YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Talmudic Aggadot**

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**Shiur #04: The *Aggada* of R. Bana’a (Part II)**

**I. Introduction**

In the previous *shiur* we analyzed the story concerning R. Bana'a in the third chapter of tractate *Bava Batra,* detached from its context in the chapter. In this shiur, we will examine the broader context of the story and demonstrate how the context contributes to our understanding of the story and how the story contributes to its context.

The story appears as part of a long aggadic unit. The common denominator of most of the unit’s sections is the Amora R. Bana'a, who either transmits the statements or features in the stories (see the entire unit, *Bava Batra* 57b-58a, parts of which we will cite below). The unit (which we will refer to as the R. Bana'a collection) is part of the talmudic discussion attached to the Mishna, *Bava Batra* 3:5 (57a). The connection of the collection to the Mishna and the brief halakhic discussion at the beginning of the talmudic passage is complex, and we will not expand upon that in this framework. We will, however, note that only the first part of the collection connects in some way to the halakhic discussion that precedes it. The halakhic discussion deals with actions that joint owners of a courtyard can stop each other from performing in their jointly owned courtyard. In the relevant part of the aggadic collection, there appears a statement of R. Bana'a, cited by his disciple R. Yochanan, which deals with a similar issue:

R. Yochanan said in the name of R. Bana'a: Joint owners of a courtyard can prevent one another from using the courtyard for any purpose save that of washing [clothes], since it is not fitting that the daughters of Israel should expose themselves to the public gaze while washing [clothes].

This study will focus primarily on the relationship between the story of R. Bana'a in the Makhpela Cave that was examined in the previous *shiur* and the other sections of the collection.

Click here to continue reading The *Aggada* of R. Bana’a (Part II) by Rav Yonatan Feintuch.

**II. The Sections of the Collection that Precede the Story of R. Bana’a in the Cave**

After R. Bana'a's halakhic statement and before the story about his visit to the Makhpela Cave, the Gemara presents an exposition of R. Chiyya b. Abba and a conversation between R. Bana'a and R. Yochanan:

It is written: "He shuts his eyes from seeing evil" (*Yeshaya* 33:15). [Commenting upon this] R. Chiyya b. Abba said: This refers to a man who does not look at women when they are washing [clothes]. How so? If there is another road, then if [he does not take it] he is wicked. If there is no other road, he is a victim of circumstances beyond his control. In fact, there is no other road, and even so it is incumbent on him to hide his eyes from them.

R. Yochanan asked R. Bana'a: How [long] should the under-garment of a Torah scholar [be]? [He replied:] So long that his flesh should not be visible beneath it. How [long should] the upper garment of a Torah scholar [be]? So long that not more than a handbreadth of his under-garment should be visible underneath it. How should the table of a Torah scholar [be laid]? Two-thirds should be covered with a cloth and the other third should be uncovered for putting the dishes and vegetables on; and the ring should be outside… The table of an *am ha'aretz* is like a hearth with pots all round. What is the sign of the bed of a Torah scholar? That nothing is kept under it save sandals in the summer season and shoes in the rainy season. But the bed of an *am ha’aretz* is like a packed storeroom.

***Explanation of the Statement of R. Chiyya b. Abba***

R. Chiyya b. Abba's statement is unrelated to a courtyard or joint owners. Rather, it shifts the focus of the discussion to the issue of laundry and modesty. R. Chiyya b. Abba, a disciple of R. Yochanan, expounds the verse: "He shuts his eyes from seeing evil," as praising a man who does not gaze upon the immodest sight of women doing laundry. A distinction should be made between the words of R. Bana'a, which focus on the honor of Jewish women, and the words of R. Chiyya b. Abba, which highlight a man’s responsibility to refrain from gazing.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Talmud goes on to interpret the statement as referring to one who does not gaze upon the women doing their laundry, despite the fact that passing by them and seeing them is unavoidable. The Gemara's interpretation is supported by R. Meisha's exposition in *Vayikra Rabba*, which we cited in last week's *shiur*, which in fact expounds the same verse as does R. Chiyya b. Abba:

