YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Rabbinic Tales: In the Talmud and in *Chassidut***

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**Shiur #07: Adam (2)**

In the last *shiur*, we began to explore the story of Adam and the winter solstice:

The Sages taught: When Adam saw that the days were becoming progressively shorter, he said, “Woe is me! Perhaps it is because I sinned that the world is becoming dark around me, and returning to chaos and void. And this is the death that is imposed upon me by heaven.” He decided to spend eight days in fasting [and prayer].

Once he saw the solstice of Tevet [winter solstice] and saw that the days [that followed it] were becoming progressively longer, he said, “This is the way of the world.” He went and made a festival for eight days. The next year, he observed both [periods of eight days] as festivals. He established them for the sake of heaven, while [the Romans] established them for idolatry. (*Avoda Zara* 8a)

In this *shiur*, we will continue our discussion of the story from increasingly broad perspectives within the *sugya* in which the story is located, in different circles: first in connection with the lines immediately preceding the story, and then with another story found later in the Gemara.

**B. Beyond the boundaries of the story in the *Bavli***

1. “*Achor va-kedem tzartani* – Behind and in front You encompassed me”

Immediately preceding this story of Adam in the Gemara in *Avoda Zara*, Rav Chanan bar Rava teaches about two festivals mentioned in the Mishna:

‘Kalenda’ falls eight days after the solstice; ‘Satarnura’ falls eight days before the solstice. This is hinted to in the verse (*Tehillim* 139:5), “From behind and in front You have encompassed me (*tzartani* – which may also be understood as ‘formed me’)….”

The “hint” that Rav Chanan bar Rava finds, in the verse in *Tehillim*, seems to be merely a technical resemblance between the protective presence of God that surrounds a person in front and behind, and the two pagan festivals that surround the winter solstice – one leading up to that date, and one immediately following it. Perhaps he also meant to invoke the possible negative connotations of the word “*tzartani*” (as derived from ‘*tzara’* – trouble), with a view to casting the pagan festivals in a negative light.

Rav Chanan bar Rava did not necessarily utter his teaching in the context of the story about Adam. However, the redactor of the Talmud chose to place it here.[[1]](#footnote-1)

When Rav Chanan bar Rava’s teaching is read in juxtaposition to the story about Adam, it can be illuminated by the story – in other words, it can be interpreted in another way, in light of the story – as well as making its own contribution to our reading of the story.

We might read the words of the verse in *Tehillim*,“behind (*achor*) and in front (*kedem*),” in the context of the story as referring to the two periods that Adam experienced: the first eight days, in which he worried the world was retreating (“*achor*” – backwards) back into chaos and void, and the second eight days, when he felt progress, optimism, and joy (“*kedem*” – *kadima* – forwards). In other words, the insight as to “the way of the world,” and establishing a yearly celebration of the days leading up to the turnaround as well as the days following it, may also relate to the human experience. Cyclical change is not something that exists only in nature. Man, too, undergoes ups and downs, and when a person declares, “From behind and in front You have encompassed me (or ‘formed me’),” he is expressing his acceptance of this reality. Moreover, he attributes it to God. He says to God, “You created me such that sometimes I am facing forward, in a movement of progress, and at other times I am moving backwards, in retreat. The cyclical changes of nature described in the story are reflected in the ups and downs experienced by the human psyche: the joy and the sadness, the anxiety and the confidence that give way to one another.

Now let us consider the implications if we read the word “*tzartani*” in the verse “*Achor va-kedem tzartani*” to mean “You have formed me.” *Chazal* understood the verse in this sense, as evidenced in the following passage from *Bereishit Rabba* 8:

[And God said, “Let us make man…”]: R. Yochanan taught: “From behind and in front You have formed me…” (*Tehillim* 139:5)… R. Shmuel bar Nachman said, “When the Holy One, blessed be He, created Adam, He created him two-faced [i.e., back to back] and then sawed him, so he had a back on one side and a back on the other.” [The Sages] objected: “But what about the verse that says, ‘And He took one of his ribs (*tzal’otav*)…’ (*Bereishit* 2:21)?” He answered them, “[It means, He took one] of his two sides, in the same sense in which the word is used in the verse, ‘the side (*tzela*) of the *Mishkan’* (*Shemot* 26:20).”

R. Yehoshua bar Nechemia and R. Yehuda bar Simon said, in the name of R. Lazar: “[God] created [Adam] such that he filled the whole world. From where do we know [that he extended] from the east to the west? As it is written: ‘From behind [*achor* – *acharei*, i.e., ‘from after’; the place of the setting of the sun] and in front [*kedem* – the east; the place of the rising sun] You formed me.’ From where do we know [that he extended] from the north to the south? As it is written, ‘From one end of the heaven to the other end of heaven’ (*Devarim* 4:32).”

