YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Talmudic *Aggadot***

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Shiur #16: The *Aggada* of R. Pinchas Ben Yair

1. **The story**

In the first *sugya* in *Massekhet Chullin*, which deals with the criteria for a ritual slaughterer (*shochet*), we find a relatively long *aggada* about R. Pinchas ben Yair:

A(1): Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair was once on his way to redeem captives when he came to the river Ginnai. He said to it, ‘Ginnai, divide your waters for me, that I might pass through you.’ It said to him, ‘You are on your way to perform the will of your Maker; I, too, am performing the will of my Maker. With regard to you, there is some doubt as to whether or not you will succeed, but my success is certain.’ He said, ‘If you do not divide yourself, I will decree that no water will ever pass through you.’ [The river] thereupon parted for him. There was also present a man who was carrying wheat for Pesach. [R. Pinchas b. Yair] said to [the river], ‘Divide yourself for him, too, since he is engaged in performing a mitzva.’ It parted for him. There was also an Arab nomad who was accompanying them. [R. Pinchas b. Yair] said, ‘Divide yourself for him, too, so that he will not say, ‘Is this how a traveling companion is treated?!’ So it parted for him, too.

R. Yosef said,[[1]](#footnote-1) ‘How great is this man – greater than Moshe and the six hundred thousand [of Israel]. For in their case, [the sea parted] only once, but here [the waters parted] three times.’ But perhaps here, too, it was only once [that the waters parted, and then did not close until the third had passed through]? Hence, [we conclude that] he was as great as Moshe and the six hundred thousand.

B. He happened upon a certain inn. They gave his donkey some barley, but it would not eat. They sifted it, but still [the donkey] would not eat it. They picked carefully through it, and still [the donkey] would not eat. [R. Pinchas b. Yair] said to them, ‘Perhaps [the barley] has not been tithed?’ They tithed it, and the donkey ate. He said, ‘This poor creature was trying to perform the will of its Maker and you feed it untithed produce?!’

But was the produce indeed in need of tithing? After all, we learn in the Mishna, ‘One who buys for sowing or for feeding animals […] is exempt from tithing it as ‘demai’.’ But concerning that teaching, R. Yochanan said: ‘This was taught only in the case where one bought the corn specifically for the purpose of feeding animals, but if one bought it originally for human consumption and then afterwards decided to feed it to animals, it must be tithed.’ And so it is taught in a *beraita*: If one buys fruit in the market for eating, and later decides to feed it to animals, one may not give it to either his own animals or to his neighbor’s animals without first tithing it.

C. When Rabbi heard [of the arrival of R. Pinchas b. Yair], he went out to greet him. He said, ‘Would you like to dine with me?’ [R. Pinchas b. Yair] answered, ‘Yes.’ Rabbi’s face brightened. R. Pinchas b. Yair then said, ‘You imagine that I have vowed to abstain from deriving any benefit from an Israelite [but this is not so]. The people of Israel are holy. Some have the desire [to benefit others] but not the means, while others have the means, but not the desire. And it is written, ‘Do not eat of the bread of him who has an evil eye nor desire his dainties. For as one who calculates in his heart, so is he: ‘Eat and drink,’ he says to you, but his heart is not with you (Mishlei 23:6-7).’ You have both the means and the desire, but right now [I decline because] I am in a hurry, for I am engaged in performing a mitzva. When I return, I will come to you.’ When he returned, it happened that he entered by a gate at which there stood some [wild] white mules. He said, ‘The Angel of Death is in this house; shall I then dine here?’ When Rabbi heard this, he came out to meet him. He said, ‘I will sell them.’ He replied, ‘You shall not put a stumbling-block before the blind’ (Vayikra 19:14). [Rabbi] said, ‘I will abandon them.’ [He replied,] ‘You will thereby be spreading danger.’ He said, ‘I shall neuter them’ [and thereby make them less dangerous]. [He replied,] ‘That would cause them suffering.’ He proposed, ‘I will kill them.’ He said, ‘But there is a law against wanton destruction (*Devarim* 20:19).’ Rabbi [continued to] press upon him, and a mountain rose up between them. Rabbi wept and said, ‘If this [is the power of the righteous] during their lifetime, how much more so after their death!’

