YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

**Talmudic *Aggadot***

Rav Dr. Yonatan Feintuch

Shiur #18: *Aggadot* of the Early Second Temple Era (Part II)

# In the previous *shiur,* we began to consider the *aggada* in Tractate *Yoma* (69b) about the eradication of the idolatrous inclination. At the end of the *shiur*, we dealt with the significance of the description of this idolatrous inclination as a lion-cub made of flames exiting the Holy of Holies, at which point it is handed over to the Jewish People:

He came forth from the Holy of Holies like a fiery lion-cub.

We suggested an interpretation relating to religious fervor: Such passion may be directed to serving God, but in practice it was often directed to idol worship.

**The Holy of Holies, the Ark, and the Cherubim**

Leaving the Holy of Holies has another dimension to it, as it reminds us of a feature of that chamber during the Second Temple Era: the absence of the Ark(*Aron*) of the Covenant and its Cover featuring two cherubs (*Keruvim*). The departure of this lion-cub from the Holy of Holies — indeed, of any living creature — may symbolize the absence of the *Keruvim*. In fact, the Holy of Holies during the Second Temple Era was totally empty, with its only distinguishing feature being the Foundation Stone:

After the *Aron* had been taken away, there was a stone from the days of the Early Prophets called “The Foundation,” which protruded three finger-breadths above the ground, upon which he would place the pan. (*Yoma* 5:2)

As for the Divine Presence itself, some sources indicate that it could be found in the Holy of Holies during the Second Temple Era.[[1]](#footnote-1) However, this is a challenging concept. If God’s Presence was in the Holy of Holies, what significance should we attribute to the absence of the *Aron* and the *Keruvim*?

In terms of the Temple service, there was no great significance to this fact. The High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies only on Yom Kippur, and he would place the pan of incense on the Foundation Stone. There he would sprinkle the blood of the sin-offerings, without any *Aron* or *Keruvim*.

It may be that the central significance of the absence of the *Aron* and the *Keruvim* related to the manner in which the relationship of God to His people was conceived. If we consider other sources in the literature of *Chazal* that relate to the *Aron* and the *Keruvim*, we discover that some of the significance of their absence is tied to the nature of the encounter between Israel and the Divine Presence – for example, the encounter taking place during the three pilgrimage festivals. Elsewhere in Tractate *Yoma*, there is a wonderful and thought-provoking debate, the context of which is a discussion of the concealment of the *Aron* at the end of the First Temple Era. The *gemara* begins by considering a verse from *I Melakhim* thatspeaking of the staves of the *Aron,* which were used to carry it: “These staves were so long that their ends could be seen from the Holy Place in front of the inner sanctuary, but they could not be seen from outside the Holy Place; and they are still there today.” The verse is analyzed as follows:

R. Yehuda contrasted: It is written that “their ends could be seen,” but it is also written, “but they could not be seen from outside.” How is that possible? They were seen and unseen.

Thus was it also taught: “Their ends could be seen” — One might have assumed that they did not protrude from their place. To teach us, the verse says: “These staves were so long.” One might assume that they tore the Curtain and showed forth; to teach us, the verse says: “But they could not be seen from outside.” How then? They pressed forth and protruded as the two breasts of a woman, as it is said: “My beloved is unto me as a pouch of myrrh, between my breasts he lies.”

R. Katina said: Whenever Israel came up to the Festival, the Curtain would be removed for them and the *Keruvim* were shown to them, whose bodies were intertwined with one another, and they would be thus addressed: “See how beloved you are before the Omnipresent, as the love between man and woman!”

R. Chisda raised the following objection: “But they shall not go in to see the holy things as they are being covered” — Did not R. Yehuda say in the name of Rav that this refers to the time when the vessels are being put into their cases?

R. Nachman answered: That may be compared to a bride; for as long as she is in her father's house, she is reserved in regard to her husband, but when she comes to her father-in-law's house, she is no more so reserved in regard to him.

R. Chana son of R. Katina raised the following objection: It happened with a priest who was whiling away his time [that he saw a block of pavement that was different from the others. He came and informed his fellow, but before he could complete his account, his soul departed. Thus, they knew definitely that the *Aron* was hidden there.]

