**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Midrash on the Parasha**

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**Parashat Miketz: "And God Almighty Give You Mercy Before the Man"**

### Introduction

Just as in the Talmudic text, so too in *Bereishit Rabba* we find collections of *derashot* on a particular verse or on a matter arising from the verse or its context that create dialogues about certain theological-conceptual themes.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In the *midrash* on *Parashat Miketz,* we find two such conceptual discussions: one deals with dreams and their interpretation, in the wake of Pharaoh's dreams, while the other deals with the role and meaning of human suffering. In this *shiur* we will address the second matter.

Dealing with suffering is a fundamental universal, national and individual issue. The Midrash focuses on the subject of afflictions (*yissurim*) that beset the righteous in the context of the words of Ya’akov in this *parasha.* Ya’akov is forced to grant Yehuda's request to allow him to take Binyamin down with his brothers to Egypt as commanded by Yosef in his Egyptian guise, in order to enable them once again to purchase the food they need during the famine (and to retrieve Shimon, who has been imprisoned by Yosef):

And their father Yisrael said to them: If it be so now, do this: take of the choice fruits of the land in your vessels, and carry down the man a present, a little balm, and a little honey, spicery and ladanum, nuts, and almonds; and take double money in your hand; and the money that was returned in the mouth of your sacks carry back in your hand; perhaps it was an oversight; take also your brother, and arise, go again to the man; and God Almighty give you mercy before the man, that he may release to you your other brother and Binyamin. And as for me, if I be bereaved of my children, I am bereaved. (*Bereishit* 43:11-14)

In his remarks, Ya’akov refers to the practical preparations needed for another meeting of the brothers with Yosef. To the allowance itself to take Binyamin he tacks on another verse, which includes two elements: a supplication: "And God Almighty give you mercy before the man," and his coming to terms with the situation: "And as for me, if I be bereaved of my children, I am bereaved."

In *Bereishit Rabba*, we find in connection with this verse two *petichtot* and one *petira*.[[2]](#footnote-2) Let us consider the first *petichta*:

### "Happy is the man whom You instruct, O Lord":

### Afflictions, Wholeheartedness and freedom

I.

"And God Almighty give you mercy [before the man]."

Rabbi Pinechas opened in the name of Rabbi Chanan of Tzipori:

"Happy is the man whom You instruct, O Lord" (*Tehillim* 94:12).

And if he becomes angry, "and teach out of Your law" (ibid.).

What is written about Avraham? "And I will bless you, and make your name great" (*Bereishit* 12:2). As soon as he went out, famine leapt upon him, but he did not get angry, nor did he complain.

So too you, afflictions have beset you; don't be angry and don't complain.

Rabbi Alexandri said: There is nobody without afflictions. Happy is the man whose Torah is his affliction.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: All of the afflictions that beset a person and cause him to neglect his studies are afflictions of rebuke. And all of the afflictions that beset a person but do not cause him to neglect his studies, are afflictions of love.

Rabbi [Yehuda Ha-nasi] saw a certain blind man who was engaged in Torah study.

He said to him: Peace be with you, free-man.

He said to him: Did you hear that I had been a slave and was emancipated?

He said to him: No, only that you will be a free-man in the World to Come.

Rabbi Yudin said: It is written: "And if he smites out his slave's tooth, or his handmaid's tooth, [he shall let him go free for his tooth's sake]" (*Shemot* 21:27). One who is smitten with afflictions, all the more so.

Rabbi Pinechas said in the name of Rabbi Hoshaya:

"Happy is the man whom You instruct, O Lord" (*Tehillim* 94:12).

The Tetragrammaton is not written here, but rather the name *Yah*. Like him who is judged before a judge, he says: *Yah*.

So too our father Ya’akov said: He who in the future will say to afflictions: Enough, He should say to my afflictions: Enough.

"And God Almighty give you mercy before the man." (*Bereishit Rabba* 92, 1, ed. Theodor-Albeck, pp. 1136-1138)

The *petichta* before us consists of three parts: the *derasha* of Rabbi Pinechas in the name of the Tanna Rabbi Chanan which appears at the beginning; the *derasha* of Rabbi Pinechas in the name of Rabbi Hoshaya which appears at the end; and the middle section which is made up of the *derashot* between them. They all relate to the verse: "Happy is the man whom You instruct, O Lord, and teach out of Your law" (*Tehillim* 94:12).

