YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**TALMUDIC AGGADA**

**By Rav Yitzchak Blau**

The htm version of this shiur is available at:

<http://vbm-torah.org/archive/aggada72/11aggada.htm>

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In memory of our grandparents, whose yahrzeits fall this week:

Shmuel Nachamu ben Shlomo Moshe HaKohen Fredman (10 Tevet)

Chaya bat Yitzchak David Fredman (15 Tevet)

Shimon ben Moshe Rosenthal (16 Tevet)

By their grandchildren and great-grandchildren,

Aaron and Tzipora Ross and family

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**Shiur #11: Talking about the Bride**

How does one dance before the bride [i.e. what does one say about her]? Beit Shammai says: “The bride is as she is.” Beit Hillel says: “The bride is beautiful and graceful.” Beit Shammai said to Beit Hillel: “If the bride is lame or blind, will we say she is beautiful and graceful? Did the Torah not say, ‘Keep distant from falsehood’ (*Shemot* 23:7)?” Beit Hillel said to Beit Shamai: “Even according to your position, if a person acquires a poor purchase in the market, should you praise it in his eyes or denigrate it? You should praise it.” Therefore, the Sages said: “A person’s disposition should always be pleasant with people.” (*Ketubot* 16b-17a)

Last week’s class addressed the clash between peace and truth, which is the apparent point of contention in this passage as well. According to this interpretation, Beit Shammai favors truth, whereas Beit HiIlel prefers peace. Indeed, Ritva explains Beit Hillel based on the statement in the *gemara* in *Yevamot* (65b) that we fabricate for the sake of peace. However, it seems hard to accept that Beit Shammai requires brutal honesty. Does the school of Shammai expect the wedding guests to publically catalogue all the bride’s shortcomings?

Tosafot offer a less harsh reading of Beit Shammai in which the guests do not insult the bride. Rather, they either remain silent, or focus on her positive qualities. In a sense, Beit Shammai argues that we need not choose between opposing ideals. We can refrain from uttering a falsehood, while simultaneously not insulting the bride or her family. How does Beit Hillel respond to this argument? They contend that some questions cannot be avoided. If someone asks: “How is the bride?” and you respond with silence or by praising her bowling prowess, those listening get the implicit negative message. Since the clash of ideals is inescapable, we must make a choice, and Beit HIllel prefers a lie when the truth will prove insulting.

This explanation of Beit Hillel reminds me of a famous thesis advocated by Isaiah Berlin. Berlin argues that humanity is tempted to believe in one grand harmonizing theory enabling simultaneous realization of all the ideals we value. In truth, some of these ideals, such as liberty and equality, inherently conflict with each other. Frequently, we need to determine when to give up one ideal for the sake of another. Our theme provides one of Berlin’s examples. “You believe in always telling the truth, no matter what; I do not, because I believe that it can sometimes be too painful and too destructive” (“The Pursuit of the Ideal” p. 12, in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*). Whereas Beit Shammai attempts to adhere fully to both truth and peace, Beit Hillel follows Berlin in arguing that unavoidable clashes force us to make difficult choices and to establish preferences.

Maharal offers an alternative understanding of Beit Hillel in which their position does not involve any fabrication. This *gemara* is not discussing an objective fact, such as who was the third American president or what is the chemical makeup of water. Rather, the *gemara* discusses a subjective judgment regarding the attractiveness of the bride. In this context, the guest can confidently answer that the bride is pretty, because he assumes that the groom finds her so. In effect, beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

According to Maharal’s reading of Beit Hillel, why does Beit Shammai differ? Perhaps Beit Shammai thinks that looks also belong in the category of objective evaluations. Alternatively, the school of Shammai might contend that the convention is for the guest to state his own opinion and not that of the groom. Therefore, offering a positive report based on the presumed estimation of the groom’s opinion still constitutes a fabrication.