He was answered: You speak of a woman who has been divorced. When she is divorced, she goes back to her earlier state of affection. (*Yoma* 54a)

The passage opens with a discussion about the staves of the *Aron*. R. Yehuda determines that “they were seen and unseen.” In the *baraita*, we have the explanation of this paradox: The staves of the *Aron* protruded into the Curtain at the entrance of the Holy of Holies; thus, the staves themselves were not visible, but their shape was clear. The analogy used here links the staves to the domain of spousal relationships. Such a link exists in R. Katina’s words, who says that at the time of the pilgrimage festivals, they would peel back the Curtain and reveal the *Keruvim* to all of Israel. This detail is indeed astounding, and the *gemara* expresses just such a sentiment below.

The reason for this revelation is to show to those pilgrims the intimate state in which the *Keruvim* could be observed: “whose bodies were intertwined with one another.” This represents the intimate state between God and His people: “See how beloved you are before the Omnipresent.” Here as well, the analogies employed are from the world of spousal relationships; clearly, the relationship between God and His people is conceived as belonging to this realm.

Indeed, the idea of the *Keruvim*’s interaction representing the relationship between God and Israel forms the basis of the following well-known *midrash*:

How did they stand? R. Yochanan and R. Elazar [argue]. One says that they faced each other, but the other says that their faces were inward. But according to him who says that they faced each other, [it may be asked]: Is it not written, “And their faces were inward?”  [This is] no difficulty: The former [was] at a time when Israel obeyed the will of the Omnipresent; the latter [was] at a time when Israel did not obey the will of the Omnipresent. (Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Batra* 99a)

Indeed, when R. Chisda is shocked by the idea of the Holy of Holies being exposed to the eyes of all Israel, in light of the severe restrictions of its contents being exposed even to the Levites charged with transporting it from place to place, R. Nachman once again uses romantic imagery. In the desert, Israel and God were “engaged,” as it were; thus, the Divine Presence was like a modest bride, covered up before the groom. However, in the Temple, their relationship was that of a consummated marriage, with no obstacles of modesty between the spouses.

However, this analogy refers to the First Temple Era, when the *Keruvim* were in the Holy of Holies atop the *Aron*.[[2]](#footnote-2) Moreover, when R. Nachman is asked about a priest from the Second Temple Era who happened upon the *Aron* and ended up paying for his discovery with his life — recalling early biblical accounts before Shelomo’s time, such as the death of Uzza when David brings the *Aron* up to Jerusalem — he responds that the Second Temple Era is another phase of the relationship. The analogy is now to a divorced couple, between whom the borders and boundaries have been restored to their previous state.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The description of the relationship between God and Israel as a spousal one is well-known to us from the Prophets, who describe the sin of idolatry during the First Temple as a harmful dalliance, indeed as a betrayal of the spousal covenant. It is only natural for such adultery to result in a loss of romantic intimacy between the partners.

**The Showbread**

Granted, there is another phenomenon associated with the Temple that *Chazal* compare to the unveiling of the *Keruvim* before the pilgrims on Festivals. This relates to the *Lechem Ha-Panim* (Showbread), and apparently it was customary during the Second Temple Era:

It teaches, therefore, that they used to lift it and show thereon to the Festival pilgrims the *Lechem Ha-Panim*, and to say to them: “See how beloved you are before the Omnipresent; it is taken away as [fresh as] it is set down!”

For R. Yehoshua ben Levi said: A great miracle was performed in regard to the *Lechem Ha-Panim*: As [fresh as] it was when set down, so was it taken away. For it is said: “To put hot bread on the day when it was taken away.” (Babylonian Talmud, *Chagiga* 26b and parallels)

Here as well, we have the pilgrims presented with a certain feature of the Temple on the Festivals to illustrate God’s Presence among them, and here as well the conclusion to be drawn is, “See how beloved you are before the Omnipresent.”

As stated above, this phenomenon could very well be present during the Second Temple Era. However, there is a clear difference between seeing the *Lechem Ha-Panim* and seeing “the *Keruvim* whose bodies were intertwined with one another.” The intimate connection symbolized by the *Keruvim* is unambiguous, while that of the *Lechem Ha-Panim* is subtle and allusive. The Festival pilgrims see the *Lechem Ha-Panim* and witness its miraculous warmth. This continual freshness alludes to the freshness of their relationship with God, but this is a far more understated symbol than that of the *Keruvim*.

