YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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UNDERSTANDING AGGADA

By Rav Yitzchak Blau

In Loving Memory of

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

כ"ב אב תשכ"ח – י' אב תשע"ב

Shiur #6a: Don't Despair

There was an elderly woman who came before Rav Nachman. She said to him: "The *Reish Galuta* (Exilarch) and all the rabbis of the *Reish Galuta*'s court are sitting in a stolen *sukka*." She cried out, but R. Nachman did not pay attention to her.

She said to him: "A woman whose ancestor (i.e. Avraham Avinu) had three hundred and eighteen slaves is crying out before you, and you don't pay attention?"

R. Nachman said to [his students]: "She is a complainer, and she shall receive only monetary compensation for the wood." (*Sukka* 31a)

This story raises several questions. Why did Rav Nachman ignore this poor woman's plight if the *Reish Galuta*'s workers had indeed taken her wood? Why should she only receive compensation and not the very items that were stolen? Why does the woman make reference to Avraham and the three hundred and eighteen slaves with which he vanquished the four kings? Is this point somehow relevant to her case?

R. Tzadok Hakohen of Lublin offers a beautiful interpretation of this story in his *Divrei Soferim* (16). According to Rav Tzadok, Avraham is a crucial symbol of a particular component of Judaism. Avraham and Sarah had already despaired of having children when the angels came to tell them that they would have a son. Thus, the continuity of the Jewish people was assured only after complete despair had set in. God arranged for Jewish peoplehood to begin in this fashion so that it become an entrenched principle that Jews should never despair.

Avraham displays a refusal to despair when he courageously engages the four kings in battle. After all, these kings had just defeated the five kings, and were presumably an intimidating enemy. When Avraham gathers together his three hundred and eighteen men, they too become a symbol of not giving up. R. Tzadok then presents a *gematria* that even those not enthusiastic about *gematriot* should love. The numerical value of the word *ye'ush*, despair, is three hundred and seventeen. R. Tzadok relies on a rule that a *gematria* can be off by one to argue that though this number of men numerically equals despair, they in fact demonstrate man's ability to transcend despair. I would slightly adjust R. Tzadok's insight, and argue that the three hundred and eighteen men represent moving beyond despair, and thus add up to one more than the numerical value of *ye'ush*.

According to Halakha, a thief is allowed to keep a stolen item and merely pay its value when the item has changed possession (*shinui reshut*) and the original owner has despaired of ever getting the item back. If so, we can understand R. Nachman and the elderly woman. R. Nachman assumed that this woman must certainly have given up hope once her wood was taken by the powerful forces of the Exilarch. Therefore, she was legally entitled only to financial compensation. The woman responded that she was a daughter of Avraham, with his three hundred and eighteen men. Namely, despite the odds, she had not given up, and was legally entitled to the very wood that was taken.

Of course, this still leaves open the question of why R. Nachman still did not listen to her. Rashi explains that there was a rabbinic edict allowing thieves who had stolen materials and used them in a building to keep the building standing and merely reimburse the owner. This edict was intended to make the act of repentance easier for thieves. According to Rashi, R. Nachman may have conceded that this unusual woman did not despair, but he denied her the wood on other grounds.

R. Tzadok's reading should have deep resonance for a student of Jewish history. Of course, he is not claiming that Jews will succeed at any unrealistic plan that they see fit, just because they are the descendents of Avraham. At the same time, when historical forces place us in a precarious situation, we should remember Avraham and his three hundred and eighteen men.