The first *derasha* relates to the second part of the verse: "and teach out of Your law," expounding it as describing a situation in which a person is not whole in faith and therefore is not happy about his or her afflictions. In such a situation, one must learn from what is written in the Torah about Avraham, that despite the fact that he has been promised the land of Israel, he is forced to leave it immediately after arriving there and go down to Egypt on account of a famine; nevertheless he does not challenge or complain about the ways of Divine providence. This *derasha* ends with a direct appeal to the person hearing it, the true addressee. The objective of the *derasha* is not the exposition of Scripture or a deeper understanding of the stories of the patriarchs; rather, it is a sermon for the congregation listening to Rabbi Pinechas, who wishes to leave an impression upon their hearts and their way of life. The *derasha* strongly suggests an oration, perhaps in a synagogue.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The middle section of the *petichta* is made up of four units: two statements by Amoraim of Eretz Israel, the first by Rabbi Alexandri (of the third generation) and the second by his teacher Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi (of the first generation); one incident involving Rabbi [Yehuda Ha-nasi]; and one *derasha* of Rabbi Yudin (an Amora of Eretz Israel of the fourth-fifth generation).[[4]](#footnote-4)

The words of Rabbi Alexandri, which open with the assertion that suffering is the norm, constitute the conceptual starting point from which stems the entire discussion that follows. The second part of Rabbi Alexandri's remarks: "Happy is the man whose Torah is his affliction," requires explanation. In two manuscripts of *Bereishit Rabba* (MS Munich and MS Paris) an explanation is added: "How so? A person with a toothache or eye pain who cannot sleep is awake all night, and one who studies Torah is awake. As this one is awake, that one is awake."[[5]](#footnote-5) Unlike Rabbi Chanan in the first part of the *petichta*, who explains the two parts of the verse "Happy is the man whom You instruct, O Lord, and teach out of Your law" as relating to two different levels of faith, Rabbi Alexandri reads them as one continuum. There is nobody without afflictions, and happy is one whose affliction is toiling in Torah.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi also expounds the aforementioned verse in *Tehillim*. He understands the words, "and teach out of Your law," as a criterion for determining the nature of the afflictions. If the person who is suffering is able to study Torah, the afflictions are an expression of God's love, and therefore one is fortunate; these are afflictions of love. If, however, one is unable to study Torah, the afflictions are not an expression of God's love, but rather "afflictions of rebuke."[[6]](#footnote-6)

The verse "Happy is the man whose Torah is his affliction, O Lord, and instruct him out of Your law" appears in the middle of a psalm that deals entirely with the suffering of the righteous at the hands of the wicked. The psalm opens with a general cry:

O Lord, You God to Whom vengeance belongs, You God to Whom vengeance belongs, shine forth. Lift up Yourself, You judge of the earth; render to the proud their recompense. Lord, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked exult? (*Tehillim* 94:1-3).

It then relates specifically to the people of Israel: "They crush Your people, O Lord, and afflict Your heritage. They slay the widow and the stranger, and murder the fatherless. And they say: The Lord will not see, neither will the God of Ya’akov give heed" (vv. 5-7). The verse that is cited for our exposition is exceptional in the psalm in that its subject is the individual sufferer, whose afflictions come directly from the hand of God, rather than from some "nation" or band of "wicked" men. In addition, the verse refers to the man in question with the term "happy," which expresses a desired state. All this points to a special type of affliction.

The third unit in this section establishes the ability to study Torah while suffering not as an objective measure, but rather as an expression of the magnitude of the person's desire to study Torah despite all the difficulties. According to this, the determination whether or not the afflictions that beset a person are afflictions of love is also connected to his personal attitude. The story about Rabbi Yehuda Ha-nasi's excited response to the blind man who studies Torah emphasizes the blind man's freedom in the World to Come, not because of the fact that he studies Torah, but because of his refusal to let his disability prevent him from occupying himself in Torah study. His inner freedom allows him to live a life full of meaning in this world, and will grant him eternity in the World to Come.

Rabbi Yudin's *derasha* deals with the remuneration to be received in the World to Come by those who suffer in this world, without connection to the verse in *Tehillim* or Torah study. He presents an *a fortiori* argument from a person's obligation to compensate his fellow for damage that he caused him. It would seem that drawing an analogy between suffering and damages that obligate compensation somewhat undermines Rabbi Alexandri's assertion at the beginning of the *derasha* that "there is nobody without afflictions,"because it removes suffering from the normal course of the world and turns it into an exceptional event of damages. In so doing, Rabbi Yudin, on the one hand, returns the notion of suffering to the immediacy of the connection between God and man, which is absent in the words of Rabbi Alexandri, but on the other hand, continues to maintain a concept of suffering that is not connected to sin on the part of man. Rabbi Yudin's formulation expresses a certain distance between God and man, which, perhaps, reflects the condition of the afflicted man. Nevertheless, the magnitude of reward for afflictions in the World to Come expresses absolute trust in Divine justice.