R. Meisha the son of the son of Rabbi Yehoshua ben 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).

The preoccupation of the first sections of the collection of R. Bana'a with avoiding "feeding one's eyes" upon lewdness, and the exposition of the verse: "He shuts his eyes from seeing evil," reinforces the argument presented in the previous *shiur.* As may be recalled, we tried to argue that using R. Meisha's position (“anyone who beholds lewdness and does not feed his eyes on it merits greeting the *Shekhina*”)*,* it is possible to connect the two parts of the story of R. Bana'a in the cave: R. Bana'a, who avoids looking at Avraham and Sara, merits beholding something similar to "the beauty of the king."

***Explanation of the Conversation between R. Yochanan and R. Bana’a***

The conversation between R. Yochanan and R. Bana'a touches upon a number of characteristics of a Torah scholar, some of which distinguish him from an *am ha'aretz,* or an ignorant boor. The differences are all external – the appearance of his clothing, his table and his bed. The first two characteristics, regarding the scholar's under-garment and upper garment, set a high standard of modesty, and thus they connect to the earlier statement of R. Chiyya b. Abba that addresses modesty in the context of gazing upon women doing their laundry. Modesty in the context of a Torah scholar is not identical to the modesty that R. Chiyya b. Abba addresses: we are dealing with men, not women, and the demands are not connected to the problem of lewdness according to the conventional halakhic definition. Nevertheless, as we mentioned earlier, women also have a concept of honor that is not connected to the gaze of men, and from which certain laws of modesty are derived. (We also noted a certain gap between R. Bana'a's statement at the beginning of the collection, which is formulated in terms of honor, and the words of R. Chiyya b. Abba, which address the problem of gazing). Regarding men, there is no parameter of honor in the sense that it exists for women. We are therefore not dealing with a sweeping demand made on the public at large, but rather with very stringent criteria that are expected of a Torah scholar in honor of the Torah. The appearances of his table and his bed also connect to this concept: the honor of the Torah necessitates not only stringent levels of modesty, but also aesthetic care. When a Torah scholar lives in filthy and neglected conditions, the honor of the Torah is impaired.[[2]](#footnote-2)

We also mentioned in the previous *shiur* the source in *Midrash Tannaim* (chap. 33, v. 26), which also uses the phrase "feed his eyes upon" (see the full source in the previous *shiur*) and there the matter is formulated in terms of honor or glory:[[3]](#footnote-3)

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…

This formulation is reminiscent of the idea that we dealt with above, regarding the first part of the *aggada*, with respect to the difference between issues of modesty stemming from prohibitions applying to the beholder, and those that are more immanent and are connected to the woman's honor.

Another issue pointed out when we discussed the *aggada* concerning R. Bana'a in the Makhpela Cave was the positive attitude toward beauty and aesthetics. This attitude creates another connection to the conversation between R. Bana'a and Rabbi Yochanan in the first part of the collection, which deals with appearance and aesthetics in the world of a Torah scholar. This connection between the parts of the collection illuminates the laws mentioned in the conversation in a new light: the aesthetics demanded of a Torah scholar stem from his having descended from Adam. Adam was created in "the likeness" of the *Shekhina*, and therefore his descendants are "the likeness of My likeness." Noting the beauty of certain Sages emphasizes the positive attitude toward outward appearances in connection with a Torah scholar.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**III. The Continuation of the Collection after the Story of R. Bana’a**

***The Story of Abaye and the Magician***

There was a certain *amgusha* [magician; Zoroastrian priest] who used to exhume the dead. When he came to the grave of R. Tovi bar Matana, [R. Tovi] took hold of his beard. Abaye came and said to him: Please, leave him. A year later [the *amgusha*] again came, and [the dead man] took hold of his beard, and Abaye again came, but [the dead man] did not leave him till [Abaye] had to bring scissors and cut off his beard.

