YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Talmudic *Aggadot***

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Shiur #11: *Aggadot* of the Elderly Planters (Part I)

Choni and the Dreamers

Introduction

# In a number of places and different contexts in the literature of *Chazal*, we find *aggadot* that tell about an elderly man who is observed as he works in the field or plants trees, despite the fact that his advanced age puts in serious doubt his capacity to enjoy the fruit of his labor.

# However, among the sources there are distinctions, big and small, in a number of areas: the nature of the description, the response of the observer, the elderly man’s explanation of his actions, and the conclusion of the narrative. In this *shiur*, we will delve into a number of these traditions and the differences between them in an attempt to understand their basis.

**The Story in the Babylonian Talmud**

# The first narrative that we will discuss appears in Tractate *Ta’anit* in the Babylonian Talmud. The story follows the famous tale about Choni Ha-Ma’agel(the “circler”) and his success as a literal rainmaker:

1. R. Yochanan said: This righteous man [Choni] was throughout the whole of his life troubled about the meaning of the verse, “A song of ascents: When God brought back those that returned to Zion, we were like dreamers.” Is it possible for a person to dream continuously for seventy years?
2. One day he was journeying on the road and he saw a man planting a carob tree. He asked him, “How long does it take [for this tree] to bear fruit?”

The man replied: “Seventy years.”

He then further asked him: “Are you certain that you will live another seventy years?”

The man replied: “I found [ready grown] carob trees in the world; as my ancestors planted these for me, so I too plant these for my children.”

Choni sat down to have a meal and sleep overcame him. As he slept, a rocky formation enclosed upon him that hid him from sight, so he continued to sleep for seventy years. When he awoke, he saw a man gathering the fruit of the carob tree, and he asked him, “Are you the man who planted the tree?”

The man replied: “I am his grandson.”

Thereupon he exclaimed: “It is clear that I have been in a dream for seventy years!”

1. He returned home. He there enquired, “Is the son of Choni Ha-Ma’agel still alive?”

The people answered him, “His son is no more, but his grandson is still living.”

Thereupon he said to them: “I am Choni Ha-Ma’agel,” but no one would believe him.

He then repaired to the *beit midrash,* and there he overheard the scholars say, “The law is as clear (lit.: illuminated) to us as in the days of Choni Ha-Ma’agel,” for whenever he came to the *beit midrash* he would settle for the scholars any difficulty that they had.

He then called out, “I am he!” However, the scholars would not believe him, nor did they give him the honor he sought.

This hurt him greatly, so he sought mercy and died.

Rabba said: Hence the saying, “Either companionship or death.”

(Babylonian Talmud, *Ta’anit* 23a, based on Oxford Manuscript 23)

The story is composed of three parts. Prof. Jeffrey Rubenstein notes that the tale is composed of an internal story and an external story or framing device. [[1]](#footnote-2) The latter is about how Choni was troubled by the verse (*Tehillim* 126:1): “A song of ascents: When God brought back those that returned to Zion, we were like dreamers.” This enigma is resolved when Choni experiences seven decades of slumber (as long as the Babylonian exile). The internal story consists of Choni’s encounter with the man, his sleep, and the encounter with the man’s grandson; it stands on its own, without any need for the external story. This internal story is in fact a common folkloric motif: someone falls asleep for many years and awakens to a drastically different reality.

*Chazal* choose to use this motif for their purposes in a story about Choni. This motif provides the framework, and within it lies the content, which changes from one story to another. In the case of *Chazal*, they have a message to impart. The content of the framework in this specific story has the protagonist (in this case, Choni) witness a tree being planted even though the individual doing the work is unlikely to see the fruits of his labor. The actions and words of the protagonist are meant to teach us an important lesson about humanity and ethics. The individual that the protagonist meets is meant to teach us about altruism, contributing to the common good for the sake of coming generations. This is the message of the internal story.

How does this connect to the external story?

**The Critical Perspective**

Prof. Yona Fraenkel explicates this story and how its parts fit together to form a whole. The conclusion tells us that Choni was accustomed to receive “the honor he sought” for his novel ideas in the *beit midrash*. This is, as it were, compensation for his investment and his success in scholarly endeavors. He is therefore incapable of understanding the investment of the old man, for which he can expect no compensation.

Fraenkel points to some interesting wordplay in the story. The term used for bearing fruit is “*ta’in*,” spelled *tet*-*ayin*-*nun*. The term used for planting a tree is “*nata*,” spelled *nun*-*tet*-*ayin*. Choni sees not a casual relationship between the terms, but a causal one: one should not bother with planting (*nun*-*tet*-*ayin*) unless one will personally see the fruit-bearing (*tet*-*ayin*-*nun*). Torah scholarship is for Choni what agriculture is for the man, but Choni sees the yield of his toil immediately. Evidently, the encounter with the carob-planter is supposed to teach Choni about the reality of investing without personal recompense.

