YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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UNDERSTANDING AGGADA

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In Loving Memory of

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August 15, 1968 – July 29, 2012

לע"נ יהודה פנחס בן הרב שרגא פייוועל ז"ל

כ"ב אב תשכ"ח – י' אב תשע"ב

Shiur #5: Torah and Seeing Ugliness

The Rabbis taught: "A person should always be soft like a reed and not hard like a cedar."

Once R. Elazar the son of R. Shimon was coming from his teacher's house in Migdal Gedor, riding on a donkey. He was traveling along the bank of the river with a feeling of great joy and a sense of arrogance, because he had learned a great deal of Torah.

A very ugly person happened upon him. The ugly person said: "How are you Rebbe?"

R. Elazar did not respond. [Rather,] he said: "Empty one - how ugly this fellow is! Are all the people of your town as ugly as you?"

The ugly person responded: "I don't know, but you should go to the craftsman who made me and tell him how ugly is the vessel that he made."

R. Elazar knew that he had sinned. He got off the donkey, prostrated himself before the other fellow and said: "I have pained you. Forgive me."

The man said: "I will not forgive you until you go to the craftsman who made me and tell him how ugly is the vessel he made."

R. Elazar followed him until they came to his town. All the townspeople came out to greet R. Elazar and they said: "Welcome, our Rabbi, our Rabbi, our teacher, our teacher."

The ugly fellow said: "Who are you referring to as your rabbi?"

They said: "The one who is walking behind you."

He said to them: "If this is a rabbi, let there not be more like him in Israel."

They said: "Why?"

He said to them: "This is what he did to me."

They said to him: "Nevertheless, forgive him because he is a great Torah scholar."

He said to them: "For your sake I forgive him, but on condition that he not become accustomed to act this way."

R. Elazar immediately entered [the study hall] and taught: "A person should always be soft like a reed and not hard like a cedar." (*Ta'anit* 20a-20b)

The story ends rather ambiguously - to whom was R. Elazar referring when he discouraged harshness? He may have been criticizing his own harsh response at the beginning of the story. If so, his teaching reveals that he internalized this lesson.

Alternatively, he may have been referring to the ugly person's refusal to forgive him. After all, the man refused to forgive R. Elazar, even as he trailed after him all the way to town. Furthermore, the ugly person tries to publicly embarrass R. Elazar when the town comes out to greet the visiting rabbi.

This ambiguous ending is noted by R. Yoshiyahu Pinto, a sixteenth century rabbi from Damascus, in the commentary entitled "*Rif*" in the *Ein Yaakov*. (Note that the acronym "*Rif*" in the *Ein Yaakov* refers to R. Pinto and not to the more famous R. Yitzchak Alfasi.)

Leaving aside this ambiguity, one could ask what the point of this tale is altogether. On its simplest level, it cautions against arrogance and cruel speech. Furthermore, it reveals that great scholars are capable of improper behavior. Indeed, one cannot help but contrast this type of talmudic story with contemporary rabbinic biographies, in which rabbinic greats are portrayed as being flawless. However, something else might be contained within this story as well.

R. Yitzchak of Karlin, brother of the *Mishkenot Yaakov*, suggests a metaphorical level of meaning (see his *Keren Ora* on *Ta'anit*). He notes us that this episode occurs when R. Elazar is returning from learning in yeshiva, and that R. Elazar's transgression stems from an arrogance that is based upon extensive Torah knowledge. According to *Keren Ora*, this story examines the relationship of Torah to the world around it. A Torah scholar can choose to look upon the world beyond the *beit* *midrash* as unredeemable, as full of unmitigated ugliness. R. Elazar chooses this route, and that choice inspires his cruel comment. What he sees is not so much aesthetic ugliness as spiritual and moral ugliness.

A comment of the Maharal may enhance the above interpretation. Maharal (*Netivot Olam, Netiv Ha-anavah* 7) notices that no other talmudic story mentions a place called "Migdal Gedor." This suggests that the place name here has symbolic import. As Maharal notes, the terms refer to towers and fences. The tower symbolizes a high point, from which those on top can look down on others, while the fence connotes rigid boundaries. The bank of the river might also represent such a boundary. The scholar who selects R. Elazar's path draws a sharp dividing line between the *beit midrash* and the outside world.

Of course, the *talmid chakham* can choose a different path. He can see the outside world for the mixed bag that it is, and use the Torah as a means of sanctifying the broader realms of human experience. From this perspective, the ideals and values of Torah should permeate the full range of human endeavors, including work, leisure time, family life, and secular academic pursuits. R. Elazar needed to learn to see this world as being full of potential, and not just as full of ugliness.

*Keren Ora* offers an interesting argument for this approach. He cites several verses (*Devarim* 7:6, 14:2, and 26:18) which describe the Jews as an *am segula*, a treasured nation. This language indicates that God in fact cares about all the nations of this world - after all, a precious item is only special when its owner has other items of worth which are superseded by the precious item. Thus, the Jews' special quality indicates that the rest of humanity has significant value as well. According to R. Yitzchak, "It is well known that the main aspect of the giving of the Torah was not just to mend Israel, but rather to mend all His creations so that all their actions should be pleasing before God." The traveling scholar must see more than ugliness in the broader Jewish and non-Jewish worlds. These worlds include precious materials that can be mined successfully with the tools of Torah.

*Avot De-Rabbi Natan* (41:1) has a different version of our story, in which the protagonist is R. Shimon ben Elazar. Yet the fact that the version in our talmudic texts tells this story about the son of R. Shimon bar Yochai certainly works well with our theme. As we know from the famous episode of the cave (*Shabbat* 33b), R. Elazar ben R. Shimon was prone to see all endeavors other than prayer, Torah study and mitzva performance as worthless. In our story, this tendency gets him into trouble.

It should be noted that *Keren Ora*'s point differs from the point frequently emphasized in *Torah U-madda* literature. He speaks not about the help Torah can get from the outside world, but rather about the help Torah can give to the outside world. As David Shatz has pointed out (see his essays on Rav Kook in *Hazon Nahum* and in *Engaging Modernity*), Rav Kook employed the halakhic terminology of *hotza'a* and *hachnasa* to convey the dual nature of the mutually beneficial relationship between Torah and other endeavors. According to the *hotza'a* model, Jews need not "be creative *within* the realm of secular disciplines; their creativity lies, rather, in the process of infusing these disciplines with religious significance." (See Shatz's "The Integration of Torah and Culture: Its Scope and Limits in the Thought of Rav Kook," in *Hazon Nahum: Studies in Jewish Law, Thought, and History Presented to Dr. Norman Lamm on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, eds. Elman and Gurock, p. 554.)

Without claiming an exact affinity between the thought of *Keren Ora* and that of Rav Kook, we can still discern common a theme. Torah was never meant to hide from the world, calling the world ugly from behind a tall boundary. Torah was meant to transform the world.