This story is exceptional in the framework of the *aggada* as a whole: it is set not in Palestine, but rather in Babylonia, as evidenced both by the names of the Sages – Abaye (fourth generation Babylonian Amora) and Rav Tovi bar Matana (third generation Babylonian Amora) - and by the presence of the *amgusha* (Persian magician), who certainly belongs to the Babylonian environment. From a literary perspective, this story is connected verbally and substantively to the previous stories about R. Bana'a. The preoccupation with graves and the recurring formulation of “when he came to the grave of" connect it to the sections before it. The opening term, "*hahu*" (a certain) connects it to the sections that follow.

In terms of content and message, this story is a mirror image of the preceding stories, and perhaps for this reason it was included in this collection. As opposed to R. Bana'a, who enters burial caves because of the need to mark the graves, the magician enters them to "exhume the dead," or to remove the deceased from their graves so that their flesh decomposes.[[5]](#footnote-5) R. Bana'a recognizes the caves as the lair of the dead, and wishes to mark the graves in order to distance the living from ritual impurity, whereas the magician does not recognize the "right" of the deceased to be buried in the ground if their flesh has not yet decomposed. His actions desecrate the dead and damage the living, who are now exposed to impure corpses.

The price that the magician is forced to pay is the mutilation of his beard, which is "the glory of the face."[[6]](#footnote-6) This is an additional connection to the preceding section, which dealt with the beauty of Adam and others, and especially the beauty of their faces. Here, the face and beauty of the magician are mutilated, and it is possible that the contrasting parallelism is also built on a play of words between *dikni* (beard) and *diyukni* (likeness). In any event, this contrasting parallelism presents a mirror image of R. Bana'a's visit to the Makhpela cave.

***A Pair of Stories regarding Inheritance and R. Bana’a***

In the last part of the collection we find a pair of stories regarding inheritance in which R. Bana'a is involved as an intermediary, after which he is appointed as a judge. Owing to the lack of space, we will limit our discussion to the second story concerning inheritance, which is more directly related to the parts of the collection that were discussed above:

A certain man heard his wife say to her daughter: "Why do you not observe more secrecy in your amours? I have ten children, and only one is from your father." When [the man was] on his deathbed, he said: "I leave all my property to one son." They had no idea which of them he meant, so they consulted R. Bana'a. He said to them: "Go and knock at the grave of your father, until he gets up and tells you which one of you [he has made his heir]." So they all went to do so. The one who was really his son, however, did not go. R. Bana'a thereupon said: "All the estate belongs to this one." They then went and slandered [R. Bana’a] before the king, saying: "There is a man among the Jews who extorts money from people without witnesses or anything else." So they took him and threw him in prison. His wife came [to the court] and said: "I had a slave, and some men have cut off his head, skinned him, eaten the flesh, filled the skin with water, and given students to drink from it, and they have not paid me either its price or its hire." They did not know what to make of her tale, so they said: "Let us fetch the wise man of the Jews and he will tell us." So they called R. Bana'a, and he said to them: "She means a goat-skin bottle." They said: "Since he is so wise, let him sit in the gate and act as judge."

This story uses several literary devices, like the ironic use of keywords and biblical associations.

The story opens with a sentence that connects us once again to issues of modesty, but it is a very ironic statement. "Why do you not observe more secrecy [lit., why are you not more modest] in your amours [lit., prohibition]?" - that is, when you transgress the prohibition against forbidden sexual relations, why do you not do it in a more modest way, so that nobody finds out?[[7]](#footnote-7) She, the mother, committed adultery many times, and nobody knows that nine of her ten children are not from her husband. There is great irony in using the term modesty juxtaposed to the term "prohibition" in the context of a prohibition as severe as adultery; this involves a joining of opposites. The irony is intensified by the fact that the husband overhears the mother boasting of her sinful secrecy, and he consequently disinherits her illegitimate children. The ironic use of the word "modesty" serves as a contrasting parallelism to the modesty referred to in the first sections of the collection.

