YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Talmudic *Aggadot***

Rav Dr. Yonatan Feintuch

Shiur #04: Is it Important to Read a Narrative in Context?

Different Views of One Story

# In our introductory *shiur*, I wrote that we would deal with Talmudic stories and how to read them in their broad context in the Gemara. In this *shiur*, I would like to pause for a moment to pose a question: Does the context of a story influence how we read it? Does the context also influence the content of the story, such as plot elements? As we shall see, it is evident that there is disagreement on this matter among those who discuss Talmudic *aggadot*.

We will cite the divergent approaches of two 20th-century researchers who analyze the *aggadot* of *Chazal*, demonstrating their diametrically opposed views on this matter in terms of one story analyzed by both.

The story we will deal with is one about R. Yossei the Galilean and his wife. This is the story as it appears in the Jerusalem Talmud (*Ketubot* 11:3, 34b):

R. Yossei the Galilean’s wife caused him a great deal of grief. R. Elazar ben Azarya came to visit him and said: “Leave her, as she does not respect you.” [R. Yossei] replied: “I cannot afford her settlement.” [R. Elazar] said: “Leave her and I will pay the settlement for you!” So he gave him the settlement and he left her.

She went and married the town sentry. Becoming blind, he lost his livelihood, so she would lead him through the town to beg on his behalf. One time, they went throughout the town, but [the citizens of the town] gave him nothing. He said to her: “Is no other neighborhood here?” She said: “There is one more neighborhood, but I have no strength to go there.” He brought her there and began to strike her.

R. Yossei the Galilean passed by and heard the sound of their quarrel in the street. He took them and put them in one of his houses. For the rest of their lives he supported them, as it says, “‘And do not hide from your own flesh’ (*Yeshayahu* 58:7) — this refers to one’s ex-wife.” Even so, her voice was audible at night, and when they heard it, they would say: “Did the grief outside her body [her former poverty and begging] not suffice, that she now has grief inside her body [the shame of being supported by her ex-husband]?”

On the surface, this story deals with the fate of R. Yossei the Galilean’s first wife, but we also encounter R. Yossei’s virtue in this story: despite the way she had treated him during their marriage, he treats her with kindness. Still, this woman is the main character of the story, as it opens and concludes with her. The message of the story seems obvious: what goes around comes around. The woman’s behavior determines her fate. She disrespects R. Yossei, her decent first husband, even mocking him (a parallel story tells us exactly how, as we shall see). Her fate, in any case, is to marry a vastly inferior man, whose economic situation is far worse, as is his behavior towards her. In the end, we learn that she is humiliated, a simple case of retribution for her behavior towards R. Yossei in the beginning of the story. Indeed, R. Yossei, for his part, goes above and beyond what we might expect: he puts her and her second husband in a house he owns and supports her, resolving her economic problems. However, this does not prevent her from receiving her punishment for her harsh behavior towards R. Yossei, as this very fact shames her. The end of the story allows, in any case, for R. Yossei to be compassionate and munificent without sparing his villainous ex-wife the retribution she deserves.

Now let us consider the context of this story in the Jerusalem Talmud. The *mishna* (*Ketubot* 11:3) deals with a widow or divorcee who wants to sell her husband’s property in order to collect her *ketuba* or her maintenance. The third *mishna* cites the view of the *Chakhamim*, who maintain that a widow may sell her former husband’s property outside of court, but a divorcee may do so only in court:

However, the *Chakhamim* say that she may sell, even four or five times; and she may sell for her maintenance even outside of court, and she writes: “I have sold for maintenance.” A divorcee, on the other hand, may sell only in court.

The commentators (e.g., R. Ovadya Bartenura) explain the difference between a widow and a divorcee based on the Talmud. The assumption concerning the widow is that her deceased husband would not want her to be shamed by coming to court to support herself, and the *Chakhamim* therefore rule that she may sell the property without appearing in court. However, when it comes to the divorcee, the assumption is that her ex-husband would not care about her embarrassment.

However, the Jerusalem Talmud cites another view concerning the divorcee:

R. Ya’akov bar Acha in the name of R. Yochanan, R. Hilla in the name of R. Elazar: Just as a man is concerned with the dignity of his widow, he is concerned with the dignity of his ex-wife, as R. Ya’akov bar Acha said in the name of R. Elazar: “And do not hide from your own flesh” — this refers to one’s ex-wife.

