YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Talmudic Aggadot**

**Rav Yonatan Feintuch**

**Shiur #03: The *Aggada* about R. Bana’a (Part I)**

In the previous two *shiurim* we dealt with two *aggadot* in tractate *Bava Batra* (the *aggada* concerning Herod and the *aggada* concerning R. Yannai). In the coming weeks we will, God-willing, examine additional stories found in *Bava Batra*. During the first part of this series of *shiurim*, we will cover almost all of the stories falling into the category of "deeds of the Sages" recorded in this tractate. This week we will study a story relating to the Amora R. Bana'a,[[1]](#footnote-1) which appears in a collection of *aggadot* found in the third chapter of the tractate (57b-58b). In our usual manner, after relating to the story itself, we will relate (in the next *shiur*) to the collection as a whole and to the broader context of the collection within the passage and the tractate.

**I. The Story**

1. R. Bana'a used to mark out caves [where there were dead bodies].

2. When he came to the cave of Avraham, he found Eliezer, the servant of Avraham, standing at the entrance.

3. He said to him: "What is Avraham doing?"

4. He replied: "He is sleeping in the arms of Sara, and she is looking fondly at his head."

5. He said: "Go and tell him that Bana'a is standing at the entrance."

6. Avraham said to him: "Let him enter; it is well known that there is no passion in this world."

7. So he went in, surveyed the cave, and came out again.

8. When he came to the cave of Adam,

9. a voice came forth from heaven saying: "You have beholden the likeness of My likeness. My likeness itself you may not behold."

10. "But I want to mark out the cave."

11. "The measurement of the inner one is the same as that of the outer one."

12. Those who hold that there was one chamber above another [say that the answer was]: "The measurement of the lower one is the same as that of the upper one."

13. R. Bana'a said: "I discerned his [Adam's] two heels, and they were like two orbs of the sun."

14. Compared to Sara, [any other person] is like a monkey to a human being.

15. Compared to Chava, Sara was like a monkey to a human being.

16. Compared to Adam, Chava was like a monkey to a human being.

17. Compared to the *Shekhina*, Adam was like a monkey to a human being.

18. The beauty of R. Kahana was a reflection of [the beauty of Rav.

19. The beauty of Rav was a reflection of] the beauty of R. Abbahu.

20. The beauty of R. Abbahu was a reflection of the beauty of our father Yaakov.

21. The beauty of Yaakov was a reflection of the beauty of Adam.

**II. Literary Analysis**

The *aggada* before us opens with the sentence: "R. Bana'a used to mark out caves [where there were dead bodies]" (line 1). This sentence serves as a heading for the two parts of the story, both of which open with the words: "when he came to the cave of." Two "appendices" (lines 14-21) follow the two parts of the story. The first appendix compares the beauty of Sara, Chava, Adam and the *Shekhina*,. The second appendix compares the beauty of various Amoraim, and compares their beauty to the beauty of Yaakov and Adam; the beauty diminishes gradually with the generations.

In the first part of the story concerning R. Bana'a (lines 2-7), R. Bana'a visits the caves of Avraham and Sara. R. Bana'a, for reasons of modesty, does not want to barge into Avraham and Sara’s intimate space, and therefore he stops at the entrance to the cave. The presence of Eliezer standing guard at the entrance adds to the sense that an intimate situation is taking place inside, and that there is no room for strangers. R. Bana'a receives the surprising answer that since there is no passion in this world (i.e., the World-to-Come, the world of the dead), there is no reason not to enter.

The intimate situation inside the cave (line 4: "He is sleeping in the arms of Sara, and she is looking fondly at his head") is described in exceedingly clean terms. The account specifically chooses the term for "looking" or "observing" (me'ayna leh).[[2]](#footnote-2) The significance of this point will become apparent later. The answer that R. Bana'a receives is also interesting: "There is no passion in this world." This statement can be understood in two ways. It could mean that since there is no passion in the World-to-Come, even an intimate act between husband and wife is free of sexual desire. While an action can express great love, it is free of passion, and as such, there is no prohibition for an outsider to observe. Accordingly, the "looking" mentioned here is not a euphemism, but rather the physical expression of great love in a world that is void of sexual passion. Alternatively, the statement "there is no passion in this world" could relate not to Avraham and Sara, but rather to R. Bana'a, Because he is now in territory where sexual passion is neutralized, R’ Bana’a is no longer governed by the laws of modesty and refraining from observing intimacy or even "lewdness" (*devar erva*). Either way, the message that arises from the passage in general, and from this sentence in particular, is that in a world in which passion is neutralized, the limits imposed by modesty are not necessary. The account is reminiscent of Adam and Chava’s experiencein the Garden of Eden before their sin: "And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and they felt no shame” (*Bereishit* 2:25).

