YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**TALMUDIC AGGADA**

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<http://vbm-torah.org/archive/aggada72/18aggada.htm>

**Shiur #18: Large Strides and Loss of Vision**

The Rabbis taught: “There are six things degrading to a scholar….And some say he should not take large strides.”

“And some say he should not take large strides,” as the master taught: “A large stride removes five hundredth of a person’s eyesight. What is the remedy? It is restored with *kiddush* on Friday night.”

Tosafot (*Ta’anit* 10b) understand this *gemara* in a literal and mathematically precise fashion, going so far as to wonder why people who have taken five hundred large strides in their lifetimes do not become blind. First, Tosafot suggest that each step removes one five hundredth of the person’s remaining eyesight. Thus each step hurts, but the person never approaches blindness. Tosafot then suggest that only the first large stride damages the person’s eyesight, while subsequent steps do not. In a variation on that theme, *Sefat Emet* explains that the *gemara* does not refer to each individual stride, but to a person who consistently takes such steps. If so, the person’s eyesight is only reduced once.

Remaining with the more literal reading of this *gemara*, how does such a person restore the lost vision? Rashi says that he drinks the wine of *kiddush*,while other commentators suggest that he places some of the wine either on or in his eye. Some commentators object to putting it in the eye, since that would violate the rabbinic prohibition against medicinal cures on Shabbat. Ritva (*Shabbat* 113b) provides a justification for placing the wine directly in the eye; the prohibition against medicinal cures on Shabbat only encompasses naturalistic cures, not those based on loving attachment to *mitzvot* such as this one.

Ben Yehoyada also assumes that the *gemara* speaks about actual physical harm in the form of lost vision. He questions why the rabbis cite large strides as specifically degrading to a scholar, when the subsequent *gemara* implies that large strides are bad for anybody. Apparently, diminished sight is particularly galling for a *talmid chakham* (scholar). People might think the scholar’s eyesight is fading because he took bribes, as the verse states: “Bribery blinds the eyes of the wise” (*Devarim* 16:19). Furthermore, scholars depend upon discerning vision to render legal rulings regarding possible *terefot* (blemishes) in animals, the *kashrut* of *etrogim*, or colors on the cloth of a potential *nidda* (a woman who is ritually impure on account of menstruation). Therefore, a sage with poor vision finds the situation especially embarrassing.

Alternatively, the Gemara does not refer to any special properties of *kiddush* wine, but to the entrance of Shabbat. Both Meiri (*Shabbat* 113b) and Maharsha (*Berakhot* 43b) adopt this approach. Maharsha adds that Shabbat is a time when Halakha (Jewish law) prohibits large strides, since they are involved in running. This explanation helps clarify how the institution of Shabbat serves as the antidote for large steps.

Maharsha’s comment helps move the interpretation in a non-literal direction, in which the Gemara does not discuss actual loss of sight and a magical recovery through contact with *kiddush* wine. Keren Ora explains that large steps signify running after things our eyes covet. He cites the well-known verse: “Do not go after your heart and your eyes which you use to go astray” (*Bemidbar* 15:39). For example, we mindlessly chase after money or prestige, without thinking clearly about the implications. Shabbat comes and curtails that mode of behavior. “Let no man leave his leave his place on the seventh day” (*Shemot* 16:29). According to Keren Ora, this verse signifies being content to remain in place on Shabbat, temporarily putting on hold the breathless pursuit of the unnecessary.

Based on this approach, we can suggest a non-literal interpretation. *Berakhot* 43b refers not to a physical loss of sight, but to a loss of perspective or vision. Chasing the prestigious position or the expensive vacation, we forget what truly matters. Fortunately for observant Jews, Shabbat comes weekly and restores our perspective. No matter how many hours spent working in the law firm or pursuing a big business deal, Friday night brings us back to the serenity of the Shabbat table and to the warmth of community and family. Reciting *kiddush* Friday night, we become oblivious to whatever drives us to take large strides. I often wonder what provides a similar reminder to those lacking the gift of the Sabbath.

A parallel approach appears in the *Ollelot Efraim* (cited in the *Hidushei Ha-geonim* in the *Ein Yaakov*). He views large steps as representing arrogance. Excessive pride causes loss of wisdom, signified by loss of vision. Shabbat reminds us of our awesome Creator and helps restore perspective on our place in the universe. Thus, the *kiddush* each Shabbat evening repairs the damage generated by large steps of excess pride.

None of the interpretations thus far have explained why the Gemara selects a five hundredth as the measure of the damage. We can raise this question even with regard to a literal interpretation, but all the more so with regard to a metaphorical interpretation. It is worth noting that a different *gemara* about loss of sight employs the same number. Eating coarse black bread, new beer, or raw vegetables causes various health problems, including loss of a five hundredth of one’s vision (*Pesachim* 42a). That *gemara* is not truly analogous to our discussion, since that source focuses on health concerns, whereas our *gemara* critiques the character of someone taking large steps. At the same time, it is striking how the Sages twice frame loss of vision in terms of a five hundredth.

Let us follow our methodology from the previous two weeks and see if the number five hundred has any particular Jewish resonance. The few explicit scriptural references to that number seem irrelevant to declining vision. Noah has children at the age of five hundred (*Bereishit* 5:32) and Israelite soldiers donate a five hundredth of the spoils of war to Elazar after the defeat of Midian (*Bemidbar* 31: 28).

R. Kook provides an answer to the question that coheres with his broader reading of our passage. For R. Kook, large steps convey impatience with the process and the means to an end, while rushing toward conclusions and results. From this perspective, *pesiah gasa* (taking large steps) is problematic even when chasing a worthy goal. Someone with a deeper understanding appreciates the value of the process and avoids a frenzied attempt to finish early. In fact, according to this more profound perspective, one does not rest content at any finish line, since each achievement is the springboard for the next journey.

The Jerusalem Talmud in *Berakhot* 1:1 (see also *Pesachim* 94b) says that the distance from the earth to the firmament is five hundred years, and the thickness of the firmament is also five hundred years. R. Kook explains that this number symbolizes striving for a distant goal in the heavens, with the five hundredth step representing the meeting point between the process and the goal. Those who appreciate the value of process comprehend the secret of five hundred. Those who don’t understand invariably run with large steps and lose a five hundredth of their sight, since they lack that crucial final step that connects the means with the end. This approach to the number five hundred is homiletic, and does not address the other *gemara* about lost vision. Nonetheless, R. Kook’s general interpretation of our *gemara* is quite profound.

R. Kook emphasizes the value of the means to an end elsewhere in his writings. According to a *midrash* (*Bereishit Rabba* 5:9), God formed this world so that trees would have a pleasant taste just as fruit does. Sin damaged the world, and now we only enjoy the fruits. R. Kook identifies the tree as the means, and the fruit as the ends. Ideally, we should enjoy and value the process as much as the conclusion. Due to our sin and limited insight, we only appreciate the end result, as symbolized by the fruit (*Orot Ha-teshuva* 6:7).