YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**TALMUDIC AGGADA**

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The htm version of this shiur is available at:

<http://vbm-torah.org/archive/aggada72/09aggada.htm>

**Shiur #09: Divinely Coerced Sin and Non–Literal Interpretation**

R. Yehoshua ben Levi said: “Israel only made the golden calf to give strength to those who want to repent, as it says: ‘O that they had such a heart as this always, to fear me, and keep all my commandments’ (*Devarim* 5:26) [the people of Israel were on a high spiritual level, so they were not fit to sin; they must have only sinned in order to help out those who want to repent].” This accords with what R. Yochanan said in the name of R. Shimon bar Yochai: “David was not the kind of person to do that act (the sin of Bat Sheva), nor was Israel the kind of people to do that act (the sin of the golden calf).” David was not the kind of person to do that act, as it says: “And my heart slain within me” (*Tehillim* 109:21). Israel was not the kind of people to do that act, as it says: “O that they had such a heart as this always, to fear me, and keep all my commandments.” Why then did they do these sins? In order to teach you that if an individual sins, we say to him, “Repent as the individual [David] did,” and if a community sins, we say to them, “Repent as the community [Israel] did.” We need both of these instances. If we only learned about the individual, we would say that (he can repent since) his sin is not public, but the community which is public (cannot repent). If we only learned about the community, we would say the community (can repent) since there is great cause for mercy, but an individual may not have strong merit. Therefore, both are necessary (*Avoda Zara* 4b).

Taken at face value, this *gemara* indicates that Divine providence arranged for the sin of David with Bat Sheva and for the sin of the golden calf so that future generations would have models of individual and communal repentance. That idea directly opposes other Torah principles such as free will. How could God coerce individuals or communities into heinous transgressions? Furthermore, both instances bring about extremely harsh punishments. The golden calf reverberates throughout Jewish history, and increases the punishments for later iniquity (*Shemot* 32:34). David suffers immensely for the sin of Bat Sheva, including the loss of a child and witnessing his wives taken by another before his very eyes (*Shmuel II* 12). How could people undergo such torments for a sin not freely chosen?

Given these difficulties, the traditional commentaries refuse to take this *gemara* literally. Maharsha bases his explanation on a *gemara* in *Kiddushin* (30b) which says that God helps people combat the evil inclination. Had God done so, David would not have erred in the Bat Sheva episode and Israel would not have succumbed to the temptation of the golden calf. God decided not to intervene; thereby enabling models of sin and repentance to emerge. According to Maharsha, David and the people of Israel retain full responsibility for their religious failures; God just decided not to provide extra providential help towards resisting sin. Many of the commentaries found in the *Ein Yaakov* adopt a parallel approach.

According to Maharal, this *gemara* conveys that God wanted sin and repentance to be part of the created order. He fashioned a world in which someone would inevitably sin, but did not coerce any particular individual to sin. This explanation resembles Rambam’s idea that just because God predicted, as part of the *brit bein ha-betarim* (covenant between the pieces), that a nation would enslave the Jewish people, did not mean that any particular nation was forced to do so. Since each individual nation was free to desist, the Egyptians retain full moral culpability, notwithstanding this Divine prophecy (*Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshuva* 6:5). In our context, the original Divine plan included the potential for sin and the possibility of repentance. God arranged a world where sin and repentance would occur, and they occurred in the cases of David and Israel. In other words, God created a universe in which David and Israel, or others, could sin; He did not remove their freedom.

Tosafot make a brief comment whose import is easily missed: “It was necessary to *write* about their sins and the acceptance of their repentance.” As Maharam of Lublin notes, Tosafot shift the *gemara*’s focus from the sins to the biblical recording of the sins. Both David and Israel sinned without any special Divine role in them doing so, and this *gemara* does not address what brought them to sin. Instead, the *gemara* discusses the Divine decision to record these iniquities in sacred Scripture. In theory, the Biblecould have left out the Bat Sheva episode and the forging of the golden calf, but God preferred to include these stories so individuals and communities who stumble will have models for emulation. Other people and groups will invariably sin, and they need to understand both that predecessors did likewise, and that there is a live possibility of authentic repentance.

Talmudic language supports Tosafot’s reading. The *tzerikha* form, in which the Gemara outlines what would have happened if we had only been taught one of the ideas, tends to address the need for two authoritative texts. The Gemara’s use of this language here fits with Tosafot’s approach that the Gemara questions only the need for *writing* the David passage and the golden calf story. If we accept Rashi’s reading, then the *gemara* addresses the actual eventsand not the texts about them, in which case the application of *tzerikha* (“If we only learned”) terminology would be quite unusual.

Methodologically, we should not reinterpret a *gemara* every time it conflicts with another theme in rabbinic literature, since our rabbinic tradition includes disparate voices and opinions. A survey of *aggadot* reveals a host of positions regarding issues such as the balance between Divine providence and the natural order, or how seriously to take dreams, and there is no reason to harmonize all views into a single approach. At the same time, some *aggadot* contradict notions that are so fundamental to Torah that we are justified in rejecting the literal interpretation. Judaism affirms human freedom and the impossibility of receiving punishment for coerced behavior. Since R. Shimon bar Yochai would not contest these notions, we must understand his statement in a different fashion.

As an addendum, note that this *gemara* assumes that David sinned in the Bat Sheva story. Although it is quite difficult to read chapters 11 and 12 of *Shmuel* II and arrive at any other conclusion, another *gemara* famously states: “Whoever says that David sinned is mistaken” (*Shabbat* 56a). Perhaps the Talmud includes conflicting views on this matter; indeed, the same Talmudic page cites Rav as critiquing Rabbi for saying that David did not sin. Alternatively, the *gemara* in Shabbat never intended to whitewash David; it simply states that David did not technically sin when he took Bat Sheva, since his soldiers gave a bill of divorce to their wives to prevent them from turning into *agunot* (women bound to their husbands with no means of ending the marriage) in the event that their husband was lost at war. Yet morally and religiously, he certainly did something extremely grievous in taking advantage of the wife of a soldier away defending his countrymen. Along similar lines, Maharsha develops two models in which David tried to commit adultery, but was saved by circumstance. Either David was unaware of the divorce, or the divorce remained contingent on a yet to be fulfilled condition (Uriya’s death). Understood in this light, the *gemara* in *Shabbat* rescues David from technical violation of *Halakha*, not from moral failure.