However, the continuation of the story indicates that R. Bana'a did not fully internalize Avraham’s instructions. The brief formulation of the following sentence, with its many verbs (line 7: "So he went in, surveyed [*iyyen*]the cave, and came out again"; or as it reads in most manuscripts: "So he went in, marked (*tziyen*)the cave, and came out again"), suggests that R. Bana'a did not overcome his instinctive modesty. Therefore, he went in, executed his mission, and went out.

In the second part of the story, R. Bana'a comes to the cave of Adam. Here he is commanded not to enter, for looking at the likeness of Adam is tantamount to looking at the likeness of the *Shekhina*.[[3]](#footnote-3) Nevertheless, R. Bana'a reports in the concluding sentence that he beheld Adam's two heels.[[4]](#footnote-4)

What is the idea of beholding Adam's heels? The Heavenly Voice calls Adam "My likeness" (as opposed to Avraham and Sara, who are only "the likeness of My likeness"). Beholding the "likeness" is tantamount to "beholding the *Shekhina*," i.e., an experience that is similar to what can be achieved through "beholding the *Shekhina*" at the level possible to man. Beholding Adam's heels is also reminiscent of a biblical description of "beholding the *Shekhina*" (*Shemot* 24:9-13), in which Moshe, Aharon, Nadav and Avihu see the area underneath God’s feet:[[5]](#footnote-5)

Then Moshe went up, and Aharon, Nadav and Avihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel: and they saw the God of Israel: and there was **under His feet** a kind of paved work of sapphire stone, and as it were the very heaven for clearness. And upon the nobles of the children of Israel he laid not his hand; and they beheld God, and did eat and drink.

The association of Adam’s heel and the globe of the sun which R. Bana’a identifies appears already in *Midrash Vayikra Rabba* 20, 2:

R. Levi said in the name of R. Shimon b. Menasya: The apple of Adam's heel obscured the globe of the sun; and all the more so the features of his face.

 And in greater detail in *Pesikta de-R. Kahana* (4, 4, ed. Mandelbaum, p. 66):[[6]](#footnote-6)

"A man's wisdom makes his face shine" (*Kohelet* 8:1). R. Levi said in the name of R. Shimon ben Menasya: The apple of Adam's heel obscured the globe of the sun… So Adam was created to serve the Holy One, blessed be He, and the sun was created to serve man. It is obvious that the apple of Adam's heel would obscure the globe of the sun. And if the apple of Adam's heel would obscure the globe of the sun, all the more so the features of his face.

This Midrash gives expression to the idea of Adam's beauty. The Midrash ends with the words: "All the more so the features of his face." This statement may account, at least in part, for the prohibition to behold "My likeness itself" – the danger of "blinding," i.e., the danger of an experience or apprehension that man's body or mind cannot withstand or contain, just as he cannot glance at the sun (There is, here, a hidden assumption that what obscures the sun shines even more, and thus is blinding). The same goes for "beholding" the *Shekhina* (not "its back" nor "under its feet"): "For no man shall see Me, and live" (*Shemot* 33:20). If Adam's face, which was created in the likeness of God, cannot be seen, all the more so God himself.

**III. Connecting the Two Parts of the Story**

What is the relationship between the two parts of the story? Is there a connection between what takes place in the outer cave of Avraham and Sara, and what takes place in the inner cave of Adam?