Immediately after the words of R. Ya’akov bar Acha, the story about R. Yossei the Galilean and his wife is cited. Now, the question arises: What is the relationship between the narrative and its context? Does reading it in context influence the story?

Professor Jonah Frankel, one of the greatest researchers of Aggada in the 20th century, deals with this question and conclusively determines that the connection between the story and its context is purely technical and associative. Since R. Ya’akov bar Acha cites the *derasha* in the name of R. Elazar, “‘And do not hide from your own flesh’ — this refers to one’s ex-wife,” the story of R. Yossei the Galilean, which also cites this *derasha*, is mentioned as well. As Frankel writes:

The Talmud cites this without any connection to the laws in the *mishna* (as the *mishna* deals with cases in which the husband is no longer around to pay the *ketuba*), simply due to the verse from *Yeshayahu*. This is an associative-technical link. The Talmudic editors of the tractate certainly asked themselves if it was worthwhile to cite this aggadic passage, and their affirmative decision, despite the artificiality of the editing, testifies to how important their aggadic passage was to them. **This is the typical phenomenon of the placement of Aggada in the Talmuds.**[[1]](#footnote-1)

Frankel expresses his view elsewhere with regard to other *aggadot*.

However, another researcher of Aggada, Prof. Ofra Meir, disputes this approach. In an article concerning aggadic narrative,[[2]](#footnote-2) she also deals with the story of R. Yossei the Galilean, and her conclusions are diametrically opposed. In her view, the connection between the tale and the context is much more than technical, as we shall see below.

As we consider the *sugya*, we see that the *Amora’im* express an essential position – that every husband is concerned with his ex-wife’s dignity, despite the generally troubled relationship between them. We may therefore assume that he would not want her to be shamed, for example by being forced to appear in court in order to take care of her finances. The narrative, in this context, is not merely associative; it buttresses the words of these *Amora’im* and their essential position.

But Ofra Meir goes beyond this. In her view, reading the story in this specific context of the *sugya* of the Jerusalem Talmud changes the focus of the narrative. When we read the story on its own, as a detached unit, the emphasis is upon the retribution for the woman due to her behavior. This is also how Yona Frankel explains the story. However, when the story is read in context, the focus is altered: we are now dealing with a man’s concern for his wife after their divorce, and the attention of the reader is drawn inexorably to this matter. R. Yossei the Galilean fulfills this expectation, above and beyond. He displays great sensitivity towards his ex-wife, despite her previous shameful behavior towards him. He even supports her financially. This becomes the most prominent aspect of the story when it is read in its context in the Jerusalem Talmud.

In order to illustrate this point, Ofra Meir leads us to consider this story as it appears in other contexts. The first context is in *Bereishit Rabba*, where the *midrash* considers the verse that describes the creation of woman, God’s statement, “I will make for him a helpmate opposite him” (*Bereishit* 2:18).

“I will make for him a helpmate opposite him” — if he succeeds, she shall be “a helpmate;” if he does not, she shall be “opposite him.” Said R. Yehoshua ben Nechemya: If he succeeds, she shall be like the wife of Chananya ben Chakhinai; if not, she shall be like the wife of R. Yossei the Galilean. R. Yossei the Galilean married his niece — his sister's daughter — who proved an exceedingly bad wife, and took a delight in abusing him in the presence of his pupils. They said to him: “Rabbi, divorce this bad woman, for she does not respect you!” But he replied: “Her settlement is beyond me; I do not have enough to leave her.”

Now it happened once that he and R. Elazar ben Azarya were sitting and studying, and when they finished, the latter asked him: “Rabbi, will you kindly permit that we go to your home together?” “Yes,” he replied.

As they entered, [R. Yossei’s wife] cast down her gaze [in anger] and was making her way out, when he looked at a cauldron standing on the stove and asked her: “Is there anything in the cauldron?” “There is pottage (*parparyan*) in it,” she answered. He went and uncovered it, and found in it some pullets (*pargeyan*). Now R. Elazar ben Azarya knew what he had heard, and as they sat together and were eating he observed: “Rabbi, did she not say it was pottage, yet we have found pullets?” “A miracle must have happened,” he replied.

