YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Talmudic *Aggadot***

**Rav Dr. Yonatan Feintuch**

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Sponsored by Aaron and Tzipora Ross and family   
in honor of the *yahrtzeits* of our esteemed grandparents:   
Neil Fredman (Shmuel Nachamu ben Shlomo Moshe HaKohen, 10 Tevet),   
Clara Fredman (Chaya bat Yitzchak Dovid, 15 Tevet),   
and Walter Rosenthal (Shimon ben Moshe, 16 Tevet).

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**Shiur #11: The *aggada* of the poor man, the rich man, and the wicked man – part I**

1. **The *aggada***

In last week’s *shiur,* we discussed Chazal’s critical attitude toward the *kohanim* at the end of the Second Temple Period. In this shiur, we will continue analyzing the same theme with a long *aggada* that appears in *Massekhet Yoma* as part of a discussion about the garments the *Kohen Gadol* wears on Yom Kippur.

The third chapter of *Massekhet Yoma* starts to describe the order of the Divine service performed by the *Kohen Gadol* on Yom Kippur. At the heart of this chapter in the Talmud Bavli, at the end of a brief unit that talks about special garments that the *Kohen Gadol* wears for the Yom Kippur service, we find the following aggadic *beraita* (35b):

Our Rabbis taught: the poor, the rich, and the wicked come before the [heavenly] court.

They say to the poor man, ‘Why did you not occupy yourself with Torah?’ If he says, ‘I was poor and worried about my sustenance,’ they say to him, ‘Were you poorer than Hillel?’ It was said of Hillel the Elder that every day he used to work and earn one tropeik. He would give half to the guard at the Beit Midrash, and spend the other half on food for himself and for his family. One day he found no way to earn anything, and the guard at the Beit Midrash would not allow him to enter. He climbed up and sat by the window, so as to hear the words of the living God from the mouths of Shemaya and Avtalyon. They say that day was the eve of Shabbat, during the month of Tevet [i.e., mid-winter], and snow fell down upon him from heaven. When the dawn came, Shemaya said to Avtalyon: Brother Avtalyon, usually [lit. “on every day”] this house is well-lit, but to-day it is dark; is it perhaps a cloudy day?’ They looked up and saw the figure of a man at the window. They went up and found him covered by three cubits of snow. They removed him, bathed and anointed him and placed him in front of the fire. They said, ‘This man is deserving of having Shabbat desecrated on his behalf.’

To the rich man they say, ‘Why did you not occupy yourself with Torah?’ If he says, ‘I was rich and occupied with my possessions,’ they say to him: ‘Were you then richer than R. Elazar?’ It was said of R. Elazar b. Charsom that his father left him a thousand cities on the continent and, correspondingly, one thousand boats on the sea. Every day, he would take a sack of flour on his shoulder and go from city to city and from province to province to study Torah. One day his servants found him and seized him for public service. He said to them, ‘I beg of you, allow me to go and study Torah.’ They said, ‘By the life of R. Elazar b. Charsom, we shall not allow you to go.’ He had never seen them, for he would sit and occupy himself with Torah all day and night.

To the wicked person they say, ‘Why did you not occupy yourself with Torah?’ If he says, ‘I was handsome and occupied with sensual passion,’ they would say to him, ‘Were you then more handsome than Yosef?’ It was said of Yosef, the righteous one, that every day the wife of Potifar would try to entice him with words. The garments she put on for him in the morning, she did not wear in the evening; those she had put on in the evening, she did not wear in the morning. She said to him, ‘Yield to me!’ He said, ‘No.’ She said, ‘I shall have you imprisoned.’ He said, ‘The Lord releases the bound’ (Tehillim 146). [She said,] ‘I shall bring down your proud stature.’ He replied, ‘The Lord raises those who are bowed down’ (ibid.) [She said,] ‘I shall blind your eyes.’ He replied, ‘The Lord opens the eyes of the blind’ (ibid.) She offered him a thousand talents of silver to make him yield to her, to lie with her, to be near her, but he would not listen to her; not to ‘lie with her’ in this world, nor ‘to be with her’ in the world to come.

Thus [the example of] Hillel condemns the poor, [the example of] R. Elazar b. Charsom condemns the rich, and Yosef, the righteous one, condemns the wicked.”

1. **Analysis: the *aggada* as a collection of three separate lessons**

Our *aggada* brings together three separate scenes, introduced with the inclusive heading, “The poor, the rich, and the wicked come before the [heavenly] court”, and followed by the inclusive conclusion, “Thus, Hillel condemns the poor, R. Elazar b. Charsom condemns the rich, and Yosef, the righteous one, condemns the wicked.” The unifying subject is the judgment of different sorts of people by the heavenly court. The central message of the *aggada* is that every person, in every situation, is able – and therefore obligated – to devote himself to Torah study, and he will be answerable for this on the Day of Judgment.