One possibility is that the two parts are connected by their contrast. This is what emerges on the plain level from the contrast between the Heavenly Voice that forbids R. Bana'a from entering Adam's cave, and the voice of Eliezer inviting R. Bana’a to come into the cave of Avraham and Sara. As we saw above, one of the messages emerging from the first part of the story (the cave of Avraham and Sara) is that there are certain things that necessitate modesty in this world, not because they themselves are unfit for observation, but because of the 'yetzer'-inclination inherent in the beholder. The moment that this inclination is neutralized, e.g., in the world of truth, the limits of modesty are removed.[[7]](#footnote-7) This message is reinforced by the contrast to the "beholding" the *Shekhina*, or even of "My likeness," which is unconditionally problematic. A tannaitic Midrash (*Midrash Tannaim* on *Devarim* 33:26), which also uses the phrase "to feed his eyes," formulates the unconditionally problematic vision of the *Shekhina* in terms of "glory":

Our master Moshe said to him: "Tell us **what is the measure of the glory of the Most High?"** He said to them: "… **If man cannot behold the lower heaven, all the more so His glory…."** After he asked to see the face of the king, those who heard him said to him: "Go to his province and you will see him." When he reached the entrance to his province, he saw a curtain spread across the entrance to the province, with pearls and gemstones fixed in it, and he did not have a chance **to feed his eyes** upon it before he fell to his face. Those who heard him said to him: "If the curtain that is spread across the entrance to the province you could not withstand and behold, all the more so when you reach the province itself; and all the more so when you reach the entrance to the palace; and all the more so when you enter the palace…."

This Midrash builds a graded structure, similar to the stories concerning R. Bana'a, in which the cave "of My likeness" is the more inner cave. Clearly, the structures in both stories are reminiscent of the Garden of Eden, and the structure of the *Mishkan* and the Temple, structures that include inner and outer zones, that are separated by a curtain embroidered with *keruvim*.

**IV. The Story’s Appendices**

The continuation of this message is found in the two "appendices." These are two sections with symmetric structures. The two sections deal with Adam's supreme beauty, and they are appended here in connection with the description of Adam's heels, which, as stated earlier, are representative of his great beauty. The first section deals with women, whereas the second section deals with men.[[8]](#footnote-8) The overall message is the superiority of the beauty of Adam over that of both men and women, i.e., over that of all mankind, to the point that in comparison to him all are monkeys. In this way, these sections continue to develop the idea alluded to in the story, that Adam was "My likeness," whereas those who came after him were only "a likeness of My likeness."

Here one must consider the fact that this account does not only describe the deterioration in the beauty and perfection of the human species after Adam. This account also describes the gap between Adam, despite his superiority, and the *Shekhina.* The first appendix establishes that even Adam was like a monkey in comparison to the *Shekhina*, despite the similarity and despite his status of "My likeness." It seems that this section comes, among other things, to counter the impression that is likely to arise from the story, that man's appearance and that of the *Shekhina* are comparable*.*

On the other hand, another message arises from the "appendices." Even if the beauty of the later generations is not the same as the beauty of Adam, it is nevertheless worthy of note. Especially interesting in this regard is the second appendix, which speaks of the beauty of certain Sages. This section (together with the end of the story, which mentions the exceptional beauty of Adam) conveys that external beauty and appearance can have positive value. Thus the "appendices" join the previous sections and deepen the message concerning the distinction that must be made between beauty and the problem of beholding beauty that exists in certain contexts, which stems not from a negation of beauty, but from the *yetzer*, which is an immanent and necessary component of all those who behold things in this world.

One can also understand the connection between the two parts of the story as cause and effect. This follows from an exposition found in *Midrash Vayikra Rabba* (23, 13):[[9]](#footnote-9)

R. Meisha the son of the son of R. Yehoshua b. Levi said: We find that anyone who beholds lewdness and does not feed his eyes on it merits greeting the *Shekhina*. What is the reason? [The verse states:] **"He shuts his eyes from seeing evil"** (*Yeshaya* 33:15). What is written afterwards: "Your eyes shall see the king in his beauty" (ibid. v. 17).

R. Meisha's exposition views greeting the *Shekhina* as a reward for the choice not to behold lewdness. In our story, R. Bana'a chooses not to behold the intimate situation of Avraham and Sara, but only to enter in a matter-of-fact manner and go out. In the wake of R. Meisha's statement, one can explain that in reward for R. Bana’a’s meticulousness, he merits to see to see the heels of Adam in the inner cave.[[10]](#footnote-10) While it is true that R. Bana'a's visit to the cave of Adam (if only from the outside) is not precisely greeting the *Shekhina*, beholding "My likeness," may be the closest thing to greeting the *Shekhina* that an ordinary person (apart from Moshe) can experience.