In the third part of the *petichta*, Rabbi Hoshaya identifies a cry hidden between the words of the verse, in the name of God mentioned therein, God Almighty (*El Shaddai*): "'And God Almighty give you mercy'… He who in the future will say to afflictions: Enough (*dai*), He should say to my afflictions: Enough."[[7]](#footnote-7) This is the cry of one who can no longer bear seemingly endless suffering. Accordingly, the verse "Happy is the man whom You instruct, O Lord (*Yah*), and teach out of Your law" is expounded in a similar fashion, and the word *Yah* in the verse turns into a cry. In both verses, Rabbi Hoshaya finds the cry in the name of God. The experience of suffering is also an existential encounter with one's being completely in the hands of God. The cry is a supplication, and everything comes together in one moment when the barriers are removed.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The *petichta* opens then with an intellectual experience of Torah study as a source of faith: "And teach him out of Your law." It ends at the nadir of suffering, when a person just wants to be left alone. This text seems to be a powerful reflection of the consciousness of the Amoraim of Eretz Israel, who are unwilling to remain in the world of theory, but rather want to touch life itself.

This *petichta* finely illustrates how we can trace the time of its formation. The latest figure mentioned in the *petichta*, which reports the *derashot* of earlier generations both at its beginning and at its end, is that of Rabbi Pinechas, as stated, of the fifth generation. According to this, the *petichta* was created not before the fifth generation, perhaps by Rabbi Pinechas, perhaps by some other compiler.

### "For this let everyone who is godly pray to You": Suffering and prayer

Let us examine the continuation of the Midrash, the second *petichta*:

II.

"For this let everyone that is godly pray to You in a time when You may be found; [surely when the great waters overflow, they will not reach to him]" (*Tehillim* 32:6).

Zavdi ben Levi and Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi and Rabbi Yosei bar Petras — the three of them recited three verses at the time of death.

One of them said: "For this let everyone that is godly pray to You."

Another one said: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You have anointed my head with oil; my cup runs over." (*Tehillim* 23:5)

And another one said: "For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand" (*Tehillim* 84:11).

And some say: "Oh how abundant is your goodness" (*Tehillim* 31:20).

Rabbi Pinechas said in the name of Rabbi Hoshaya:

The Holy One, blessed be He, took the feet of the patriarch Ya’akov and set them in the sea.

He said to him: See the miracles that I will perform for your children.

This is what is stated: "When Yisrael came forth out of Egypt" (*Tehillim* 114:1) — Yisrael the patriarch.

Rabbi Chuna said in the name of Rabbi Acha: He also set the feet of the patriarchs in the sea.

This is what is stated: “Marvelous things did He in the sight of their fathers" (*Tehillim* 78:12).

"In a time when You may be found (*metzo*)" (*Tehillim* 32:6).

At the time of the final judgment (*mitzui ha-din*), at the time of the squeezing of the soul out of the body (*mitzui ha-nefesh*), at the time of the final count of sins (*mitzui ha-cheshbon*).

When Ya’akov saw that the final count was made, he began to pour out supplications.

"And God Almighty give you mercy." )*Bereishit Rabba* 92, 2, ed. Theodor-Albeck, pp. 1138-1139)

We will relate first to the frame of the *petichta,* and then to its contents. The verse in *Bereishit*, "And God Almighty give you mercy before the man," is expounded by way of the verse: "For this let everyone that is godly pray to You in a time when You may be found; surely when the great waters overflow, they will not reach to him.” The words "in a time when You may be found (*metzo*)" in *Tehillim*, which relate to an undefined point in time, are expounded at the end of the *petichta* in the sense of *mitzui*, exhausting a process before moving on to a new period.[[9]](#footnote-9) The anonymous *darshan* describes Ya’akov as seeing the sending of Binyamin to Egypt as the end of his affliction. It is true that this is a situation requiring a great amount of prayer, but already at this point it offers a glimmer of hope for a new period. If so, the second *petichta* continues from the point mentioned at the end of the first *petichta*: the acute awareness that suffering cannot continue turns into the endpoint of a process.