… For it was said of R. Pinchas b. Yair that he never broke bread that was not his own, and that from the time he reached maturity he did not eat from his father’s table.” (*Chullin* 7a-7b)

1. Parallel sources

The *aggada* consists of three parts, or “acts,” each taking place in a different location. The three acts collectively create a single continuum, whose framework is R. Pinchas b. Yair’s journey to redeem captives. Each act presents an event or challenge along the way. The question arises: what unifies the various parts of the *aggada*? Is this merely a series of events that happen to take place over the course of a single journey, or is there a common theme that connects them conceptually and not only chronologically?

This question is intensified in light of the parallels to the various parts of the story that are to be found in the *Yerushalmi*. In the *Yerushalmi*, *Massekhet* *Demai* (1:3; 24d) we find a series of eight *aggadot* about R. Pinchas b. Yair. Three of them parallel the three parts of the story that appear in *Massekhet* *Chullin* in the *Bavli*:

1. “Rabbi Pinchas b. Yair’s donkey was stolen by thieves in the night. It was with them for three days, during which it ate nothing. After three days they decided to return it to its owner. They said, ‘Let us return it to its owner, so it will not die here with us and cause the cave to smell.’ They brought it out; it went and stood by its owner’s gate, and brayed. [R. Pinchas b. Yair] said, ‘Open up for the poor creature; it has eaten nothing for three days.’ They opened for it and it came in. He said to them, ‘Give it something to eat.’ They gave it barley, but it did not want to eat. They said, ‘Rabbi, it does not want to eat.’ He said to them, ‘Is it [the barley] fresh?’ They said, ‘Yes.’ He asked, ‘And did you tithe it for ‘*demai’*?’ They said, ‘No, for did Rabbi not teach: ‘If one buys for sowing, for [feeding] animals, for flour, for hides, for oil for the lamp, or for oiling vessels, then he is exempt from ‘demai’’? He said to them, ‘What then shall we do with this unfortunate animal, which is very stringent with itself?’ So they tithed, and it ate.”
2. R. Pinchas b. Yair was on his way to the house of study, when the [River] Ginnai rose up. He said, ‘Ginnai, Ginnai, why are you keeping me from the house of study?’ So it parted for him, and he crossed over. His students asked him, ‘Can we, too, pass over?’ He told him, ‘Someone who knows that he never in his life mistreated a fellow Jew, can pass over and no harm will come to him.’”
3. Rabbi wished to permit produce of the seventh year. R. Pinchas b. Yair came to him. Rabbi said to him, ‘How is the produce doing?’ He answered, עולשין יפות... (the chicory – a herb that grows without human care – is doing well), and (from this) Rabbi knew that [R. Pinchas b. Yair] did not agree with him. He asked him, ‘Would my master agree to eat something small with us today?’ He answered, ‘Yes.’ When he came down [to eat with them] he saw Rabbi’s mules standing there. He said, ‘Are Jews feeding all of these? Perhaps I will no longer see him.’ They went and reported this to Rabbi. Rabbi sent messengers, hoping to appease him. They came to his city. He said, ‘People of my city – come close to me.’ The people of his city came and encircled him. They said to them, ‘Rabbi wishes to appease [R. Pinchas b. Yair]. [The people of the city] left him and went on their way. He said, ‘My sons, come close to me.’ A fire descended from heaven and surrounded him. They went and reported this to Rabbi. He said, ‘Since we have not merited to enjoy his company in this world, we shall enjoy it in the World to Come.’”