Indeed, the words of the man underscore this. He speaks of the fact that he himself found a world full of carob trees; just as the planters of those trees may never have benefited from them, he leaves carob trees in the world from which he may never benefit. Planting a carob tree is, by its very nature, an altruistic act. However, this idea does not remain confined to the ideological plain. Choni experiences something else; he sees how the grandson of the man indeed enjoys the carobs, thanks to his grandfather’s selfless investment. Witnessing this is supposed to teach Choni a lesson about the value of altruism. This is more than a moral teaching; it is a human experience that gives one the feeling that the grandfather’s investment for the sake of his offspring has been worthwhile.

However, Choni fails to understand this message. All he gleans from his encounter with the old man and his decades-long slumber is the external and technical meaning – how it may be conceivable that a person might sleep for seventy years, which allows him to understand the verse in *Tehillim*. It may be that this is a result of Choni being overly focused on himself.

Afterwards, Choni heads to the *beit midrash*. No one recognizes him, and it may be that this is payback for Choni; since he does not recognize the value of intergenerational connections, he is wounded by the lack of such a connection. Apparently, his reputation and image is not something that is passed down from one generation to another, and this is why the descendants of the sages of his era fail to recognize him.

Choni’s encounter with the time of his own grandchildren parallels his encounter with the elderly man’s grandson. This emphasizes the aspect of *midda ke-neged midda*, measure for measure, in Choni’s commensurate experience. He does not value investing in future generations, so those future generations do not “give him the honor he sought.”

Choni prays for death in response, and his fate is also described with striking wordplay: “However, the scholars would not believe him, nor did they give him the honor **he sought.** This hurt him greatly, so **he sought** mercy and died.”

**A Kinder View**

Fraenkel’s approach is quite severe in its evaluation of Choni’s character, but it is certainly feasible. However, I would like to suggest a different interpretation, a softer view of Choni that also attempts to understand the sequence of the narrative and the message to be gleaned from it.

Why did Choni not learn his lesson right away? We may consider the entire narrative in a new light if we consider the broader context of the *sugya* in which it appears.

As noted above, the story about Choni’s long sleep follows a tale about his rainmaking, a *baraita* cited in response to a similar narrative in the *mishna*. Shimon ben Shetach describes Choni as “a petulant child before his Father in Heaven.” Indeed, when Choni is not answered immediately with precipitation, he draws a circle around himself and swears not to leave it until God answers his prayers. Even when rain begins to fall, Choni takes issue with its rate and demands a change: “This is not what I asked for!”

This tale draws a picture of Choni as someone who is used to getting from God exactly what he seeks, as a result of their unique relationship. The exchange that he is accustomed to is immediate and precise.

The spiritual advantage of such a lifestyle is strong faith in God and His ability to listen and respond to our prayers. Still, some of the Sages take a dim view of this modus operandi.[[2]](#footnote-3)

It may very well be that the price of living such a miraculous life is an inability to comprehend the natural and regular order of things in the world. The reality of the world demands that one take into account future generations and work hard in advance, accepting the absence of immediate payoff at times.

We also find this attitude among the Generation of the Wilderness, who had become accustomed to subsisting on the miracle of manna. This bread from heaven, by its very definition, fell only once a day on each of the weekdays, supplying that day’s needs and thereby creating a “here-and-now” existence. Such a reality makes it difficult to comprehend the capacity to worry about the future.

As noted, in the Babylonian Talmud, there is an external story as well, which describes Choni’s puzzlement at the verse in *Tehillim* 126: "Is it possible for a person to dream continuously for seventy years?” The external story answers this question by having Choni sleep for seventy years.

Reading the internal story in light of the external story shifts the focus of the narrative. If we were to read only the internal story, we would focus on the lesson that the elderly man teaches – that out of concern for the coming generations and appreciation for all the good he has received from the world, he is willing to toil and labor for a world from which he may never benefit. Similarly, we would absorb the criticism directed against Choni or his spiritual path due to his failure to understand the elderly man’s actions.

However, the context changes everything; the external frameworks shifts the focus irrevocably. The image of Choni is not that of someone who fails to understand a certain suspect of human behavior, but rather that of a frustrated biblical scholar. Choni takes the verse literally,[[3]](#footnote-4) so he believes that the returnees to Zion must have spent seventy years sleeping, awakening only upon their restoration to the Land of Israel. How could those who returned to Zion after seven decades in Babylonia have spent all those years in a fugue state?