The two matters brought in the *petichta*, the verses that are expounded close to death and the *derasha* of Rabbi Pinechas in the name of Rabbi Hoshaya, also relate to liminal situations. The time of death is the end of life, but it is also the gateway to the world of eternity, to which the verses in the mouths of the Amoraim of Eretz Israel relate.[[10]](#footnote-10) The moment before the splitting of the Sea of Reeds is a moment of danger, terror and great prayer, after which the people of Israel are elevated to new heights of enormous public miraculous intervention.

According to what is stated here, the "mercy" in the verse in *Bereishit* relates not to the cessation of suffering, but to prayer.[[11]](#footnote-11)

### “I will not be Bereaved again”:

### THe end of the afflictions

Let us move on to the third and final leg of the topic of *yissurim* as it appears in *Bereishit Rabba*, namely, the double *petira* of our verse: "And God Almighty give you mercy before the man, that he may release to you your other brother and Binyamin. And as for me, if I be bereaved of my children, I am bereaved."

III.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi interpreted the verse as referring to the exiles.

"And God Almighty give you mercy" — "He made them also to be pitied of all those that carried them captive" (*Tehillim* 106:46).

"Before the man" — this is the Holy One, blessed be He, as it is stated: "The Lord is a man of war" (*Shemot* 15:3).

"That he may release to you your brother" — these are the Ten Tribes.

"Other and Binyamin" — these are the tribes of Yehuda and Binyamin.

"And as for me, if I be bereaved of my children" — with the first destruction.

"I am bereaved" — with the second destruction.

As I was bereaved with the second destruction, I will not be bereaved again.

Another explanation: "And God Almighty give you mercy before the man" — this is the government.

"That he may release to you your brother" — this is Yosef.

"Other" — this is Shimon.

"And Binyamin" — literally.

"And as for me, if I be bereaved of my children" — of Yosef.

"I am bereaved" — of Shimon.

As I was bereaved of Shimon, I will not be bereaved again. (*Bereishit Rabba* 92, 1-3, ed. Theodor-Albeck, pp. 1139-1140)

The main message implied by this *petira* is that there is a point in time at which the suffering will come to an end and never recur. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi expounds this principle regarding the Jewish people's path in history, transferring Ya’akov's paternal feelings for his youngest son, his remaining son from his beloved wife Rachel, to God in relation to the people of Israel in states of exile and destruction. The second *derasha* returns to the Biblical story of Ya’akov, who is forced to come to terms with Binyamin's going down to Egypt.

### a Theological perspective on Suffering

The three parts of the cycle of *derashot* on the issue of afflictions return to Ya’akov, who permits Binyamin to go down to Egypt. The Amoraim of Eretz Israel do not hesitate to portray Ya’akov in this manner. In this way, the fundamental conceptual discussion returns to the experiential-existential plane and it encounter human suffering in its most poignant moments.

Let us summarize the main insights on the subject of suffering that arise from the cycle of *derashot* taught here:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *Petichta* 1: "Happy is the man whom You instruct, O Lord" | * To learn wholeheartedness in times of suffering from the Torah's stories about Avraham * Afflictions of rebuke, afflictions of love * Not to see afflictions as a barrier to action (inner freedom) * The sufferer's search for the end of his suffering * The climax of suffering as a moment of connection and encounter |
| *Petichta* II: "For this let everyone that is godly pray to You" | * Bringing suffering to an end * The transition to a new situation as a moment of prayer |
| *Petira*: Exile, Ya’akov | * Certainty of an end to suffering |

In the teachings of the Tannaim, we find broad expression of the theological perspective on suffering:

Rabbi Akiva says: Do not treat me the way others treat their gods, that when good comes, they honor their gods… but when calamity comes, they curse their gods…

Furthermore, a person should be happier with afflictions than with good, for even if a person enjoys good all his days, he is not pardoned for the transgressions he committed. What pardons him for his transgressions? Say, afflictions.

Rabbi Eliezer ben Ya’akov says: "For whom the Lord loves he corrects" (*Mishlei* 3:12).

What brings a son to reconcile with his father? Say, afflictions.

Rabbi Meir says… Let your heart know the deeds that you have done and the afflictions that I brought upon you, that the afflictions I have brought upon you were not as egregious as your deeds.

Rabbi Yosei bar Yehuda says: Dear are afflictions, for the name of God falls upon him when afflictions beset him, as it is stated: "The Lord your God afflicts you" (*Devarim* 8:5).

Rabbi Yonatan says: Afflictions are dear; just as a covenant was made for the land, so a covenant was made for afflictions…

Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai says: Dear are afflictions, for three good gifts were given to Israel and the nations of the world desire them, and they were only given to them through afflictions. They are: the Torah, Eretz Israel and the World to Come…

What is the path that leads a person to life in the World to Come? Say, afflictions.