Each of the three scenes comprising the *aggada* is actually a narrative that stands alone, and therefore, we might analyze each as an independent creation with its own message. For example, the first story, about Hillel the Elder, has a few themes. First and foremost is the emphasis on Hillel’s devotion to Torah study, and the appreciation that Shemaya and Avtalyon express in view of this devotion. Yona Frankel, who analyzes this unit as an independent narrative in one of his books,[[1]](#footnote-1) notes another theme, which is emphasized through the literary molding: the relationship between the occupants of the Beit Midrash (who are both physically and spiritually “warm”) and the outside world, which is sometimes very cold – in both senses. According to Frankel, the story calls upon the occupants of the Beit Midrash to be more aware of and sensitive to those on the outside. In this story, someone who comes from the outside, having lacked the financial means to enter the Beit Midrash, ultimately becomes one of the greatest of Sages to arise amongst the Jewish people.

The other two stories might be analyzed in a similar way. However, our intention here is to examine the *aggada* as a single unit, within its context in the third chapter of *Massekhet Yoma*, and therefore we will not dwell on the meaning of each separate account.

**“The poor, the rich, and the wicked?”**

As noted, the *aggada* is comprised of three parts (along with an introduction and a conclusion). A quick overview of the literary structure shows that each part is built on more or less the same pattern, as the following table demonstrates:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| They say to the poor man, | To the rich man they say, | To the wicked person they say, |
| ‘Why did you not occupy yourself with Torah?’ | ‘Why did you not occupy yourself with Torah?’ | ‘Why did you not occupy yourself with Torah?’ |
| If he says, ‘I was poor and worried about my sustenance,’ | If he says, ‘I was rich and occupied with my possessions,’ | If he says, ‘I was handsome and occupied with sensual passion,’ |
| they say to him, ‘Were you poorer than Hillel?’ | they say to him: ‘Were you then richer than R. Elazar?’ | they would say to him, ‘Were you then more handsome than Yosef?’ |
| It was said of Hillel the Elder that every day… | It was said of R. Elazar b. Charsom that… every day… | It was said of Yosef, the righteous one, that every day… |

This structure testifies to a deliberate ordering of the three accounts in such a way as to create a unified, cohesive whole, emphasizing and amplifying the general theme. This theme is formulated in the introduction and in the conclusion, and is illustrated through the three stories, all showing that a person wishing to study Torah can overcome any obstacle. Therefore, no one can claim before the heavenly court that he was prevented from engaging in study by a difficulty.

However, upon closer examination of the three parts, we discover that the uniform structure set out above is a sort of “optical illusion”: the third story, about Yosef, is actually very different from the first two. In contrast to the accounts of Hillel and R. Elazar b. Charsom overcoming their respective challenges in order to engage in Torah, Yosef’s story is about dealing with sexual temptation. Yosef manages to withstand his passion and does not give in to the temptations and entreaties of Potifar’s wife – but at no stage in the story does he engage in Torah study. Thus, not only is this account different from the previous two and a deviation from the main theme, but it is in fact out of place under its very own heading within the *aggada:* “Why did you not engage in Torah?” Another inconsistency in content and language concerns the object of the comparison: while the poor man and the rich man standing before the heavenly court are compared, respectively, to the poor Hillel and the rich R. Elazar, the wicked man is compared to Yosef – whom the *aggada* itself refers to as “Yosef, the righteous one!”

In fact, the story of Yosef is out of place in terms of its content, too. The poor man and the rich man are mirror-images of one another; two polar extremes on a singular continuum. Together they create a harmonious and complete structure with a simple message: nothing related to material possessions in this world – be they abundant or scarce – should prevent a person from engaging in Torah study. The wicked man, with his sexual cravings, belongs to a different continuum.[[2]](#footnote-2) The motivation for including the story of Yosef within this *aggada* cannot be asserted with certainty. Perhaps the reason is that the number three is a typological number that creates a whole. Alternatively, perhaps the story of Yosef is included in order to broaden the message to address the realm of sexual temptation, too. However, as we shall see, the story of Yosef makes an important contribution to the greater context of the *beraita* within the discussion in the Gemara, This in turn sheds light on the reason for the inclusion within the sugya of this particular beraita.[[3]](#footnote-3)

1. **The *sugya* concerning the garments of the *Kohen Gadol***

As noted, our *aggada* appears in the third chapters of *Massekhet Yoma*. This chapter introduces the service of the *Kohen Gadol* on Yom Kippur with a description of the proclamation of sunrise. The chapter includes a description of the daily actions that are performed by the *Kohen Gadol*, the special actions performed on Yom Kippur, and the transitions between these two types of service. None of this is connected in any way to the *aggada* with its three characters standing before the heavenly court. What, then, is this doing in the midst of this chapter?