The husband bequeaths all of his property to his one biological son. The matter is brought before R. Bana'a, who proposes an experiment similar to the judgment of Shlomo.[[8]](#footnote-8) In our story, however, we are dealing with the children of the "harlot," who demonstrate their attitude to their father by beating on his grave. The allusion to the biblical story may come to emphasize the motif of the woman's harlotry, as an antithesis to modesty.

The story, then, begins with relationships that are founded on a lack of modesty, and ends with harm to the father's grave (even if most of the children are not his, he brought them up as a father). In this way, the story is connected by way of contrasting parallelism to two central motifs in the previous stories relating to R. Bana'a: at the beginning of the collection, R. Bana'a calls for the observance of modesty, and acts that way himself; and R. Bana'a's attitude toward graves and those resting in them is an attitude of respect.

The frustrated sons bring about R. Bana'a's imprisonment. His wife brings about his release by way of a riddle that intrigues his jailers, who set him free for its solution. R. Bana'a's release for the solution of the riddle and his appointment to serve as a judge in the wake of that solution bring to mind the biblical story of Yosef. Yosef, who is released from prison and appointed to high office in the wake of resolving the riddle of Pharaoh's dream, was originally jailed because he refused to violate the prohibition of forbidden sexual relations. The story's allusion to Yosef further contributes to shaping the image of R. Bana'a as representing the maintenance of high modesty standards.

The allusion to Yosef also correspond with what we saw in the story concerning R. Bana'a in the cave. First of all, Yosef's beauty fits well with the descriptions of beauty in the "appendices" to the story. What is more, another talmudic source (*Berakhot* 20a) that deals with the beauty of a Sage and the beauty of Yosef makes use of the recurring phrase, "feed his eyes upon," and other phrases that connect it to the beginning of the collection:[[9]](#footnote-9)

R. Yochanan was accustomed to go and sit at the gates of the bathing place. He said: When the daughters of Israel come up from bathing they look at me and they have children as handsome as I am… I come from the seed of Yosef, over whom the evil eye has no power… The evil eye has no power over the eye which refused to feed itself on what did not belong to it.

In a parallel passage (*Zevachim* 118b), the Gemara draws a connection between not feeding one's eye upon what does not belong to him and the resting of the *Shekhina* in the Shilo Tabernacle – in Yosef's part of the land, and the eating of sacrifices that were brought there:

R. Abbahu said: The verse states: "Yosef is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine through the eye" (*Bereishit* 29:22); [this means,] let the eye which would not feed upon and enjoy that which did not belong to it, merit to eat [of sacrifices] as far as it can see. R. Yose son of R. Hanina quoted: "And the desire of him that dwelt in hatred" (*Devarim* 33:16); [this means] let the eye that did not desire to enjoy that which did not belong to it merit to eat [sacrifices] among those that hated it.

Here the circle is closed. From the statements about Yosef we learn that one who stands the test and does not feed his eyes on lewdness merits receiving the presence of the *Shekhina*, on the one hand, and his descendant (R. Yochanan) has the power of bestowing on others the blessing of fitting children, which are a "reflection" of the *Shekhina*, on the other. R. Bana'a, similarly, does not want to see lewdness, and merits, to a certain degree, to see the *Shekhina*. Thus he resembles Yosef, and like Yosef, merits to leave prison to resolve a riddle.

In the continuation of the second story, the confidence of R. Bana'a's wife in his ability to understand her intent and solve her riddle indicates great and powerful intimacy between them. This contrasts starkly to the couple who form the basis of the story – the woman who twice deceives her husband: once when she commits adultery, and a second time when, owing to his ignorance, he raises her bastard children as if they were his own. In the riddle the parable is connected to the situation: behind the riddle about the water-bottle lies the genuine cry of a woman for her one and only spouse ("I had a slave") who was forcibly taken without recompense.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The words of R. Bana'a's wife give rise to an association with another biblical story – the story of David and Bat-Sheva (II *Shemuel*,chapters 11-12). The woman's words are reminiscent of the parable of the poor man's lamb ("I had one slave"). The biblical story deals with the sin of a lack of modesty. It begins with gazing upon Bat-Sheva as she bathes, a situation that is similar to the matter discussed at the beginning of the collection – gazing upon women while they are doing their laundry. *Chazal*, in their attempt to protect the modesty of those doing laundry, make sure that women can do their laundry in their courtyard without concern that people will be gazing upon them. David did something far worse, seeing that he gazed into the "court," and not at the time of laundry, but at the time of bathing. The beginning of the story also alludes to Natan's words to David (ibid. 12:12): "For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun." In our story, the woman who commits adultery does so in secrecy, but eventually it becomes known. In the biblical narrative, part of the consequences of David's action is that his sons publically challenge his honor and authority.[[11]](#footnote-11)