Thus, the external story also deals with a certain incomprehension on Choni’s part. He does not seem to grasp the poetic metaphor of this psalm, nor the plain understanding of reality: “We were **like** dreamers” — the returnees to Zion feel (or have felt) **as if** they are in a dream.

Considering this metaphor, we might expect the story to have Choni undergo some experience or event that would make him realize the true meaning of the text. However, this is not what happens at all; in fact, just the opposite occurs. Choni indeed falls asleep for seventy years, confirming his reading of the verse: a person can sleep for a lifetime. Thus, Choni retains his approach.

Moreover, Choni gets a sort of divine stamp of approval for his view. The miracle is two-fold: not only does he survive a seventy-year sleep, he is protected from view by a rocky formation that springs up, sheltering him from all observers and buttressing his own point of view.

Choni’s reading of the verse, which is so drastically different from ours, is neither happenstance nor ignorance nor incomprehension. Rather, Choni’s reading emanates from his peculiar worldview.

As noted above, Choni’s worldview is different from that of normal people, and it is nurtured by his life experience, which also differs from the life experience of normal people. Choni’s existence is a miraculous one, not a natural one of regular order. Logically, this would consequently have an impact on his approach to the biblical text.

Choni anticipates a literal fulfillment of the verse. He is not accustomed to interpreting supernatural analogies as metaphorical, as representing something other than what they say, as differing from reality and the laws of nature. This is because his world is one in which supernatural events are par for the course.

In this context we may connect the internal story to the external framing device. The elderly man planting the carob tree without anticipating direct benefit is also a dreamer of a sort. This is not a nocturnal reverie, but the type of dream that one may fulfill by day: a vision. This elderly man has a vision, and this is what motivates him to plant a carob tree.

This concept of a dream also allows for a new interpretation of the verse that so perplexes Choni, even if it is more allegorical. “A song of ascents: When God brought back those that returned to Zion, we were like dreamers.” This is not a dream in the midst of sleep; this is not about sleep at all. This dream is one that is dreamt during the day, a vision of the returnees to Zion. This may have been a dream that they had in Babylonia – that they would one day return to Jerusalem and rebuild the House of God – and this dream is realized when they return to Zion. Alternatively, this may be a dream that they have upon returning to Zion. Anyone familiar with the Book of *Ezra*-*Nechemia* knows full well how difficult the first few years are for those who return to the Land of Israel from Babylonia. They suffer greatly and encounter many obstacles in their attempts to rebuild the Jewish settlement in the Land and the Temple. Indeed, their Temple pales in comparison to the one that had been destroyed seventy years earlier.

Naturally, the returnees to Zion had to be dreamers. They dream of a different future, a future in which the status of the Jews in the Land of Israel will improve, their sovereignty will be strengthened, and the Temple will be restored to its glory of yore. This may be the dream that they dream; the fulfillment of this vision will not be in their own lifetimes, but in those of their descendants. This dream gives them the motivation and the strength to be courageous and to invest in building up the Land despite the paltry return on their investment that they personally experience. As the psalm goes on to say, they are “those who sow in tears.”

In the same psalm, we find “those who go out weeping,” recalling *Ezra* 3:12: “And many of the elderly priests, Levities and patriarchal heads had seen the former House with their own eyes. When they observed the foundation of this House being laid, they wept with a loud voice, as many shouted for joy.” The Second Temple pales in comparison to the First. Their dream is to “reap with songs of joy,” to “come back with songs of joy,” even if at the moment it is difficult to see this reality – even if it will only come into existence in the coming generations.

Indeed, this elderly man lives with a dream; Choni, on the other hand, seems to live with no dream. This may be a result of the reality of his life. Choni’s life requires no dreaming, since everything that he sees fit to happen indeed occurs immediately and miraculously. This may be why he does not know how to dream. The only way for him to understand the phrase “we were like dreamers” is in the most concrete way possible – being asleep.

The story concludes with Choni’s return to his house (*beitei*) and to the *beit midrash*. Here we see how profound the disconnection is between Choni and his environment. He is unrecognized and unrecognizable, whether in his own home or in the *beit midrash*. It appears that this practical disconnection points to the existential and spiritual gap between Choni and his environment. The Circler’s miraculous life experience is not the life experience of most human beings, not even that of the paradigmatic scholars in the *beit midrash*, who toil in Torah without resorting to miracles.

The gap between their differing life experiences is apparent even when Choni is among his contemporaries and his natural surroundings, though not quite as strongly. According to the narrative, Choni manages to find his seat in the *beit midrash* in his own time. Nevertheless, the story deepens the gap by telling of the miraculous out-of-time encounter between Choni, the sleeper of seventy years, and an environment in which normal, natural life reigns supreme. The unfamiliarity with Choni symbolizes the vast gap between their life experience and his.