When they finished he said to him: "Rabbi, abandon this woman, for she does not treat you with proper respect.” But he replied: “Her settlement is beyond me; I do not have enough to leave her.” “We [your pupils] will apportion her settlement among ourselves, so you can divorce her,” he declared. And they did so for him; they apportioned her settlement and had her divorced from him, allowing him to marry another and better wife.

As a punishment for her sins, [the first wife] became married to the town sentry. After some time, [her second husband] was visited with affliction, and she went about leading him round the whole town, begging in every district, but on coming to where R. Yossei the Galilean lived she used to turn back. But since [her husband] was well-acquainted with the town, he said to her: “Why do you not lead me to the house of R. Yossei the Galilean, as I have heard that he is charitably disposed?” “I am his ex-wife,” she confessed, “and I cannot bring myself to face him.”

On one occasion they came begging in the vicinity of R. Yossei the Galilean, when he began to maltreat her, and their cries brought a crowd and the whole town was shocked at them. Looking out, R. Yossei the Galilean saw how they were being jeered at in the streets, whereupon he took and settled them in one of his houses and supported them until the last day of their lives, as it says: “And do not hide from your own flesh.”

We may point to a number of phenomena in the story as it appears in *Bereishit Rabba*.

First of all, the context is very different from that in the Jerusalem Talmud. The *derasha* in *Bereishit Rabba* makes an extremely bold statement. It expounds the verse, “I will make for him a helpmate (*ezer*) opposite him (*kenegdo*),” which appears in the context of the creation of the first human beings. Ostensibly, these two words are contradictory. The *midrash* sees this combination as expressing two paths or two situations. Sometimes, the spousal relationship is that of helpmates, *ezer*; sometimes, the couple becomes estranged and the relationship may even become adversarial, oppositional, *kenegdo*. What does this depend on? It is logical to see this as contingent on personal action, as the phrasing, “if he succeeds, she shall be ‘a helpmate’” may be understood more literally as “if he merits (*zakha*).” A meritorious person deserves a good marriage, and so a virtuous man will find a wife who is a helpmate. If he does not meet this bar, his wife will oppose him, and his marriage will be a miserable one. However, the *midrash* seeks to say something else and uses the story to express this idea. The story shows precisely the opposite: the quality of one’s marriage may not reflect one’s virtue, as a paragon of virtue such as R. Yossei the Galilean, who treats his wife with a profound level of sensitivity, finds himself with a bad wife—the very archetype of *kenegdo*.

Indeed, as Meir points out, this idea is even more prominent in *Midrash Rabba* than in the Jerusalem Talmud. There are many slight variations between the stories, but they do not seem to be extremely significant. However, one distinction that no reader can ignore is the cauldron of pottage, which is unique to the *midrash*. Yona Frankel (elsewhere) points to the play on words in this exchange (*parparyan* versus *pargeyan*), and it appears that this wordplay makes the story stand out in the eyes of the reader.

The short scene in R. Yossei’s kitchen broadens the fissure between the spouses. R. Yossei’s wife is not content to aggrieve him; she is also stingy, not wanting to waste the tender young chickens in the pot on her husband and his honored guest. She therefore claims that it is only pottage, a mash of vegetables and grain, so they won’t be tempted to partake. R. Yossei realizes what is up, as he is familiar with his wife’s sour attitude. Nevertheless, he wants to protect her dignity, and when R. Elazar b. Azarya remarks on the gap between the mistress of the house’s menu and the facts on the plate, her husband declares it to be divine intervention.

R. Yossei is not simply a man of great virtue; he is also extremely sensitive to his wife’s dignity while they are married, and he does everything to make their relationship good. Despite this, they have an execrable marriage. The message to be understood from this is that the quality of one’s relationship is not contingent on personal investment, despite attempts to improve the communication and interaction between husband and wife. It is all in the hands of Heaven! Some marriages succeed and some fail, but the factors for differentiating between them are not at all clear, and the reason for divorce certainly is not as simple as how a person acts.