Rabbi Nechemya says: Dear are afflictions, for just as the offerings bring reconciliation, so afflictions bring reconciliation.

Rabbi Akiva says… Dear are afflictions. Despite all the effort that was done for him, and of all the toil that was spent on him, what brought him back to good were afflictions.

(*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael Yitro, Bachodesh*, 10)

The recurring refrain in the *Mekhilta* is that "dear are afflictions." They all describe the benefit of suffering for improving one's spirituality and closeness to God. In contrast, the Amoraim of Eretz Israel voice a different view. They do not only talk about afflictions; they make the experience of suffering present, and they even cry out: Enough.

Toward the end of the passage dealing with afflictions in tractate *Berakhot*, a story is brought that echoes the Amoraim of Eretz Israel, as we hear them in our examination of *Bereishit Rabba*:

Rabbi Chiya bar Abba fell ill, and Rabbi Yochanan went in to visit him.

He said to him: Are your afflictions dear to you?

He replied: Neither they nor their reward.

He said to him: Give me your hand.

He gave him his hand and he raised him.

Rabbi Yochanan once fell ill, and Rabbi Chanina went in to visit him.

He said to him: Are your afflictions dear to you?

He replied: Neither they nor their reward.

He said to him: Give me your hand.

He gave him his hand and he raised him.

Rabbi Elazar fell ill, and Rabbi Yochanan went in to visit him…

He said to him: Are your afflictions dear to you?

He replied: Neither they nor their reward.

He said to him: Give me your hand.

He gave him his hand and he raised him. (BT, *Berakhot* 5b)

Despite all the benefit of afflictions, these Sages are resolute in their assertion: "Neither they nor their reward." The second level that the Amoraim of Eretz Israel build over that of the Tannaim is a level of empathy and humanity, which refuses to idealize suffering. From listening to suffering, they know how to go beyond themselves and extend a hand, to teach those who are suffering to go beyond themselves, extend a hand and stand up.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. *Bereishit Rabba* is a classic exegetical Midrash, in which the *derashot* are brought in the order of the verses, and in which brief explanations are inserted alongside various different forms of *derasha*. For a more extensive discussion, see Ofra Meir, *Ha-sippur Ha-darshani Bi-Vreishit Rabba* (Tel-Aviv: 1987). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The *petira* is one of the *derasha* forms in Eretz Israel, in which the verse is expounded for another matter. For a more extensive discussion, see Yona Frankel, *Midrash Ve-aggada*, Vol. I (Tel Aviv: 1997), pp. 172-174. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Joseph Heinemann, *Derashot Be-tzibbur Bi-tkufat Ha-Talmud* (Jerusalem: 1982), pp. 7-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The fact that the student's statement is set before the statement of his teacher indicates deliberate editing in accordance with the subject matter, as will be clarified below. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This reading is taken from the parallel passage in *Midrash Tanchuma*; see *Yefei To'ar* and *Mattenot Kehuna*, and also the *Minchat Yehuda* commentary of Rabbi Yehuda Theodor, ad loc., ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 1137. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. No definition is given here as to the nature of "afflictions of rebuke," whether they are a punishment for some concrete transgression, or a signal regarding one's general spiritual state. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The are several earlier instances of the name *El Shaddai* across the book of *Bereishit*. The name first appears in God's command to Avraham regarding circumcision. See *Bereishit* 17:1; 28:3; 35:11; *Shemot* 6:3. This name is expounded in *Bereishit Rabba* 46, 3 (Theodor-Albeck, p. 460). For an extended discussion of the meaning of the name, see Ramban, *Bereishit* 17:1 and *Shemot* 6:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Compare to *Tanchuma* (Warsaw), *Miketz* 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The meaning of the word *mitzui* here is similar to its meaning in modern Hebrew. In Rabbinic literature, it usually denotes the concrete activity of squeezing or removing liquid. See Tosefta, *Zevachim* 7:10. Here, in the continuation, the *darshan* uses the term *shefikha*, pouring, which also relates to a liquid. See also *Yerushalmi*, *Berakhot* 4:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In the parallels in the *Yerushalmi*, *Avoda Zara* 3:1 and in *Bereishit Rabba* 62, 8, some of the cited verses are different. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. As is well known, the Rabbinic term for prayer is *rachamim*, mercy. The word *rachamim* appears many times in Scripture in the context of the end of the exile. See *Tehillim* 106:40-46; *Devarim* 13:18; I *Melakhim* 8:50. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)