**The Version in the Jerusalem Talmud**

In conclusion, let us consider the parallel story in the Jerusalem Talmud:

R. Yehuda, son of converts, said: This Choni Ha-Ma’agel was the grandson of that Choni Ha-Ma’agel.

One day around the time of the Destruction of the Temple, he went out to the hillside to his workers. While he was there, it began to rain, so he ducked into a cave, where he sat and became drowsy. He sank so deeply into sleep that seventy years passed, during which the Temple was destroyed and then rebuilt. Once seventy years had passed, he awoke and left the cave, discovering a changed world: the vineyards had become olive groves and the olive groves had become fields of grain.

He asked the locals: “What news is there in the world?”

They replied: “Don’t you know what news there is?”

He responded: “No.”

“Then who are you?” they asked.

“Choni Ha-Ma’agel,” he replied.

They said to him: “We have heard that when you entered the Temple Court, it would be filled with light!”

He went to the Court, and it was filled with light. He applied this verse to himself: “When God brought back those that returned to Zion, we were like dreamers.”

(Jerusalem Talmud, *Ta’anit* 3:9)

This story is far simpler than its parallel in the Babylonian Talmud. There is no complexity of structure, no intertwining plotlines and messages, but rather a straightforward tale: this Choni (grandfather of the one in the *mishna*) falls asleep while the First Temple is still standing and awakens when the Second Temple has already been established. The world has changed; some of the differences are physical, but we may assume that the narrative also alludes to the spiritual difference between the First Temple and the Second. Nevertheless, Choni is a static figure; he does not change.

Unlike in the Babylonian Talmud, the outcome is positive for Choni. He illuminates the Temple Court just as he used to, which means he has retained his status, and he gets his happy ending.

As Rubenstein demonstrates, the narrative in the Babylonian Talmud seems to be a reworking of the simpler tale in the Jerusalem Talmud, or some similar story. The Babylonian Talmud adds a great deal to the story, fundamentally changing the pleasant atmosphere of the Jerusalem Talmud’s version into a toxic one, in which the great tension between Choni and his surroundings leads to a tragic end.

The Babylonian Talmud chooses to broaden and deepen the gap between Choni and his environment. Part of this emphasis is expressed in the tragic conclusion, which makes the tension so thick as to be unbearable. However, when we consider this tale in its broader context, it appears unreasonable to adopt Fraenkel’s reading, in which the *gemara* is overly critical of Choni; this would undermine the previous component of the *sugya* and its main thrust, about Choni the rainmaker, viewed in a very positive light.[[4]](#footnote-5)

We may surmise that the Babylonian Talmud shapes the story to broaden and deepen the gap between Choni and his surroundings because it addresses the world of the *beit midrash*, and in the academic realm, Choni stands farther apart from his colleagues then he does in the realm of the Temple (*Beit Ha-Mikdash*), which the Jerusalem Talmud addresses. The world of the Temple is in any case a world of miracles, and Choni Ha-Ma’agel fits in well in such an environment. On the other hand, the characteristic daily environment of the *beit midrash* is not one of miracles, and so a character like Choni would not fit in there. This may be why the Babylonian Talmud’s narrative concludes in a rift and a tragic resolution, unlike the harmonious conclusion of the Jerusalem Talmud’s tale.

Note that the story in the Bavli uses the idea that Choni's presence illuminates, but in a different way. In the Jerusalem Talmud, Choni illuminates the Temple with physical light. In the *beit* *midrash* in Choni's days, his presence “illuminated” the *sugya*, metaphorically. Apparently, Choni's period was a transitional one, between the supernatural world of the Temple and the natural world of the *beit* *midrash*. When Choni returns to the *beit* *midrash* two generations later, the *beit* *midrash* has become what it is meant to be, in essence – a place where results are achieved by vigorous studying, not by miracles. Furthermore, sometimes, results aren't achieved at all, and the labors – the intellectual efforts – of one generation are only appreciated by later ones. In this sense, the *beit* *midrash* represents a model similar to the one represented by the carob-planter – hard work is invested, often only to be enjoyed by later generations. Choni just doesn't belong there.

We may summarize the view of the Babylonian Talmud as follows: The world of the *beit midrash* is not a world of miracles. However, such a world has its own benefits. As per this story, it is a world of labor and of dreams.

Translated by Yoseif Bloch

1. Jeffrey Rubenstein, *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud* (Baltimore, 2010), pp. 62-76. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Shimon ben Shetach states that he would have excommunicated anyone else who dared to act in such a manner; see also the parallel in the Jerusalem Talmud, *Ta’anit* 3:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. In truth, Choni is not taking it precisely literally, as he ignores the simile of “we were **like** dreamers.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. For further study, see our previous series for a thorough analysis of the story of Choni the rainmaker in both the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)