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R. Meisha’s use of the phrase “fed his eyes on” bolsters his position. If we examine the occurrences of this phrase in the words of *Chazal*, we find that most instances are either in the context of "seeing" the *Shekhina*, or conversely, in the context of seeing lewdness. R. Meisha's exposition and other sources[[11]](#footnote-11)are about lewdness. Nadav and Avihu also saw "under His feet," as mentioned earlier, and about this incident it says in *Vayikra Rabba*:[[12]](#footnote-12) "This teaches that they fed their eyes on the *Shekhina.*" In the continuation of that same Midrash, there appears an idea that is reminiscent of R. Meisha's exposition:

R. Yehoshua of Sikhnin said in the name of R. Levi: Moshe did not feed his eyes on the *Shekhina* and derived benefit from the *Shekhina.* In reward for: "[afraid] to look" (*Shemot* 3:6), he merited: "And the similitude of the Lord does he behold" (*Bemidbar* 12:8). Nadav and Avihu fed their eyes on the *Shekhina* and did not derive benefit from the *Shekhina*.

The idea that R. Bana'a, who saw Adam's heels, which were similar to the globe of the sun, merits "seeing" the *Shekhina*, or something close to it, is reinforced by another Midrash in *Vayikra Rabba* (chap. 31), in which the phrase "feed his eyes" appears:

R. Avina said: This globe of the sun is one of My attendants, and when it goes out into the world no creature can **feed his eyes** on it.

An explicit connection between not beholding lewdness and beholding the *Shekhina* finds expression in a Midrash appearing in yet another source, one that is similar to R. Meisha's exposition in *Vayikra Rabba* (Treatise *Kalla* 1:17):

R. Achi the son of R. Yoshiya said: Whoever observes women will eventually come to sin, and whoever removes himself from transgression, and refrains from committing it, even if he is an [ordinary] Israelite, is fit to offer a burnt-offering on the altar like the High Priest, as it is stated: "And he sent the young men of the children of Israel, who offered burnt-offerings" (*Shemot* 24:5). And whoever withdraws himself from **transgression,** and refrains from committing it, **feeds upon the glory of the *Shekhina*** like the ministering angels, as it is stated: "And they beheld God, and did eat and drink" (ibid. v. 11).

This Midrash draws a connection between refraining from transgression in the realm of forbidden relations and "feeding from the glory of the *Shekhina*." The verse that is cited as a proof-text deals with the "nobles of the children of Israel" at Mount Sinai: "And they beheld God, and did eat and drink." As stated, they saw **"under his feet** a kind of paved work of sapphire stone," similar to R. Bana'a who saw heels. The authors of the passage in the Babylonian Talmud may have known this Midrash, which is cited in the name of R. Achi son of R. Yoshiya, and it is possible that the MIdrash lies at the passage’s foundation.

**V. Conclusion**

It turns out, then, that in the Machpela cave, R. Bana'a fulfills the two parts of R. Meisha's exposition. In the first stage, in the cave of Avraham and Sara, "He shuts his eyes from seeing evil" – he enters, but does not linger, and does not feed his eyes on the intimate situation of Avraham and Sara. Even if we are not dealing with the sexual act itself, we are dealing with something which, at least in this world, would require modesty, and that is enough to deter R. Bana'a from looking. In the second stage, he merits something that is close to greeting the *Shekhina*, at least in a limited measure, which is similar to what Moshe and "the nobles of the children of Israel" merited seeing at the foot of Mount Sinai. In the next *shiur*, we will examine the broader context of the story in the Gemara, and we will see how the context contributes to our understanding and interpretation of the story.

(Translated by David Strauss)

tags: *Shekhina*, seeing, erva/lewdness, cave, dead, Eliezer, R. Bana’a, aggada, Adam, Avraham, Moshe, beauty

summary: This article discusses the story of R. Bana’a visiting Ma’arat Hamachpela, analyzing the connection between the different parts of the story and the story’s overall messages about apprehending beauty and the Divine.

