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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Talmudic *Aggadot***

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Shiur #05: The *Chasid* in the Cemetery (Part I)

Introduction

# In the previous *shiur*, we saw that there are many ways to read the same *aggada* when it appears in different contexts, even if there is no great variation in the details of the plot among the various parallels. In this *shiur* and the next, we will deal with another *aggada*, considering the same story from two divergent points of view.

# In the present *shiur*, we will see, as in the previous *aggada* we discussed, how different contexts change the focus of the *aggada*. We will base our analysis mainly on the article by Dr. Ofra Meir analyzing the story of the *chasid* in the cemetery.[[1]](#footnote-1) This will serve as the basis for our next *shiur*.

In the second *shiur* concerning this *aggada*, we will take a broader view of the *sugya* that serves as the context for each, instead of focusing merely on the immediate context. We will see that this expansive outlook significantly enriches our reading of the *aggada*.

**The *Chasid* in the Cemetery: The Story in the Babylonian Talmud**

The *aggada* that we will study appears in the third chapter of Tractate *Berakhot*:

It has been taught: It happened that a certain *chasid* gave a *dinar* to a pauper on the eve of the New Year in a year of drought, and his wife scolded him; so he went and passed the night in the cemetery, wherein he heard two spirits conversing.

One said to the other: “My dear, come and let us wander about the world and let us hear from behind the curtain what suffering is coming on the world.”  Her companion replied to her: “I am not able, because I am buried in a matting of reeds; but go, and whatever you hear tell me.” So the other went and wandered about and returned.

Her companion asked her: “My dear, what have you heard from behind the curtain?” She replied: “I heard that whoever sows after the first rainfall will have his crop struck by hail.” So the man went and did not sow till after the second rainfall, with the result that everyone else's crop was struck and his was not struck.

The next year, he again went and passed the night in the cemetery, and he heard the two spirits conversing with one another. One said to the other: “Come and let us wander about the world and hear from behind the curtain what punishment is coming upon the world.” The other replied: “My dear, did I not tell you that I am not able because I am buried in a matting of reeds? But go, and whatever you hear, come and tell me.” So the other one went and wandered about the world and returned.

She said to her:” My dear, what have you heard from behind the curtain?” She replied: “I heard that whoever sows after the later rain will have his crop struck with blight.” So the man went and sowed after the first rain with the result that everyone else's crop was blighted and his was not blighted.

His wife asked him: “How is it that last year everyone else's crop was struck and yours was not struck, and this year everyone else's crop is blighted and yours is not blighted?” So he related to her all his experiences.

The story goes that shortly afterwards a quarrel broke out between the wife of that *chasid* and the mother of the child, and the former said to the latter, “Come and I will show you your daughter buried in a matting of reeds.”

The next year, the man again went and spent the night in the cemetery and heard those conversing together. One said: “My dear, come and let us wander about the world and hear from behind the curtain what suffering is coming upon the world.” The other replied: “My dear, leave me alone; our conversation has already been heard among the living.” (*Berakhot* 18b)

When we read the story on its own, it appears that the central theme or subject is the value of *tzedaka* (charity) and its reward, as opposed to the severity of causing embarrassment and the punishment for it. The *chasid* gives *tzedaka* in the harshest of conditions, a period of famine. Most people, farmers in particular, would find themselves in an economic situation that is far from the ideal. The natural inclination is towards belt-tightening, and this is expressed, among other things, by less charitable giving. As the story goes on to make clear, this *chasid* also makes his living from agriculture.

Moreover, this story takes places on Erev Rosh Hashana. On the one hand, the eve of the Days of Judgement is an opportune time to give *tzedaka*. However, on the other hand, this is an extremely difficult period for those who work the land, as Rosh Hashana marks the end of one year, when the time comes to gather in the harvest, a disheartening activity amidst famine. Furthermore, it is the point at which the uncertainty about the coming year and what it will bring reaches its zenith.

Then there is the personal element to consider, as the *chasid* in this story has a contentious relationship with his wife. She challenges his giving *tzedaka*, and her opposition is so severe that he is compelled to sleep outside his home.