These three stories are very similar to the three parts of the *aggada* in *Massekhet Chullin* in the *Bavli*, but also differ in many circumstances and details of the plot. For instance, in the section about the River Ginnai, the Yerushalmi records that R. Pinchas b. Yair is on his way to the *beit midrash*, while in the Bavli he is on his way to redeem captives. In the story about the donkey, the Yerushalmi has thieves kidnapping the donkey but finding themselves unable to feed it, while in the Bavli the scene takes place in an inn at which R. Pinchas b. Yair stops on his way to redeem the captives.

Perhaps there were two separate traditions about R. Pinchas b. Yair: in one, which was transmitted in Eretz Yisrael and made its way into the Yerushalmi, each of the three stories took place in separate circumstances, while the Babylonian version viewed all three events within the framework of a single journey. A different possibility is that the *aggada* in the *Bavli* is not meant to convey an exact and full historical account. Instead, it is presented in the form of a literary creation, based on three separate events that happened involving R. Pinchas b. Yair. The three events are woven into a single *aggada* with a message that is built out of all three parts. In any event, it seems that the connection between the three events in the *Bavli* is not coincidental and merely technical in nature, but rather conveys a single ideal.

1. Analysis of the *aggada* in the Bavli

Main theme

Let us look at the parts of the *aggada* in the *Bavli*. In the first part, R. Pinchas b. Yair commands the river to part so that he can continue on his way to fulfill the commandment of redeeming captives. The river, however, counters with a claim of its own: it, too, by continuing its constant flow, is performing the will of God, and therefore R. Pinchas b. Yair’s needs do not take preference. On the contrary – the river, by its very flow, is already fulfilling God’s will, while R. Pinchas b. Yair is still on the way; he will attempt to redeem the captives, but there is no guarantee of his success. At this stage, R. Pinchas threatens the river that he will stop its flow permanently if it does not part, and the river accedes. Thereafter, R. Pinchas demands that the river be parted for the sake of a Jew who is engaged in performing a commandment (bringing wheat to prepare matzot). He also demands that it part for a non-Jew who is accompanying them, to prevent complaints about how Jews treat those who accompany them.

The story depicts R. Pinchas b. Yair as someone who is not only engaged in helping others, but also concerned with the needs of those around him. He is also presented as possessing a special power that allows him to overcome the obstacles that Nature puts in his way – not only in the physical sense, but also in the metaphysical realm. The flow of the river is presented not only as a physical phenomenon, but as an action that is essentially a fulfillment of God’s will. For this reason, the river can be overcome by R. Pinchas b. Yair’s power, arising from his righteousness and his (apparently constant) engagement in fulfillment of God’s commandments and helping other Jews. This, apparently, is a higher level of performing God’s will than is the flow of the river – despite the fact that, as the river points out, the success of R. Pinchas b. Yair’s actions is not guaranteed.

The crossing of the river recalls, obviously, the biblical account of the parting of the Reed Sea. Indeed, Rav Yosef comments on this and compares R. Pinchas b. Yair to Moshe. The commandment in which the other Jew is engaged – bringing wheat to prepare *matzot* for Pesach – likewise recalls the context of the Exodus. In fact, R. Pinchas b. Yair’s quest to redeem the captive is also reminiscent of Moshe, who brings Bnei Yisrael out of their place of captivity and slavery. We shall discuss the significance of the comparison to Moshe below, but even at this stage, it is clear that it serves to glorify R. Pinchas b. Yair.