The subject of the *aggada* – the judgment of different types of Jews – is related in the general sense to Yom Kippur, when people are judged for their actions and try to atone for past misdeeds. However, if this were the intended connection, we would expect to find this *aggada* in the eighth chapter of the *massekhet*, where the *mishnayot* deal with repentance and atonement, rather than in the middle of the third chapter. Moreover, the first story, about Hillel the Elder, mentions the care administered to the frozen Hillel by the occupants of the Beit Midrash, which is an instance of life-saving action which is permitted even where Shabbat will thereby be desecrated. The subject of *pikuach nefesh* (saving a life) is likewise addressed in detail in the eighth chapter (82a-85b), which makes it all the more surprising that we encounter this *aggada* in the third chapter rather than later on.

An initial glance at the discussion in which the *aggada* appears would seem to suggest that its placement is a technical matter of association: the section preceding our *aggada* (*Yoma* 35a-b) includes a *beraita* by R. Elazar ben Charsom. However, he is mentioned there in a completely different context, as part of a halakhic discussion about the value of the garments worn by the *Kohen* *Gadol* on Yom Kippur:

“It was said of R. Elazar ben Charsom that his mother made him a tunic worth twenty thousand mina, but his fellow *kohanim* would not allow him to wear it, because he appeared to be naked.”

A closer look reveals further connections between the halakhic discussion and the *aggada*. The above *beraita* about R. Elazar b. Charsom is part of a *sugya* focusing on the “white [linen] garments” of the *Kohen Gadol* on Yom Kippur. The Mishna establishes that the *Kohen Gadol* had two sets of linen garments for Yom Kippur – one for the morning, the other for the end of the day – and states their monetary value:

“In the morning he put on [fine] Pelusin linen, with a value of twelve maneh, and in the afternoon [he put on garments made of] Indian linen, with a value of eight hundred zuz. These are the words of Rabbi Meir. But the Sages say: in the morning he wore linen with a value of eighteen maneh and in the afternoon - linen with a value of twelve maneh, [or some other combination] totaling thirty maneh. This came from the public treasury, and if he wished to add [to this sum], he did so from his own funds.”

The end of the Mishna establishes that a *Kohen Gadol* who wished to wear more luxurious garments could do so if he added the difference from his own money. The Gemara discusses the license given to the *kohanim* to wear garments that were more expensive than the necessary minimum:[[4]](#footnote-4)

“R. Huna b. Yehuda, or, as some say, R. Shemuel b. Yehuda, learned: After the community service is over, a *Kohen* whose mother had made him a tunic, may put it on and perform private service wearing it, provided he hands it over to the community. [But] is it not self-evident [that he could perform private service (Rashi: ‘The removal of the pan and the censer, which is not needed for the public service…)]? You might say, ‘There is reason to fear that he may not hand it over completely,’ therefore he teaches us that we have no such fear.

It was said concerning R. Yishmael b. Fabi that his mother made him a tunic worth one hundred minas which he put on to perform private service and then handed it over to the community. It was said concerning R. Elazar b. Charsom that his mother made him a tunic worth twenty thousand minas ….”.

The *beraita* describing the case of R. Elazar b. Charsom also records the reaction of the other *kohanim*:

“It was said concerning[[5]](#footnote-5) R. Elazar b. Charsom that his mother made him a tunic worth twenty thousand minas, but his fellow *kohanim* **would not allow him** (*lo hinichuhu*) to wear it, for he appeared to be naked.”

This expression recalls the expression used in the *aggada*, concerning R. Elazar b. Charsom and his servants. The tension in this scenario surrounds his desire to be “allowed” to study Torah, but the servants do not agree:

“He said to them, ‘I beg of you, **allow me** (*hanichuni*) to go and study Torah.’ They said, ‘By the life of R. Elazar b. Charsom, **we shall not allow you** (*ein menichin otkha*) to go.”

Further support for the comparison is to be found in the fact that the formula, “his fellow *kohanim* would not allow him” is unique to the *beraita* as it appears in the Talmud Bavli. In the other sources where we find parallel *beraitot* – the Tosefta and the Yerushalmi – a different verb is used:

“A different story is told of R. Elazar b. Charsom, whose mother made him a tunic worth twenty thousand [minas], and he stood and sacrificed upon the altar, but his fellow *kohanim* brought him down [from the altar] because he could be seen through it as though naked.” (Tosefta, Kippurim 1,22; similarly, Yerushalmi, *Yoma* 3:6, 40d).