1. R. Bana'a was a first-generation Palestinian Amora. His disciple, R. Yochanan, reported many statements in his name. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I have not found another account of such conduct on the part of a married couple in the words of *Chazal*, apart from the description of the wife of R. Eliezer b. R. Shimon in *Bava Metzia* 84b:

"R. Shmuel bar Nachmani said: R. Yonatan's mother told me that she was informed by the wife of R. Elazar son of R. Shimon: I kept him lying in that upper chamber [after he had died] not less than eighteen nor more than twenty-two years. **Whenever I ascended there, I examined his hair,** and [even] if a single hair had fallen out, the blood would well forth." [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This line in the story raises theological questions about assigning a body to God. In the framework of this short study, we cannot address such questions, but it should be emphasized that we are not dealing \specifically with physical seeing. Based on the Rambam, *Guide of the Perplexed*, I, 4, we can say that the term "seeing" relates allegorcially to "rational comprehension," and the like. In general, we are dealing with questions similar to those arising from the verses in the creation story in *Bereishit* that speak of making man "in our image, after our likeness" or "in the image of God," and similarly, from verses such as "and you shall see My back" and other verses in Scripture that describe other visions beheld by the prophets. It is recommended that one study the chapters in the Rambam's *Guide* (primarily I, 1, 3, 4, and others) in which he relates to these verses and to the various terms of "seeing" in Scripture. While it seems that some of the terms in the story, e.g., those relating to Avraham and Sara, relate to actual seeing, according to the Rambam it is possible to understand that the “seeing” in our story is figurative, similar to the experience of "seeing" or "intellectually comprehending" the *Shekhina*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The story does not indicate that he was guilty of sin. Apparently, seeing the heels was inevitable for someone standing at the entrance to the cave. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It should be noted that even in reference to Moshe, the Torah states: "And you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen" (*Shemot* 33:26). The revelation that Moshe experienced was also in sort of a cave: "in a cleft of the rock." [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See also the parallel in *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* 12, 1 (ed. Mandelbaum, p. 202):

"R. Yuda b. R. Shimon opened: 'Many daughters have done virtuously, but you excel them all' (*Mishlei* 31:29). Adam was commanded six commandments… But you at Sinai were commanded six hundred and thirteen commandments… "Grace is deceitful" (ibid. v. 30). Noach's grace was deceitful, [as it is stated:] "But Noach found grace in the eyes of the Lord" (*Bereishit* 6:8). "And beauty is vain" (ibid.). Adam's beauty was vain. The apple of Adam's heel obscured the globe of the sun. And do not be surprised, as it is the way of the world… If the apple of his heel obscured the globe of the sun, all the more so the features of his face." [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. As stated, R. Bana'a was careful even there not to "feed his eyes," even though he was explicitly told that there was no problem to enter. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The idea and style of the first appendix, can be connected to a passage in *Bereishit Rabba* 23, 26:

"Abba Kohen Bardela was asked: [Why does Scripture enumerate] Adam, Shet, Enosh, and then become silent? He said to them: Up to that time [of Enosh] they were created in the likeness and image [of God]; from then onward, Centaurs were created. Four things changed in the days of Enosh: The mountains became [barren] rocks, the dead began to feel [the worms], **men's faces became ape-like,** and they became vulnerable to demons."

There is also another Midrash which appears to have used part of the appendix (*Tanchuma Lekh-lekha*, 5, 5):

"When he came to the entrance of Egypt and they stood at the Nile, our patriarch Avraham saw Sara's reflection in that river as a shining sun. From here the Sages taught: Compared with Sara, all other women are like a monkey to a human being."

The second appendix has a parallel in *Bava Metzia* 84a. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. And similarly in tractate *Derekh Eretz*, in the chapter dealing with forbidden relations, halakha 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Interesting in this context are the sources dealing with modesty that mention a woman's heel. Tractate *Kalla* 1, 8 (and parallels): "And whoever looks upon a woman's heel will beget degenerate children;” Jerusalem Talmud, *Challa* 2:1, 58c: "One who looks upon a woman's heel is as though he looked upon her womb, and one who looks upon her womb is as though he had intercourse with her." [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See, for example, *Berakhot* 20a (= *Zevachim* 118b); *Sifrei*, *Bemidbar*, sec. 139 (ed. Horowitz, p. 185), and the parallel in *Shabbat* 64b. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Vayikra Rabba* 20, 10 (= *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* 26, 9 (ed. Mandelbaum, p. 396), and parallels. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)