In the second part, R. Pinchas b. Yair is at an inn, still on his journey. The owner of the inn finds that the donkey will not eat barley that is ‘*demai,’* until it has been tithed. The Gemara comments that the donkey’s stringency arises from a distinction made in the law in the Mishna, which generally permits the feeding of produce that is ‘*demai’* to animals, but prohibits this where the produce was originally intended for human consumption. This part is a thematic continuation of the previous one in two ways: firstly, the degree of R. Pinchas b. Yair’s piety is further highlighted, when it turns out that even his beast is exceedingly stringent in observing the laws of ‘*demai,’* and will not eat produce that is not completely and unquestionably permitted. Secondly, R. Pinchas b. Yair explains this stringency by describing the donkey, too, as “performing the will of its Maker.” Thus, we are again reminded that R. Pinchas b. Yair is not simply engaged in a mitzva right now; rather, the performance of God’s will is his constant goal and his permanent situation, defining his entire life and conduct, and surrounding his entire environment such that even his donkey becomes part of it. This point sheds more light on R. Pinchas b. Yair’s ability to threaten the river and subdue it: he is not simply on the way to perform a task that may or may not end up being completed; rather, like the river – but with greater power and in the service of a higher destiny – he “flows” continuously, performing the will of God.

The third part of the story records a confrontation between R. Pinchas b. Yair and Rabbi, after the latter invites the former to eat with him. At first, R. Pinchas b. Yair presents his order of preferences and refuses to stop over until he has completed his present mission – the redeeming of the captives. Thereafter, when he happens to find out that Rabbi has in his possession (as part of his status as *Nassi*) some dangerous animals, he refuses to eat there. He rejects all of Rabbi’s offers to fix the situation, until “a mountain rises up between them”: the chasm is so great that it cannot be bridged. This chasm, it turns out, is not the result of some action that might be reversed; rather, it arises from profound differences in the respective approaches to life that the two men hold. Therefore, not only does the fact of Rabbi’s possession of the wild animals disturb R. Pinchas b. Yair, but he even finds the various attempts at fixing this situation to be intolerable and unacceptable

This chasm that opens between Rabbi and R. Pinchas b. Yair seems to be the climax toward which the story is directed. This is not just the description of a journey to fulfill the mitzva of redeeming captives – since the majority of the third part takes place on the return journey. It seems that the two preceding cameos are meant to introduce us to R. Pinchas b. Yair, who is a less well-known personality than is Rabbi, and thereby to create the proper background and buildup to the crisis that the two encounter in the third part. Once R. Pinchas b. Yair and his unique character have become familiar to us, we are in a better position to understand the essence of the conflict between these two Sages. R. Pinchas b. Yair represents the “*chassid*” who lives among the simple Jewish masses and looks out for them; he is accompanied by non-Jews, and he looks out for them, too. Rabbi is the *Nassi*, the scion of a venerated dynasty of *nesi’im*; he naturally would be living in a fancy mansion and maintains the manners of people in power, including keeping white mules. In this sense, there is a certain distance between Rabbi and the proletarian masses. R. Pinchas b. Yair is horrified by the potential damage that the dangerous beasts could cause to the public at large, but also opposes the suffering that may be caused to the mules through Rabbi’s efforts to rid of them in order to appease R. Pinchas b. Yair.

The contrast between the two figures is brought into sharp focus in this *aggada* through the animals. R. Pinchas b. Yair’s donkey is presented as a beast that not only causes no harm, but also is entirely focused on performing God’s will, as expressed in the great stringency shown in avoiding possibly forbidden food. Rabbi, on the other hand, keeps animals of a different sort: not only do they not bring benefit to others, but they may actually harm them.

R. Pinchas b. Yair vs. Rabbi

However, the message of the story is not as simple as that, and consists of more than just a glorification of R. Pinchas b. Yair in relation to Rabbi; the story does not merely depict R. Pinchas b. Yair’s moral and spiritual superiority as a more “perfect” model of righteousness. The third part of the story ends with Rabbi weeping, and this leaves a bitter taste. The sensitive reader follows the confrontation between the two characters with mixed feelings. On the one hand, R. Pinchas b. Yair seems to be justified in his claims, and the previous stories about him certainly depict the conduct of someone who is on a very high spiritual and moral level. On the other hand, Rabbi is also not just an ordinary person. He is one of the most important *nesi’im*, a great scholar, and redactor of the Mishna. R. Pinchas b. Yair’s refusal to reconcile with him under any circumstances testifies to a rigidity which seems to be the price of his perfection. Here it turns out, paradoxically, that R. Pinchas b. Yair’s intensive occupation with the needs of others, such that his entire life and his whole way of thinking are directed solely to that end, actually distance him to some extent from others. He lives in a world of perfection, of an unchanging ideal, and other people – even of the caliber of Rabbi – are unable to really communicate with him.

