiry is a distraction from the more important question of what the story teaches us. *Chazal* did not write *aggadot* to teach history; presumably, they only incorporated stores of ethical and religious import. If so, whether a given story actually happened or is an allegory, the essential issue remains what our sages wanted to teach us by including it.

R. Yaakov ibn Chabib outlines many objections to a literal interpretation of this story. Rashi (*Shabbat* 127b) says that an anonymous “*chassid*” in Talmudic tales refers to either R. Yehuda ben Bava or R. Yehuda bar Ilai. Could these pious scholars have gotten into such a serious fight with their wives on Rosh Hashana night that they ended up sleeping in a cemetery? Would a pious person return to the cemetery each year and possibly violate the prohibition of necromancy, *doresh el he-metim*? Furthermore, souls that depart from the body should be in the Garden of Eden, rather than in the cemetery where their bodies were buried. At the conclusion of an extended analysis, R. Chabib contends that this story reflects a vision that the pious fellow had in a dream Rosh Hashana night. The dream provided helpful economic guidance.

R. Yosef Chayyim (*Ben Yehoyada*) agrees that this episode took place in a dream. People often dream about something they thought about that day, and this pious fellow was no exception. On a day in which economic pressures led to marital conflict, this fellow found himself dreaming about successful crops. Yet this was no mere fantasy; the dream included heavenly information that proved prophetic.

We could adopt a more literal interpretation, since pious people may also experience marital discord. Perhaps the pious fellow took the unusual step of sleeping in a cemetery on Rosh Hashana, because the graveyard would lead to thoughts of human mortality, which would encourage repentance. R. Yaakov Reisher offers an insightful alternative in his *Iyyun Yaakov*. He suggests that this pious person faced a difficult dilemma. He could not stay home and risk a huge fight with his wife on Rosh Hashana, nor could he go to another’s lodgings because of the rumors it would start. The entire neighborhood would enjoy discussing a couple’s marital tension expressed in a High Holy Day squabble. His only option was to find a fully discreet place to sleep, such as a cemetery. Given this context, we could appreciate why a pious fellow might end up in a graveyard on Rosh Hashana night.

Interaction between those with means and those without runs through the story. The wife becomes angry when the pious fellow gives money to the poor. One of the spirits is embarrassed t o leave the graveyard due to the poverty of her burial garments. The couple’s monetary fortunes turn due to the insider information overheard in the cemetery. Finally, the wife insults the deceased girl’s mother by referring to the poverty of her daughter’s burial.

The pious person certainly does not idealize poverty, returning annually to the graveyard in the hopes of hearing some more helpful economic information. Still, despite his personal quest for financial security, he remains sensitive to the needs of others, giving charity even before he becomes more prosperous. His wife, on the other hand, cannot see beyond her own needs. She becomes so infuriated at her husband’s largesse that he ultimately sleeps outside of the house on a festival evening. After she achieves a modicum of wealth, she looks down upon the poor and utilizes economic disparity to insult a woman she argues with. Unfortunately, disadvantaged people who escape their difficult situation sometimes quickly forget their previous plight and join the haves of society in looking down upon their old peers.

This understanding of the story, as exploring the theme of poverty, helps us respond to a problem raised by R. Yechezkel Landau. He wonders why a disembodied spirit should care what she was buried in. Surely, a spirit can travel the world irrespective of the nature of her burial clothes. R. Landau adds that even if we interpret the story allegorically, the allegory must still make sense rationally. Even in an allegory, why should a spirit care abut physical garments? I suggest that the Gemara wanted to highlight the feelings caused by economic disadvantage. Disembodied spirits may not care about clothing, but flesh and blood people do, and this story emphasizes tensions generated by monetary struggles.

An important methodological point emerges from our analysis. A story cited in a Talmudic passage can have its own meaning and thematic context independent of the broader context of the passage. The Gemara brings this story in order to prove that the departed are aware of what happens in our world. However, that is certainly not the original point of this episode. If our analysis is correct, issues of poverty, wealth, and social interactions feature far more prominently.