Indeed, the very sight of the *Lechem Ha-Panim* recalls something of the appearance of the *Keruvim*. The term *Lechem Ha-Panim* literally means “Bread of the Face,” and this is in fact a halakhic requirement:

Ben Zoma says: “And you shall place on the table showbread before Me [literally, to My Face] continually” (*Shemot* 25:30) — this means it must have a face. (*Menachot* 11:4)

The fact that it is on the Festivals that the pilgrims come to see the *Lechem Ha-Panim* also has significance:

Three times a year, all your males must appear before [literally, at the Face of] the Lord, Lord God of Israel (*Shemot* 34:23)

This apparently is the aim of presenting the *Lechem Ha-Panim* to the Jewish pilgrims coming to Jerusalem for the Festivals, as the *gemara* in *Chagiga* indicates. Nevertheless, the expressionless “face” of the *Lechem Ha-Panim* is far more ambiguous than the faces of the *Keruvim*. Still, this is all that is left during the Second Temple Era.

**A Different Kind of Intimacy**

It is interesting to note another *midrash* that may express the same idea:

The Rabbis explain this verse as referring the returnees from exile:

“Our sister is little” — These are the returnees from exile; “little” refers to their poor numbers.

“And she has no breasts” — These are five thing the latter Temple lacked which the former Temple had: the fire from above, the anointing oil, the *Aron*, the holy spirit, and the *Urim Ve-tummim. (Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba*, ch. 8)

This *midrash* explores what is lacking in the Second Temple based on the verse from *Shir Ha-Shirim* (8:8):“Our sister is little, and she has no breasts; what shall we do for our sister on the day she is spoken for?” The missing elements of the Second Temple are connected to defining one of the partners in this couple as being sexually immature, so that a spousal relationship is impossible. Similarly, in light of the *baraita* in *Yoma* cited above in which the staves of the *Aron* pressing against the Curtain are compared to breasts, this *midrash*, at least in terms of the *Aron*’s absence in the Second Temple, is more clear.

Is the loss of the spousal intimacy with the Divine Presence tied to Israel’s adultery during the First Temple Era, as described often by the Prophets? Is the spousal relationship between God and His people so irreparably damaged that even after the building of the Second Temple, the gap remains? Or perhaps this distance is due to the lack of enthusiasm in the Jewish People’s response to the opportunity to return to the Land and renew this connection, as *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba* indicates?

Alternatively, this is quite simply the other side of the coin of destroying the idolatrous inclination. When there is no inclination, there is no passion, and the spousal relationship is damaged. This may be the meaning of the *midrash* in *Yoma*, which relates that when the idolatrous inclination is handed over to the Jews to be eradicated, it emerges from the Holy of Holies.

We may consider the absence of the *Aron* and the *Keruvim* from the Second Temple from a number of different angles. On the one hand, as various sources in the literature of *Chazal* indicate, the presence of the *Aron* and the *Keruvim* in the Holy of Holies symbolize the intimate and lively connection with the Divine Presence. However, it is possible to see in their absence a sort of spiritual progress, as without the *Aron* and the *Keruvim*, the Divine Presence is expressed in a far more abstract manner than in the First Temple. Indeed, we may hear such voices in midrashic sources in the literature of *Chazal*. For example, *Eikha Rabba* presents a strong expression of this idea.

R. Yitzchak opened: "We are ashamed, because we have heard reproach; shame has covered our faces, for strangers are come into the sanctuaries of the Lord's house" ([*Yirmeyahu* 51:51](https://www.sefaria.org/Jeremiah.51.51?lang=he-en)).

You find that when the enemies entered Jerusalem, Ammonites and Moabites entered with them, as it is stated: "The adversary has spread out his hand upon all her pleasant things; for she has seen that heathen nations invade her sanctuary, those whom you did forbid to enter into your congregation" (*Eikha* 1:10).

They entered the Holy of Holies and found there two *Keruvim*. They took them and put them in a box and paraded them in the streets of Jerusalem, saying: Did you not say that this nation does not worship idols? See what we found with them and what they worshipped; surely they are all alike!

This is what is written: "Because Moav and Sei’ir do say, Behold, the house of Yehuda is like all the nations" ([*Yechezkel* 25:8](https://www.sefaria.org/Ezekiel.25.8?lang=he-en)).

At that time, the Holy One, blessed be He, swore that He would stamp them out of this world, as it is stated: "Therefore, as I live, says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Surely Moav shall be like Sedom, and the children of Ammon like Amora" (*Tzefanya* 2:9).

When they sinned, they were exiled, and when they were exiled, Yirmeyahu began to recite the lamentation “*Eikha*.” (*Introduction,* 9)

How should this *midrash* be read? It attributes to non-Jews the indictment of the Temple service for “pagan” elements, even guaranteeing that they will be punished for mocking the *Keruvim* and the worship of God. However, since the *midrash* is addressing the Destruction of the First Temple, but is a composition of the period following the Destruction of the Second Temple, there might be an allusion to the view of the Sages that there may be a positive element to the *Aron* and its *Keruvim* being hidden. Without the *Keruvim*, the representation of the Divine Presence becomes more abstract and spiritual, if only because of the appearance of impropriety — but perhaps it is a more inherent reason that lies behind this.