Now the comparison that is drawn in the first part of the story, between R. Pinchas b. Yair and Moshe, assumes new significance. Moshe is the person who achieves greatness and closeness to God that is never matched by anyone else; in addition, his entire life is devoted to Am Yisrael and to their needs, and he even “argues” and pleads with God on their behalf. However, the other side of this almost angelic and non-human existence is a certain distance from the masses, and even from the great individuals among them. This is expressed, for example, in the episode of Miriam and Aharon and their words concerning the Cushite woman, as well as in other incidents. Moshe has trouble understanding the simple weaknesses and the everyday, earthly desires of the people he leads.

Now we understand why, as noted above, the first two parts of the story build up the character of R. Pinchas b. Yair in anticipation of the confrontation with Rabbi in the third part. They depict an individual who, like Moshe, devotes his entire life to the will of God, and the episodes they describe take place on an ideal level that is removed from the everyday reality of most people. The fire that surrounds R. Pinchas b. Yair in the story in the Yerushalmi, and the mountain that arises between him and Rabbi in the Bavli, emphasize this distance. The story of the mountain in the third part of the *aggada* in the Bavli effects a contrasting closing of the circle that opened with the story of the river in the first part: R. Pinchas b. Yair overcomes the physical obstacles and natural phenomena that block his way to performing a mitzvah with ease, but at the same time he himself is responsible for the appearance of other natural obstacles that arise between himself and others who do not share the ideal reality in which he lives.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The molding of the story emphasizes the fact that although R. Pinchas b. Yair looks after his escorts in the first part of the story, he maintains no dialogue with them. In general, concern for others out of idealistic/religious/moral motivation (redemption of captives, concern for a Jew busy performing a mitzva, concern that the non-Jew will not feel slighted and claim that Jews do not accord appropriate respect to those accompanying them, concern for the harm that the mules might cause, as well as concern for possible suffering that might be caused to them, and the prohibition against wanton destruction) is the focus of his life – but there is no human dialogue between himself and those around him. In fact, he speaks only within the context of confrontation and conflict: at first he argues with the river, then with the owner of the inn, and finally, with Rabbi himself. At least two of the “characters” that he argues with - the river (which is fulfilling the will of God) and Rabbi - are not negative or even neutral, but R. Pinchas b. Yair clashes with them nevertheless.

It must be emphasized that the third part of the story does not convey criticism of R. Pinchas b. Yair. His high religious and moral standards arouse admiration. Even Rabbi, who is hurt by these standards, is depicted as admiring him, seeking his company, and feeling sorrow over the distance between them. Nevertheless, the story shows that this type of life comes with a price, just as there were shortcomings in the leadership of Moshe. There is room, the story demonstrates, for a different model of leadership, as symbolized by Rabbi. Rabbi’s exclamation concerning R. Pinchas b. Yair – “If it is so for the righteous in their lifetime, how much more so when they die!” – expresses this duality: on the one hand, it is an existence that transcends the everyday reality and is a model to be admired; on the other hand, this is a person who, in his life and in his death, exists at some distance from everyone else.