This means that the story greatly influences our understanding of the *midrash*. If the author’s intent were ambiguous, the narrative cited settles the matter, as it is clear that “if he succeeds” is not a literal description of meritorious activities, but rather describing that which is bestowed from Heaven, without our being able to understand the connection between one’s windfall and one’s action. According to the *midrash*, no person has control over the quality of one’s marriage, because it is all in the hands of God.

The story is in turn influenced by its Midrashic context as well. First of all, adding the scene in the kitchen intensifies the good conduct of R. Yossei, which strengthens the message: there is no link between a person’s actions and the quality of that individual’s relationships. It may be that this part of the story was added to the *midrash*, unlike that in the Jerusalem Talmud, for precisely this reason. Nevertheless, even without this, Ofra Meir notes that the very reading of the story in its Midrashic context changes its focus from what it is in the Jerusalem Talmud. In the *midrash*, the reader focuses on the issue of intimate relationships: when does a person succeed in finding an *ezer*, and when does one’s spouse end up standing *kenegdo*? For the reader, the focus of the story changes to relationship dynamics, which means that this is what the reader will look for and pay attention to in the narrative.

Finally, there is a third context for this story in *Vayikra Rabba* (34:14). The *midrash* prefaces the story with the following *derasha*:

“When you see the naked, clothe them… And do not hide from your own flesh” — Bar Kappara says: You must see his flesh as your own flesh. As Bar Kappara taught: There is no person who does not find himself in this situation eventually; if not he, then his son; if not his son, then his grandson. R. Ya’akov says in the name of R. Elazar: “And do not hide from your own flesh” — this refers to one’s ex-wife. For R. Yossei the Galilean had a bad wife…

Ostensibly, we might say that the connection here is similar to that in the Jerusalem Talmud, as it comes immediately after, “‘And do not hide from your own flesh’ — this refers to one’s ex-wife.” Indeed, it may be read this way, and according to such a reading, the focus in the story would be the same as in the Jerusalem Talmud.

However, Ofra Meir suggests looking at the entire homily (*derasha*), including the first view, based on the verse’s opening: “When you see the naked, clothe them… And do not hide from your own flesh.” Bar Kappara expounds the opening clause to strengthen the imperative to help those in need: whoever sees one in need of clothing must provide. He thus stresses the concept of the wheel of fortune. Today, you may be the one to see the pauper in the street shivering, while you are comfortable and warm, but tomorrow the situation may be reversed. In the view of Ofra Meir, the message of this homily is that the wheel of fortune never stops turning and the future is unpredictable; one who now enjoys an advantageous position may fall precipitously, and vice versa.

In my view, it is possible to go even further. The author seeks to bolster the motivation of one who wants to aid another, in order to create a more perfect world of giving and loving-kindness, which will in turn benefit the giver in a future time of crisis.

If we analyze the story in this context, we are compelled to reassess the narrative – on the one hand, R. Yossei the Galilean’s first wife and her behavior; on the other hand, R. Yossei himself. His wife does not show generosity when she has the chance, and this ends up exploding in her face when she must beg in the streets, depending on the kindness of strangers. She may have some fleeting thoughts, certainly when some people shut the door in her face, that her behavior contributed to the building of a world of alienation and parsimony. R. Yossei also finds his fortunes turning, but in his case it is for the better. His behavior at the beginning of the narrative is generous, and it may be seen as contributing to the benefit of the world, which he enjoys twice – first, when others whom he has treated with generosity help him to enlist the money to allow him to divorce his bad wife, and second, when he himself shows great munificence to his ex-wife. Indeed, the memory of his suffering in the past may increase his motivation to come to her aid.

This is a fourth point to be derived from the story – not the issue of retribution for his first wife’s bad acts, not the issue of R. Yossei’s behavior toward his ex-wife (his “flesh”), not even the issue of the powerlessness of man in terms of one’s relationships. Rather, the focus is on the need for a person to show generosity to the other, with the understanding that the wheel of fortune is always turning.

Translated by Yoseif Bloch

1. Yona Frankel, *Midrash Ve-Aggada* (Tel Aviv: Open University, 1996), p. 771. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ofra Meir, "Editorial Influence on the Weltanschauung of Aggadic Narrative," Tura 3 (1994), pp. 67-84. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)