Nevertheless, despite all of these difficulties, the *chasid* withstands the trial and gives generously – and his reward is not long in coming. He merits to receive information form “behind the curtain,” information that helps him economically not only in the present year, but in the following year as well. Theoretically, this reward might have lasted for many years more. All of this indicates how praiseworthy charitable giving is when it is done with the dedication and self-sacrifice that the *chasid* displays.

In contrast, the second half of the story presents a mirror image. When the *chasid* is incautious with his words and his wife shames the poor mother, the *chasid* loses his reward, and we may assume that his crop failed in that year.

An additional potential theme that we may glean from the story is that the fate of a given year, at least in terms of rainfall, is determined on the first night of Rosh Hashana. This is what allows the spirit to hear on that night from “behind the curtain” what is decreed for the nascent year.

In light of all of this, we may identify in this story a variety of possible themes and messages. However, as Ofra Meir has already pointed out, when we read the story in its immediate Talmudic context, the focus of the reading is shifted to a totally different issue.

The immediate context of the story in the *sugya* is the discussion of the question whether the dead are aware of what will befall the living. This debate is initiated by two sages having a discussion as they walk in a cemetery:

R. Chiya and R. Yonatan were once walking about in a cemetery, and the blue strings of [the *tzitzit* of] R. Yonatan were trailing on the ground. Said R. Chiya to him: “Lift it up, lest [the dead] say: ‘Tomorrow they are coming to join us and now they are insulting us!’” He said to him: “Do they really know so much? Is it not written, ‘But the dead know nothing’?” He replied to him: “If you have read once, you have not repeated; if you have repeated, you have not gone over a third time; if you have gone over a third time, you have not had it explained to you. ‘For the living know that they shall die’: these are the righteous who in their death are called living, as it says. ‘And Benaya the son of Yehoyada, the son of a living man from Kavtze’el…’ 'But the dead know nothing': These are the wicked, who in their lifetime are called dead, as it says, ‘And you are a wicked corpse, prince of Israel.’  Alternatively, derive it from here: ‘At the mouth of two witnesses shall the dead be put to death.’ Is he not still alive? What it means is, he is already counted as dead.” *(Berakhot* 18a-b)

R. Chiya and R. Yonatan are walking through the cemetery, and R. Yonatan’s *tzitzit* are protruding from his hem and visible to everyone. R. Chiya points this out to him and criticizes him for mocking the dead, as the previous line invokes the verse, “Whoever mocks the poor shows contempt for their Maker; whoever gloats over disaster will not go unpunished” (*Mishlei* 17:5). Since the dead can no longer fulfill *mitzvot*, the conspicuous performance of this *mitzva* by a person who is still living and capable of fulfilling it is an act of mockery. The audaciousness is intensified by the fact that those people who are now living will inevitably join the ranks of the deceased; thus, one might expect more sensitivity from them.

R. Yonatan attempts to counter his companion’s challenge by citing his own verse, from *Kohelet* (9:5): “For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even their name is forgotten.” If the dead are unware of whatever happens on the mortal plane, they cannot be insulted by R. Yonatan’s swaying *tzitzit*. However, R. Chiya contends that R. Yonatan’s reading is deficient, as the verse is not to be taken in the literal sense; rather, these phrases are to be understood metaphorically. The living are the righteous, and they are aware; “the dead” who “know nothing” are the wicked, who are oblivious. Consequently, this verse is not relevant to the issue under discussion, the question of whether or not the dead aware of what happens in the world of the living.

In light of this story, the *sugya* cites various sources to settle the question of whether the dead are aware of what happens after they pass on. The *baraita* telling the story of the *chasid* in the cemetery constitutes one of the sources with which the *gemara* tries to prove that the dead are indeed conscious of mortal affairs.

When we read the story in this context, the reading focuses on this theme: the connection between the dead and the living. Indeed, reading the story gives one the distinct impression that the dead definitely know what happens to the living, and this is on two planes:

1. Generally, the spirits of the dead can listen to what is happening behind the curtain, at least on the night of Rosh Hashana, concerning general decrees for that year that will befall those who live on earth, from natural disasters or famines.
2. Specifically, the spirit of the poor dead girl knows that the wife of the *chasid* has humiliated her mother. This is specific knowledge of an event that occurred to a certain living person at a certain time.