1. The broader context of the story within the chapter

As noted at the outset, our *aggada* appears within a *sugya* whose subject is the criteria for a *shochet*. The Mishna introduces the chapter with a sweeping inclusion: “All may slaughter, and their slaughter is regarded as valid, except for a deaf-mute, an imbecile, and a minor” (*Bava Metzia*, 2a). Even these individuals are excluded for practical reasons, which can be overcome by means of supervision, rather than for any inherent inability. However, in the discussion that develops in the Gemara it turns out, *inter alia* through a careful reading of the language of the Mishna, that there are additional reservations, especially toward groups whose integrity cannot be relied upon completely. These include Cuthites and various types of apostates – i.e., people who are on the religious fringes of Jewish society and are suspected of not observing halakha, for reasons that are either earthly (such as the apostates who sin as a result of temptation) or ideological (holding a world-view that denies the halakhic authority of *Chazal*). As he progresses through the *sugya*, the reader becomes aware that the laws of ritual slaughter carry with them a weight that goes beyond the laws of kashrut and include a definition of the boundaries between different groups of the Jewish population. The Gemara distinguishes between different groups of apostates (those who reject halakha out of weakness in the face of temptation, those who are motivated by idolatry, etc.), discussing their statuses and the status of the Cuthites, which varied in different generations (see 5b-6a). In fact, a similar theme arises in *Massekhet Avoda Zara*, where we find prohibitions on certain foods that are produced by non-Jews – prohibitions whose purpose, *inter alia*, is to create a social barrier between Jews and non-Jews. Some of these prohibitions are also mentioned in our *sugya*, in relation to the Cuthites (6a – “The Cuthites are in the same category as idolaters with regard to their ritual slaughter and their wine”). However, for the most part, in our sugya the social ramifications are not mentioned explicitly, although they are alluded to occasionally.[[3]](#footnote-3)

We concluded above that the focus of the story is on the third part, in the confrontation between R. Pinchas b. Yair and Rabbi. This part of the story clearly demonstrates the social ramifications of decisions about whether to eat at/with someone else. R. Pinchas b. Yair adds a new dimension to the discussion, which is not directly related to the laws of kashrut: “The Angel of Death resides in his house and I should dine with him?!” In other words, the creation of a barrier by one’s refusal to eat at someone can be based on different values, and not only on the basis of criteria that belong strictly to the realm of kashrut. Aside from those groups from which the laws of kashrut serve to distance Jews, such as non-Jews and Cuthites, there are also situations in which a similar decision can be made even where there is no specific problem of kashrut. On the other hand, the offense caused to Rabbi, as demonstrated most eloquently by his weeping, also calls for caution and sensitivity when implementing such a decision. The story seems to seek to raise awareness of the sociological implications of the laws that prevent people from eating together, or from eating one another’s food. Chazal were conscious of this, and – as noted – made occasional use of such barriers in order to define and emphasize the social boundaries separating observant Jews from various types of “others.” However, this could also end up causing barriers within Jewish society itself; the story directs us to at least be aware of this, and to proceed with the appropriate sensitivity.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. This section and those that followed are parenthetical comments by different Sages on particular points arising from the story. They interrupt the narrative and are not part of the story. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It is interesting to consider the parallel confrontation, in the *Yerushalmi* in *Demai*. Rabbi, as *Nassi*, wants to ease the laws of *Shemitta* out of concern for the people, since no produce can be grown in the fields. R. Pinchas, operating from his ideal perspective, opposes this and points out the paradox in Rabbi’s concern, mentioning the expensive animals that Rabbi keeps at his home, which increase the economic burden borne by the people. Both sides – each from his own perspective – are acting out of concern for the needs of the people. R. Pinchas b. Yair lives as a “*chassid*” and takes an uncompromising view of halakha. Rabbi, in contrast, is more connected to the human reality, and tries, using human, halakhic tools, to solve the problem that he identifies. As part of his reality he believes that the house of the *Nassi* must uphold a certain standard, even in times of economic distress. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For example: “It is taught: The wife of a scholar may grind corn together with the wife of an ignoramus only during the time that the former is in a state of ritual impurity, but not when she is ritually pure. R. Shimon b. Elazar said: She should not grind [with her] even when she is ritually impure, because her friend will offer her some and she will eat…” (6b). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)