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/aggada72/12aggada.htm>

**Shiur #12: Ashmodai and Shlomo**

[In the preceding *gemara*, Shlomo instructs Benayahu to capture the demon named Ashmodai in order to enlist his help in constructing the Temple. They contain Ashmodai via a chain and ring both bearing the name of God]

One day they [Shlomo and Ashmodai] were alone. He said to him: “It is written ‘He has *toafot* *re’em*’ (*Bemidbar* 24:8). We say ‘*toafot*’ refers to the ministering angels, and ‘*re’*e*m’* refers to the demons. What is your advantage over us?” He said to him: “Take the chain off me and give me your ring and I will show you our advantage.” He took the chain off him and gave him the ring. He [Ashmodai] then swallowed him. Placing one wing in the heavens and one wing n the earth, he threw him four hundred *parsa* lengths. Regarding that moment, Shlomo said: “What advantage does man have with all his toil under the sun” (*Kohelet* 1:3).

“And this was my portion from all my toil” (*Kohelet* 2:10). What does “this” refer to? Rav and Shmuel debated. One said his staff, and one said his garments. He would beg for money at people’s doors and say: “I am Kohelet; I was king of the Jews in Jerusalem” (*Kohelet* 1:12). When he arrived at the Sanhedrin, the rabbis said: “Since a madman does not remain stuck on one idea, what is this?” They said to Benayahu: “Has the king asked you to come to him?” He said to them: “No.” They sent to the queens: “Has the king come to you?” They sent to them: “Yes, he comes.” They sent to them: “Check his legs.” They sent to them: “He comes in stockings and wants to have relations while they are in their menstrual period and wants to have relations with Bat Sheva his mother.” They brought in Shlomo and gave him the ring and the chain with the name of God engraved upon it. When he went in, Ashmodai saw him and flew away. Even so, he [Shlomo] was still afraid of him, and that is what is written: “Here is the bed of Shlomo with sixty strong men from the strong men of Israel surrounding it. They all hold swords and have experience at war. Each has a sword at his side due to fear in the night” (*Shir Ha-shirim* 3:7-8).

Rav and Shmuel debated. One said he was a king and then a commoner, and one said he was a king, then a commoner, then a king (*Gittin* 68b).

Shlomo reads a verse praising God for His dominion over the demonic forces and wonders what makes those demons great. After releasing Ashmodai from bondage, David’s son discovers the awesome power Ashmodai wields and loses his kingdom, retaining only his staff or garments. Rashi cites an alternative interpretation that translates “*gundo*” as a pot rather than as garments. While Ashmodai impersonates Shlomo, the king wanders his kingdom impoverished, unable to convince the average homeowner of his royal position. The Sanhedrin does take note of this wandering beggar and gives some credence to his story since “a madman does not remain stuck on one idea.” We might counter – is not remaining stuck on one conception precisely the mark of a crazy fellow? Rashi explains: “He does not say any other crazy things.” Someone insane may remain fixated on one point, but his insanity will find some other expression as well. Since the beggar acted completely normally with one exception, the Sages investigated and discovered that the beggar correctly identified the current king as an imposter.

Rav and Shmuel debate whether or not Shlomo was restored to prominence. Maharsha questions the position that he did not become king again. *Tanakh* reports that he reigned for forty years and then passed away (*Melakhim* I 12:42-43), implying that he kept control of his kingdom. Maharsha considers the possibility that the Ashmodai episode happened at the end of the forty years. In contrast, R. Shlomo Luria understands that Shlomo did become king again but no longer ruled over the heavenly beings. In that sense, he remained a commoner.

As is often the case, *midrashim* and *aggadot* work off a close reading of biblical verses. In the third verse of *Kohelet*, the king describes his reign as in the past, possibly indicating that it came to an end. Furthermore, the reference to “this was my portion” implies that he kept a small memento while losing all else. Perhaps this entire *aggada* attempts to create a setting befitting the cynicism and despair of *Kohelet*. Interestingly, R. Yaakov Reisher (*Iyyun Yaakov*) connects the argument between Rav and Shmuel with another midrashic debate regarding the order of Shlomo’s compositions (see *Shir* *Ha-shirim Rabba* 1:10). Those who think *Shir Ha-shirim* is his last work say that Shlomo became a king again. Conversely, those that view *Kohelet* as the final composition think that he never regained his former status.

Having granted that *midrashim* often emerge from sensitive reading, we would still not say that this Talmudic episode reflects *peshuto shel mikra* (the straightforward meaning of the biblical text). Rather than attempt to work this tale into the biblical verses, it behooves us to look for an allegorical interpretation of such a fantastic story. R. Moshe Avigdor Amiel suggests a brilliant reading in his *Derashot el Ami* (in the section for *Shabbat Chol Ha-moed Pesach*). A drifting and rootless individual symbolizes the Jew wandering through exile. Ashmodai replacing Shlomo stands for other groups claiming our mantle. Note that the demon takes command in the story after receiving the chain and ring with the name of God upon them. Originally, only the Jewish people spoke about one God, but then others started to spread their version of the monotheistic message. Christianity claimed to have formed a new covenant with God and become “Israel.” Kings bear a special Divine message, and the new king, Christianity, dispersed the Jewish people while asserting that Christianity has the only relevant message. Jews wandered from location to location but could not convince the world of our enduring Divine calling. However, at the end of the story, people of discernment recognized the authenticity of our unique religious teaching.

The demon king places one foot in the heavens and one on the earth when he sends Shlomo into exile. For R. Amiel, this reflects a characteristic of Christianity. During the Second Temple period, groups differed wildly on attitude to physicality. The Essenes rejected the physical, abandoned society, and renounced marital life. *Amei ha-aretz,* on the other hand, fully immersed themselves in the corporeal. Our ancestors, the Pharisees, avoided these extremes and lived a life integrating the spiritual with the physical. R. Amiel contends that Christianity often adopted the Essene position in theory, but emulated the *amei ha-aretz* in practice. They called for blessing the meek (*Matthew* 5:5) and recommend giving up your cloak to someone who already took your coat (*Matthew* 5:39). They also idealized celibacy. Furthermore, some interpret, “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's” (*Matthew* 22:21) as teaching that Christianity should play no role in the political arena. Yet the reality of Christian behavior in the Middle Ages was often far different. Thus, they had one foot in the heavens and one foot on the ground.

Generalizing about major religions requires caution, since plenty of exceptions exist and conflicting texts can be cited fairly easily. Not all Christian thinkers favor renouncing the world, and rabbinic literature contains ascetic and quietist themes as well. At the same time, generalizations often reflect a reality. In the wide variety of rabbinic thought, the position championing celibacy does not exist. Furthermore, halakhic requirements to eat on Shabbat and festival days invariably generate momentum towards the idea that we should sanctify the corporeal rather than abstain from it. For these reasons, R. Kook portrays Buddhism as fully giving up on this plane of existence, and Christianity as renouncing some aspects of this existence, whereas Judaism tries to sanctify the totality of our world (*Orot Hakodesh* 2: p. 488-489).

Why does Shlomo retain his staff or his cloak? R. Amiel explains that this symbolizes our remarkable ability to survive in exile and adapt to varying situations. A staff represents the ability to travel from place to place. Clothing refers not to one specific royal robe, but to a regal wardrobe including a great variety of garments. We don the clothing relevant to each Diaspora context and endure. Of course, this does not mean that we alter our fundamental value system, but that we adjust externalities to the needs of the day. Indeed, our survival and continuity through almost two thousand years of exile reflects one of the most remarkable stories of human history.