**The *Chasid* in the Cemetery: The Story in *Avot de-Rabbi Natan***

Let us continue to investigate the different contexts of the tale and how we should read the story in light of these different sources. Our story also appears in *Avot De-Rabbi Natan*, a minor tractate (one of the *masekhtot ketanot*) that expands on the Mishnaic tractate of *Avot*. The discussion preceding the story in this source diverges wildly from that in the Babylonian Talmud, focusing on another verse from *Kohelet* (11:6): “Sow your seed in the morning, and in the evening let your hands not be idle; for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both shall be equally good.”

R. Dostai be-R. Yannai says: If you arrive early and sow at the first rainfall, go back and sow at the second rainfall, lest hail fall upon the world and the former ones be caught; so the latter ones will survive, “for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both.” For if both survive, they “shall be equally good,” as it says, “Sow your seed in the morning, and in the evening let your hands not be idle.” If you arrive early and sow at the first rainfall and the second rainfall, go back and sow at the third rainfall, lest blight fall upon the world, and the former ones be blighted; so the latter ones will survive, “for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both shall be equally good.” As it says, “Sow your seed in the morning, and in the evening let your hands not be idle…”

[R. Yehoshua] was wont to say: If you give a penny to a pauper in the morning and another pauper comes before you in the evening, give him, “for you do not know… whether both,” for if both survive, they “shall be equally good,” as it says, ““Sow your seed in the morning, etc.”

It happened that a certain *chasid* gave a dinar to a pauper in a year of drought… (*Avot De-Rabbi Natan*, version A, 3:5-8)

This discussion, in the midst of which we find the story of the pious main, brings a totally different topic to the attention of the reader. First, R. Dostai be-R. Yannai is cited, discussing the agricultural context of sowing in the field. R. Dostai recommends that a farmer should not plant at the first rainfall only, but at every period of rainfall, in order to avoid the dangers endemic to each period. Sowing at every rainfall guarantees a successful crop, even if disasters such as hail or blight occur.

This advice from R. Dostai seems to be the moral gleaned from the story about the *chasid*, and naturally reading the story in this context focuses the reader on the different times at which the *chasid* sows in different years and the hazards he avoids, unlike the rest of the people, who fail to do so and end up suffering severe losses.

Indeed, the different expressions used in the *derasha* and the different losses mentioned in it very prominently recall the language of the story. Ofra Meir makes this point concerning this *derasha* in *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*. This *derasha* is found in parallel in *Bereishit Rabba*, but its formulation is slightly different:

“Sow your seed in the morning, and in the evening let your hands not be idle” — R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua [expound this]. R. Eliezer says: If you have sown early in the season, sow late in the season as well, because you do not know which will survive in your hand, whether from the early or the late sowing, “for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both shall be equally good.” (*Bereishit Rabba*, *Chayei Sara* 61)

It makes sense to assume that the phrasing of the *derasha* in *Bereishit Rabba* is more original than the phrasing of *Avot De-Rabbi Natan*. [[2]](#footnote-2) It appears that the different phrasing in *Avot De-Rabbi Natan* is influenced by its juxtaposition with the story, in order to create a connection between them. This strong connection intensifies the focus of the reader on the agricultural issue when considering this narrative.

The story in *Avot De-Rabbi Natan* does not appear immediately after R. Dostai’s *derasha*; rather, it is preceded by an additional *derasha*, that of R. Yehoshua. This homily is a discourse on the mitzva of *tzedaka*, which makes the reader focus on an additional topic in the narrative, a matter that has tremendous theological and ethical significance. This *derasha* calls for a person not to suffice with *tzedaka* at one time of the day (“in the morning”), but to give charity later in the day as well (“in the evening”). Indeed, reading the story in this context focuses us on the experience of the *chasid*, whose grand gesture consists of giving charity in time of famine, when conditions are quite difficult.

