YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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UNDERSTANDING AGGADA

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Shiur #08: From Criticism to Construction

Someone who sees a place where a miracle was done for the Jewish people says: "Blessed is the One who performed a miracle for our forefathers in this place." (*Berakhot* 54a)

The *gemara* in *Berakhot* expands upon and analyzes the above *mishna*:

The Rabbis taught: Someone who sees the place where the Jews crossed the Red Sea, the place where they crossed the Jordan, the place where they crossed the River of Arnon, the stones of Algavish in Morad Beit Choron, the stone that Og, King of the Bashan, wanted to throw on the people of Israel, the stone that Moshe sat upon when Yehoshua waged war with Amalek, Lot's wife and the walls of Yericho swallowed in their place; on all of these he must give praise and thanks before God...

All of these examples make sense, as they are miracles [that saved the Jewish people] - but Lot's wife is a punishment! One should say [upon seeing Lot's wife], "Blessed is the True Judge," not "praise and thanks" [which suggest a more joyous blessing]. We learned that on Lot and his wife one makes two blessings. On his wife, one says, "Blessed is the True Judge." On Lot, one says, "Blessed is the One who remembers the righteous." (*Berakhot* 54a-b)

Before discussing our central issue, I must mention Rashi's point that "the righteous" mentioned in the blessing upon seeing the place of Lot refers to Avraham and not to Lot. After all, *Tanakh* does not depict Lot as being particularly righteous. Furthermore, attributing the reference to Avraham helps resolve two different problems. The gemara explicitly states that the only case in which every Jew makes the blessing is when the miracle helped the Jewish people collectively. If the miracle merely saved a single individual, then only that person recites the blessing. Lot's salvation per se would not generate a blessing to be recited by others unless the salvation had more global implications because it revolved around the merits of our *avot*. Similarly, the Yerushalmi (*Berakhot* 9:1) discusses a case when a miracle for an individual generated a communal sanctifying of the Divine name, such as Daniel's miraculous salvation from the den of lions.

Secondly, the blessing recited upon remembering the salvation of Lot differs from the blessing cited in the mishna, namely, "Blessed is the One who performed a miracle for our forefathers in this place." Maharsha explains that the mishna's version is for all instances in which people were miraculously saved due to their own merits. As Lot was saved only due to Avraham's stature, the blessing changes to "remembers the righteous" to convey that God recalls the righteous when giving out punishments to others, and that the merits of those righteous people can forestall such punishments.

A more precise understanding of this particular blessingallows us to move on to our fundamental question. Although this gemara does address the unlikely inclusion of the example of Lot's wife, one has to wonder whether the gemara has truly resolved the difficulty. If the gemara wants to discuss joyous blessings of thanks upon seeing locations of miraculous salvation, why mention Lot's wife at all? The gemara could describe the blessing regarding Lot's wife in a separate discussion. Why does the gemara artificially link the joyous blessing about Lot's salvation, and the sober acceptance of justice about Lot's wife?

We could offer a technical answer. It may be that a person can recite these blessings only upon seeing a concrete physical reminder of the miracle. One could possibly see the pillar of salt that was once Lot's wife, but one cannot encounter a physical remnant of Lot's escape (see Meiri, however, who writes that seeing the location of Sodom inspires the blessings, and not necessarily seeing the pillar of salt). If so, it is only the sight of Lot's wife that can generate both blessings. Indeed, *Arukh Ha-shulchan* suggests (*Orach Chayim* 218:11) that the essential blessing is for Lot's wife, and that Lot's salvation arises only by association.

Rav Kook offers an important alternative answer in his *Ein Ayah*. He begins by pointing out that in ideological clashes, many people oppose a particular position because they see the negative results that will emerge from it. However, if they are unable or unwilling to promote a positive vision in place of the rejected view, then they have not truly completed the task.

To fully appreciate Rav Kook's idea, I suggest the image of a bright undergraduate philosophy major relishing the chance to poke holes in the theories of the great thinkers. He sits back in his chair and attacks Plato, Aristotle, and others, all the while taking great pride in his critical acumen. If we ask this student to articulate his own theory, he demurs, arguing that he is just a critic. Such a student takes the easy way out. It is always easier to be a critic, as one can continually challenge the opponent's premises, saying things like, "How do you know that," "Define your terms more precisely," and "What are you standards of evidence," until the other side struggles. To actually argue for something takes much more work. Yet, ultimately, not standing for anything renders the whole endeavor pointless.

Thomas Carlyle understood this point when he criticized Voltaire for being purely negative about religion:

What! That hast no faculty in that kind? Only a torch for burning, no hammer for building? Take our thanks, then, and – thyself away. (from "The Everlasting Yea" in *Sartor Resartus*)

John Stuart Mill also gave a low ranking to those he called,

destructive philosophers; those who can perceive what is false, but not what is true; who awaken the human mind to the inconsistencies and absurdities of time sanctioned-opinions and institutions, but substitute nothing in the place of what they take away. (*Mill on Bentham and Coleridge*)

If we turn back to the time of Sodom, we see that Avraham faced this challenge. Is he only going to critique the Sodom society and the evils that emerge from it, or is he also going to articulate a vision of a more just and worthy society? *Tanakh* juxtaposes the hospitality of Avraham with the hatred of guests exhibited in Sodom; in part, the reason for this is to demonstrate that Avraham moves beyond criticism to positive acts of construction and building. In the same vein, God explains his choice to inform Avraham about the impending destruction of Sodom in the following way: "For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, that they shall keep the way of God, to do charity and justice" (*Bereishit* 18:19). Far from being just a critic, Avraham truly stands for a nobler dream.

We now understand why the gemara feels the need to integrate the blessing for Lot with the blessing for Lot's wife. Lot's wife represents the destruction of corrupt Sodom. Lot's being saved in the merit of Avraham reflects the constructive vision of Avraham's life. These two themes must be interwoven in order to convey the need to move beyond the rejection of Sodom, to the more positive endeavor of building a better world.

Although I employed undergraduate philosophy majors as my specific example, the point has much broader scope. Observant Jews can also get caught up in the critic's mode, in which they point out the flaws in every contemporary Orthodox group but fail to explain just how we might go about things more successfully. Rav Kook's insight reminds us to avoid this trap, which, in many ways, is the intellectually easy way out.

Rav Kook apparently saw this as a significant theme worth repeating. In a celebrated passage in *Arpilei Tohar* (page 39), he writes,

The purely righteous do not complain about evil, but add righteousness; do not complain about heresy, but add faith; do not complain about ignorance, but add wisdom.