Against this background, the connection between the expression “they did not allow him” in the *beraita* in the Bavli and the expressions appearing in the *aggada* has greater weight. Moreover, further on in the *aggada*, in the story about Yosef, we find more connections to the *sugya* concerning the *Kohen Gadol’s* garments. One of the most prominent of these links appears in the description of the efforts by Potifar’s wife to entice Yosef:

“The garments she put on for him in the morning, she did not wear in the evening; those she had put on in the evening, she did not wear in the morning.”

It is difficult to ignore the connection between this aggadic description and the law appearing in the Mishna, according to which the *Kohen Gadol* had two sets of linen garments – one for the morning and the other for the afternoon. We will discuss the significance of this connection in the next shiur.

Another connection is a comparison between the portrayal of Yosef in this story and the portrayal of R. Elazar b. Charsom in the *sugya* concerning the *Kohen Gadol’s* garments. Concerning the latter we learn that his mother made him a special tunic, which aroused protest on the part of the other *kohanim*, who did not allow him to wear it.[[6]](#footnote-6) This description recalls the biblical story of Yosef, both in terms of language (“whose mother made him a tunic” – “and he made him a striped tunic” (*Bereishit* 37:3),[[7]](#footnote-7) and in terms of content: Yosef’s father made him a special tunic that aroused the anger of his brothers (albeit for a different reason), and ultimately they strip him of it. In the biblical story about Potifar’s wife, Yosef loses a garment once again:

“And it was, as she spoke to Yosef every day,[[8]](#footnote-8) that he did not listen to her, to lie with her, or to be with her. And it came to pass about this time, that Yosef went into the house to perform his work, and there was none of the men of the house there within. And she caught him by his garment, saying, Lie with me, and he left his garment in her hand, and fled, and went outside.” (*Bereishit* 39:10-12)

These similarities between the *aggada* and the halakhic discussion preceding it do not appear to be incidental; they seem to point to a more fundamental connection between the *beraita* and the *sugya*, going beyond mere association. In the next shiur we will therefore try to expose the nature of the connection between our *aggada* and the *sugya* concerning the garments of the *Kohen Gadol* on Yom Kippur, and thereby conclude our discussion of this *aggada*.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. Y. Frankel, *Iyyunim be-Olamo ha-Ruchani shel Sippur ha-Aggada*, Tel Aviv 5741, pp. 66-69 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In fact, there is a different source (Avot de-Rabbi Natan, second version, chapter 12, Shechter edition p. 30), featuring an *aggada* with a similar structure and similar message, where there is no mention of the wicked man. The structure has four parts instead of three: there is a poor man, a rich man, and two other challenges – and all of these are represented by R. Akiva:

   [They say] to the person, ‘Why did you not study Torah in this world?’ He says, ‘I was poor.’ [They answer,] ‘Rabbi Akiva, too, was poor.’ [If he says,] ‘I was rich,’ [they answer,] ‘Rabbi Akiva, too, was rich.’ [If he says,] ‘I was occupied [with other matters]’, they answer, ‘Rabbi Akiva, too, was occupied with other matters.’ [They say,] ‘Perhaps your forefathers were not worthy of you [studying Torah] – but the forefathers of Rabbi Akiva were not worthy of him, either.’ Therefore *Chazal* taught, ‘Rabbi Akiva will bring much shame to anyone who did not study Torah in this world.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rather than, for example, the *beraita* that appears in Avot de-Rabbi Natan, as cited in the previous footnote. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The basis for the discussion in the Gemara can be found in the Tosefta 1:21-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The expression, ‘It was said concerning…” appears as the introduction to both *beraitot*. This is a very common expression in aggadic passages, and therefore this similarity was not noted above. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. It is also interesting that in the aggada, R. Elazar b. Charsom's father is the source of his wealth, just like in the discussion of his tunic, his mother is the source of his costly garment (I thank Rachel Grossman for this remark). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The connection between the tunic of the *Kohen Gadol* and the tunic of Yosef is noted in Midrash Vayikra Rabba 10,6:

   “The tunic atones for those who wear garments made of forbidden mixes, as it is written, ‘And he made him a striped tunic’.” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Attention should be paid to the similarity between the biblical story and the recurring pattern in the *aggada*: “Every day…”. Likewise, the biblical narrative features a transition from an everyday reality to a one-time situation, creating the dramatic turning-point (v. 11), just as we find in the *aggada*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)