However, as the story continues, the same *chasid* is unconcerned with the dignity of the poor dead girl. The *chasid* tells the details of her burial to his wife, even though he knows of her contentious character and her inclination to quarrel and lob insults. Nevertheless, although the parallel to the *derasha* is not precisely exact, there is a certain parallel in the fact that at an earlier point, the *chasid* is concerned about the lot of the impoverished, while at a later point he displays insensitivity. Accordingly, at the first point the *chasid* merits great reward for the *tzedaka* he gives, while at the second point, he suffers a loss due to his lack of sensitivity.

In any case, the development of the story matches the message that the *derasha* imparts: one must be consistent in showing compassion to the poor and disadvantaged; isolated acts of munificence are not enough.

**The *Chasid* in the Cemetery: The Story in *Yalkut Shimoni***

An additional context in which the story appears is *Yalkut Shimoni*, which is a collection of various sources from the literature of *Chazal*, compiled in the 13th century.

In our case, the *Yalkut* collects from the two sources we have seen above, from Tractate *Berakhot* in the Babylonian Talmud and from the minor tractate of *Avot De-Rabbi Natan*. However, *Yalkut Shimoni* has a different order. We have seen that in *Avot De-Rabbi Natan*, the story appears after R. Yehoshua’s *derasha* on *tzedaka*. In contrast, in *Yalkut Shimoni*, the story appears immediately after R. Dostai’s *derasha*, while the *derasha* that parallels R. Yehoshua’s appears after the story. This configuration emphasizes the appearance of the story specifically in the context of R. Dostai’s *derasha*, the agricultural context, and not the context of *tzedaka*, which comes after the story.

As we wrote above, when we read the story in light of R. Dostai’s words, the narrative constitutes a successful agricultural model. We do not know which natural calamity may come in a given agricultural year, nor when they may come, and therefore it is worthwhile to sow in every period. Ofra Meir makes this point even more sharply. In her view, the *derasha* of R. Dostai reflects an approach in opposition to that of the *chasid*. R. Dostai’s advice reflects and accommodates a natural world following the usual rules. In the world of the *chasid*, supernatural things happen, such as receiving information from “behind the curtain” and using it for agricultural-economic profit. But in the natural world, we cannot control the weather, and we must act accordingly. At every period of rainfall, one must sow, thus being prepared for every eventuality.

Naturally, the structure and order in *Yalkut Shimoni* do not lionize the protagonist or encourage emulating him; instead, *Yalkut Shimoni* urges us to extrapolate from his case, that of the exception to the rule. We should not rely on miracles or inside information; one must make practical preparations for every eventuality.

Even the pious *chasid* himself, after two years, finds himself where he started, subject to the vagaries of the natural, typical world.

**Summary**

We have seen three different contexts in which the story of the *chasid* in the cemetery appears. In each one of the contexts, we find a different influence upon the focus of the story, on the different points emphasized in the mind of every reader of this story.

Next week, we will return to the *sugya* in *Berakhot* in the Babylonian Talmud, and we will expand the viewpoint beyond the direct context of the story in the *sugya*, as we expand our outlook to encompass the entire *sugya* analyzing the *mishna* there. We will see how broadening our view contributes to our reading of the story.

Translated by Yoseif Bloch

1. We mentioned Dr. Meir’s work in the previous *shiur*. See Ofra Meir, “*Sippurei Ha-Aggada Be-Heksherim Sifrutiyim Ke-Tofa’a Makbila Le-Matzavei Higgud Mishtanim*,” in *Mechkerei Yerushalayim Be-Folklore Yehudi* 13-14 (5751-5752), pp. 81-97. Many of the ideas we will raise in the first part of the analysis of this narrative and the explanation of its context are found in this article. However, Meir does not delve into the second part of the analysis, which we aim to carry out in the next *shiur*, in which we will broaden our view beyond the immediate context of the story in the *sugya*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Bereishit Rabba* was compiled in the 5th century, while *Avot De-Rabbi Natan* is considered to have been compiled later, around the 8th century, although this is not certain. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)