Indeed, further on in the *sugya* in *Yoma* 54, a similar *midrash* appears:

Resh Lakish said: When the heathens entered the Temple and saw the *Keruvim* whose bodies were intertwined with one another, they carried them out and said: “These Israelites, whose blessing is a blessing and whose curse is a curse, occupy themselves with such things! And immediately they despised them, as it is said (*Eikha* 1:8): “All that honored her, despised her, because they have seen her nakedness.”

In any case, even if such a position exists, there are sources that discuss the *Aron*’s return in the future – for example, the following passage:

And this is one of the five things that was hidden: the *Aron*, the *Menora*, the fire, the holy spirit, and the *Keruvim*.

When the Holy One, blessed be He, returns in mercy and builds His house and sanctuary, He will bring them back to their place to make Jerusalem rejoice, as it says, "The arid desert shall be glad, the wilderness shall rejoice" (*Yeshayahu* 35:1), "It shall blossom abundantly, it shall also exult" (ibid. v. 2). (*Bamidbar Rabba, Beha’alotekha* 15)

**Blinding Lust**

In the second half of the narrative, we find that the Jews want to take advantage of the opportunity and eradication the inclination toward illicit relations.

They said: Since this is a time of grace, let us pray for mercy concerning the sinful inclination. They prayed for mercy, and he was handed over to them. They imprisoned him for three days, then looked in the whole land of Israel for a fresh egg for a sick person and could not find it.

They wondered: Shall we beg for half-mercy? But Heaven does not grant half-measures!

So they put out his eyes and let him go. It helped inasmuch as he no more entices men to commit incest.

In light of the abovementioned sources, this matter is not surprising at all. This is not only because illicit relations is one of the sins that caused the destruction of the First Temple; it is an integral component of the Canaanite paganism that contaminated the Land of Israel during the First Temple Era. In a different sense, in the sources above we saw that the religious connection with the Divine Presence is described with the terminology of a spousal relationship. Therefore, to a certain extent, we may see a link between the two inclinations.

However, as told in the *aggada*, the Jews understand quickly that eradicating this inclination towards illicit relations would destroy the world, as all reproduction and procreation, which allows the world to feed and propagate itself, depends on the existence of the inclination toward illicit relations. Therefore, they must let the creature that represents the sinful inclination survive.

“So they put out his eyes and let him go” — In other words, they blind it, the result being that a person no longer desires to have sexual relations with close family members. It is difficult to understand why this is the effect of blinding the sinful inclination. The sense of sight is certainly integral in forming lustful thoughts, so weakening it by blinding it does make logical sense. Nevertheless, it is unclear what incest has to do with this act specifically.

In the next *shiur*, we will address an additional brief *aggada* cited below in the *sugya* in *Yoma*, immediately after the *aggada* we have analyzed here, and we will attempt to find the contribution of the shared context of these two *aggadot*.

Translated by Yoseif Bloch

1. There is a widespread misconception that the official view of *Chazal* is that the Divine Presence was not to be found in the Second Temple, but this idea appears consistently in the Babylonian Talmud only. According to sources from the Land of Israel, God did reside in the Second Temple. See the details of this position in G. Sasson, “*Nokhechut Ha-Shekhina Be-Mikdash Sheini: Bein Chakhmei Bavel Le-Chakhmei Eretz Yisrael*,” *Mada’ei Ha-Yahadut* 48 (5772), pp. 49-71. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Later in the *sugya*, R. Acha bar Ya’akov suggests that the reference is to the Second Temple Era. However, the simple understanding is that R. Nachman is not referring to this period; see below and next footnote. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The manner in which R. Nachman phrases it is very interesting: “When she is divorced, she goes back to her earlier state of affection.” This is not what we might expect about a divorced couple; the relationship between ex-spouses is usually antagonistic, engendering a permanent distance between the two former spouses. Apparently, although R. Nachman sees the Second Temple Era as one of divorce, it is a temporary status that is destined to end in reconciliation and remarriage. In this sense, the Second Temple Era may be compared to the era of the Tabernacle in the desert, an existing relationship in which there is shame and demureness, but the ultimate goal is the intimacy of consummated marriage. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)