**IV. A summary of the Collection concerning R. Bana’a**

The collection concerning R. Bana'a, which at first glance appears to be a random joining of statements and stories surrounding the figure of R. Bana'a, is in fact marked, in most of its sections, by thematic and literary unity. The thematic unity revolves around several motifs: modesty, gazing and not gazing, aesthetics, and the relationship between them. The literary unity finds expression in recurring phrases scattered throughout its various sections, and with an entire system of parallels, contrasts and mirror images. These devices highlight the themes of modesty and honor, and the reward of "seeing" and greeting the *Shekhina.*

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. It seems to be possible to view the honor of the daughters of Israel and the prohibition for men to gaze upon lewdnesss, as two separate dimensions of the laws of modesty. This issue deserves consideration on its own, and this is not the forum. At least from a preliminary review of several sources, however, it seems that apart from the prohibition to gaze upon lewdness that applies to men, there is an independent concept of "the way" or "the honor" of women, which does not depend on the presence of a man. See the interpretation of the verse: "All of the honor of the king's daughter is inward" in the following sources: Jerusalem Talmud, *Yoma* 1:1, 38d (and parallels in Jerusalem Talmud, *Megilla* 1:10, 72a; *Horayot* 3:2, 47d); *Vayikra Rabba* 20, 11; *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* 26, 10 (ed. Mandelbaum, pp. 398-399). These sources address the story of Kimchit, who observed the rules of modesty even when she was alone in the house. See also Babylonian Talmud, *Yevamot* 77a – "It is the way of a man to advance, but it is not the way of a woman to advance"; *Shevuot* 30a – "It is not the way of a woman [to come to court],” and additional sources that are formulated like the words of R. Bana'a, about "the way of women," e.g.: *Bereishit Rabba* 18:11; Babylonian Talmud Ketubot 67a. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It is interesting to note that the statements appearing in the conversation between R. Yochanan and R. Bana'a are reminiscent of a series of statements on the same subject made elsewhere by R. Chiyya b. Abba in the name of R. Yochanan:

"R. Chiyya b. Abba said in the name of R. Yochanan: It is a disgrace for a scholar to go out with patched shoes into the market place… R. Chiyya b. Abba also said in the name of R. Yochanan: Any scholar upon whose garment a [grease] stain is found is worthy of death, as it is stated: 'All they that hate me [*mesane'ai*] love [merit] death' (*Mishlei* 8:36) - read not *mesane'ai* but *masni'ai* [that make me hated, i.e., despised]… R. Chiyya b. Abba also said in the name of R. Yochanan: What is meant by the verse: 'Like as My servant Yeshaya has walked naked and barefoot' (*Yeshaya* 20:3)?8 'Naked' means in worn-out garments; 'barefoot' in patched shoes. We learnt elsewhere: A grease stain upon a saddle constitutes an interposition… For we learned: R. Yose said: [The garments] of *banna'im*: [a stain even] on one side [interposes]; of uncultured persons, [only a stain] on both sides [interposes]. And surely a saddle does not stand higher than the garment of an *am ha'aretz*! What are *banna'im*? R. Yocanan said: These are Torah scholars, who are engaged all their days in the upbuilding of the world. R. Yochanan also said: Who is the scholar to whom a lost article is returned on his recognition thereof? That [scholar] who is particular to turn his shirt" (*Shabbat* 113b). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. There is a certain ambiguity regarding the *Shekhina*, for the immanent problem that stems from the glory expresses itself in the external limitation of blinding and lack of human capacity to behold (as is expressed in the source from *Midrash Tannaim* and some of the sources cited above), a problem that can be seen as a limitation on the part of the viewer. On the other hand, there are certain people who in certain situations are permitted partial vision. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. However, we find in the words of *Chazal* the opposite position as well. See, for example, the story about Yehoshua b. Chananya and the emperor in *Nedarim* 50b. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Regarding exhuming the dead, see Isaiah Gafni, *Yehudei Bavel*, p. 41, and note 101 there; Moshe Bar, "*Al Shelosha Gezerot*," pp. 29-36. These sources indicate that "exhuming the dead" should be understood as follows: according to the Zoroastrian religion, the dead are not to be buried in the ground until their flesh has decomposed, or else the land will become defiled. Therefore, the Persians used to keep the dead unburied, and bury them only after their flesh had decomposed. For this reason they would remove fresh corpses from their graves. During part of the Amoraic period, the Zoroastrian priests (the *amgushi)* grew in power and tried to impose some of the religious beliefs upom members of other religions (Jews and Christians). In this regard, see the following source:

"When R. Yochanan was informed that the Parsees had come to Babylonia, he reeled and fell. When, however, he was told that they accepted bribes, he recovered and sat down again. They issued three decrees as a punishment for three [transgressions]: they decreed against [ritually prepared] meat, because the priestly gifts [were neglected]. They decreed against the use of baths, because ritual bathing [was not observed]. They exhumed the dead, because rejoicings were held on the days of their festivals…" (*Yevamot* 63b). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This is what follows from the following source (*Shabbat* 152a):

"A certain eunuch [*gavza'a*] said to R. Yehoshua b. Korcha [Baldhead]: 'How far is it from here to Karhina [Baldtown]?' [He replied]: 'As far as from here to Gavzania [Eunuchtown].' The infidel said to him: 'A bald buck is worth four denarii.' [He replied]: 'A goat, if castrated, is worth eight.' Now, he [the infidel] saw that he [R. Yehoshua] was not wearing shoes, [whereupon] he remarked: 'He [who rides] on a horse is a king, upon an ass, is a free man, and he who has shoes on his feet is a human being. But he who has none of these - one who is dead and buried is better off.' [He replied:] 'O eunuch, O eunuch, you have enumerated three things to me, [and now] you will hear three things: The glory of a face is its beard; the rejoicing of one's heart is a wife; the heritage of the Lord is children; blessed be the Omnipresent, who has denied you all these!'"

This short *aggada* is also an interesting parallel to our story: There is a conflict between a Sage and someone who represents a different religion (the infidel); the infidel says to the Sage that "one who is dead and buried is better off" (like R. Tovi who was buried). The Sage in his response relates to the fact that his opponent has no beard (like the magician whose beard R. Tovi mutilated). Regarding a beard, see also the incident involving shaving of beards and the accompanying humiliation in II *Shemuel* 10:4-5): "And he shaved off the one half of their beards… because the men were greatly ashamed." [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Based on the context, the reference is almost certainly to forbidden sexual relations. In several places, *Chazal* refer to forbidden relations simply as "prohibition." See, for example, *Ta'anit* 22a: "I keep the men and women separate and I place my bed between them so that they may not come to prohibition;” see also *Avoda Zara* 10b, 18a. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. I *Melachim*, 3:16-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This source is also connected to the beginning of our collection through the name of R. Yochanan, who reports the first statement in the name of R. Bana'a, and also through the phrases: "daughters of Israel" and "look." [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In her riddle, R. Bana'a's wife presents another difference between her and the wife of the dead man, as she has only one husband, whereas the wife of the dead man has "many men" who fathered her various children. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The words of R. Bana'a's wife are also reminiscent of the parable that the woman of Tekoa relays to David in the wake of the rebellion of his son, Avshalom. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)