R. Yerucham Fishel Perlow raises another potential point of contention between the rival Talmudic schools (see his commentary on Rasag’s *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, volume I, p. 312). Is there a formal biblical prohibition against lying or a positive commandment to tell the truth? R. Shimon ben Tzemach Duran enumerates such a mitzva in his *Zohar Ha-rakiya* (positive commandment 159). The verse, “Keep distant from falsehood,” however, appears in a judicial context, and may only address the honesty of judges. Since Beit Shammai cites the verse in a non-judicial context, they obviously hold this verse forbids lying in general. In contrast, Beit Hillel limits the concrete prohibition to a judge who acts with dishonesty. Perhaps this interpretation of the verse explains why Beit Hillel finds it easier to recommend fabrication. R. Perlow says that this explanation of the debate emerges clearly from *Kalla Rabbati* (9:1).

Even if we assume that the prohibition applies specifically to judges, this assumption does not imply that the Torah is indifferent to issues of honesty and falsehood. Questions of moral character and personality traits do not lend themselves to rigidly defined *halakhot* (laws). No law specifically prohibits becoming angry or expressing excessive pride, yet the rabbinic tradition clearly views both as highly problematic. In fact, the Sages compare both anger and arrogance to idolatry (*Yalkut Shimoni Mishlei* 954, *Lekah Tov Beha’alotkha*). Why does the Torah not explicitly forbid these traits?

As mentioned, character traits do not easily admit of precise halakhic delineation. Let us assume that anger is usually negative, often dangerous, and sometimes appropriate. Can we offer exact guidelines clarifying when it is appropriate? The question depends so much on context, on the personalities in question, and on the roles that people play (teacher, parent, friend etc.) that we cannot make an easy rule book. In place of a *Shulchan Arukh* (legal code) regarding character traits, the Sages conveyed general attitudes to character traits through stories, ethical maxims and the like. Regarding such matters, *Aggada* often offers more helpful guidance than Halakha.

Perhaps one can make a similar argument regarding honesty. Though we clearly grant truthfulness great value, absolute honesty sometimes clashes with principles such as not insulting others, humility, or privacy, and must sometimes give way to these principles (see *Yevamot* 65b and *Bava Metzia* 23b). Due to this complexity and the uniqueness of each situation, God decided not to include a specific prohibition of lying among the commandments. However, even if the Torah does not include a concrete prohibition against fabrication, it certainly considers honesty a sterling character trait and looks askance on a person of falsehood.

Beit Hillel cites the case of an item bought in the market in an attempt to disprove Beit Shammai. Why does Beit Shammai not contest that case as well, and argue in favor of telling the truth about the bought object? Perhaps that case came with a clear communal custom or ruling in favor of lying. Rashash notes that the *gemara* purposely describes an acquisition in the market, rather than from a known individual or shopkeeper. If telling the truth enables the buyer to rectify the mistake through returning the faulty item, then a friend should tell him the truth. When an honest answer accomplishes nothing, then we prefer preserving a friend’s feelings. Items bought in the market do not lend themselves to easy return.

Readers of this *gemara* often wonder about the exclusive focus on the bride’s appearance. We recall the words traditionally recited on Friday night: “Grace is deceitful, and beauty is vain; but a woman that fears the Lord, she shall be praised” (*Mishlei* 31:30). Presumably for this reason, R. Meir Schiff explains the phrase “*na’eh ve-chasuda*” (translated above as beautiful and graceful) as referring to both beauty and piety; he relates *chasuda* to *chasidut*. If we do not accept R. Schiff’s reading, we can explain that the *gemara* responds to a certain social reality. Guests at weddings discuss the bride’s appearance; this discussion has become a standard part of a wedding. Of course, people of worth should also care about deeper qualities, but we still need to provide guidance for real life situations that occur frequently. Expressing opinions about the looks of the bride is one such situation. Halakha follows Beit Hillel in prioritizing avoiding insult and hurt feelings.