Beyond the above: In the life of every individual, the “backward” or “behind” sometimes precedes the “forward,” with regression and slip-ups experienced prior to the desired ascent. In fact, sometimes these setbacks are actually a precondition for progress. Renewal often requires going backwards, to a point of departure somewhere in the past, even if it is a lower place and going back to it seems like a regression or an obstacle to one’s steady advancement. Going back allows one to set out on a new path that is not limited or defined by the directions, habits, or conventions of the path we previously took. And so it is with Adam. The changes that he experiences in nature – the retreating of the light, followed by its return and growth – are reflected in his psychological states: days of anguish and fear, followed by days of release and joy. The following year, when he marks the experience, he is able to celebrate the process as a whole. He celebrates the entirety of the experience, consisting of the descent as well as the subsequent ascent, because it is the existence of the descent that enables the ascent and renewal that follow.

To this we might add that Rav Yoel Bin Nun connects the festivals established by Adam to the well-known disagreement between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai as to whether Chanuka lights “progressively increase” or “progressively decrease.” During the first festival established by Adam, the light is decreasing, and these eight days reflect Chanuka as per the view of Beit Shammai. The second festival is the opposite, with the light increasing, as per the view of Beit Hillel. Thus, our *aggada* brings the two opinions together.

It would seem that once again, *Chassidut* provides clearer language to better express the same idea that *Chazal’s* story presents in a more veiled and minimalistic form. The above idea appears in several Chassidic sources – for example, in the following teaching by R. Moshe Chaim Efraim of Sadilkov, grandson of the Ba’al Shem Tov:

“And he dreamed, and behold, a ladder placed on the ground with its head reaching to the heavens” (*Bereishit* 28:12): meaning that the descent – the fact that it is “placed on the ground” – is a ladder upon which afterwards to climb to a greater level, as we know: a descent is necessary in order for there to be an ascent. And this is the meaning of, “with its head reaching to the heavens” – that he [thereby] reaches a higher level…. (*Degel Machaneh Efraim*, *Parashat Vayetze*)

Or, to quote the Maggid R. Yisrael of Kozhnitz in his *Avodat Yisrael*, at the beginning of *Parashat* *Vayetze*:

And this is hinted to in the verses, “And Yaakov awoke [*vayikatz*] from his sleep … and he was afraid”: meaning, when he saw how long the final destruction would last, fear and dread fell upon him, and he said, “When will the end come?” “And he said…‘This is none other than the house (*beit*)of God’” – meaning, he was comforted [by the knowledge] that this destruction was a preparation for the Temple, which is referred to as *bayit* – meaning, a dwelling that is fixed and permanent forever. And in accordance with the light of the redemption is the depth of the destruction; therefore this destruction has lasted a long time, and there is no end in sight, for the future redemption will be of infinite and immeasurable brightness…[[2]](#footnote-2)

The Maggid of Kozhnitz is saying that Yaakov looked into the future and saw the destruction of the (Second) Temple, with the long exile that would follow, and the prospect filled him with dread. But he was comforted with the thought that the destruction itself would in fact be “none other than the house (*bayit*) of God” - meaning, it is the destruction itself that will allow for the rebuilding of a more elevated Temple (which is referred to as a *bayit*). Actually, he is saying more than this. The more thorough and profound the destruction, so much better will the third Temple be, since it will built on cleaner foundations. This is a radical statement, and we have to ask ourselves whether it is true in every situation. Is such utter destruction of the previous state always needed in order to repair and rebuild? There are situations in which the existing structure is too rotten, or too ugly, and there is no possibility of rehabilitation, but I am not convinced that this is always the case. In any event, this teaching of the Maggid of Kozhnitz adds a nuance to the teaching from *Degel Machaneh Efraim* concerning the value of the descent that precedes the ascent.

This idea also relates to our story about Adam. Perhaps this is the insight that it seeks to express: that the great period of darkness can be viewed as an opportunity for repair and renewal, such that what comes next will be better. Renewal does, indeed, sometimes require that we let go of what was.

A teaching by the Ba’al Shem Tov on the verse, “From behind and in front You have encompassed/formed me” provides a softer formulation:

“Behind and in front You have encompassed/formed me” – When one is [mired] in physicality, which is the essence of *achor* [behind], [then] afterwards when he ascends back to the [higher] level, which is called “*kedem*,*”* he takes up with him those levels that are called “*achor*”: “And You have surrounded me in ‘*kedem’*.” (*Keter Shem Tov* 103)

The Ba’al Shem Tov identifies two situations that a spiritual seeker might find himself in. The first is generally a more physical, mundane, material reality – a state that is more distanced from God, and is identified as a lower place. This he refers to as “behind.” The second is a higher place, where he frees and directs himself to spiritual activity; this he refers to as “in front.” Dwelling in the “behind” – man’s connection to his lower aspects, whether materially, religiously or morally – seems like a retreat or a backward turn. But this connection also allows for something else to happen to those aspects. When the person later returns to a higher place, he can take those lower aspects along with him and elevate them: he can give them meaning and find the positive and Divine elements lurking in them. He can recognize and re-channel the energies that they offer; he can reveal what they have to offer the world and not just leave them in their lowly state. The “behind” and “forward” in this Chassidic interpretation are connected in a single unity, thanks to the descent into the “*achor*.” This relates back to the story of Adam and to the reading of the verse from *Tehillim* in the context of the story, as expressing a unified, holistic view of the various changes and turnarounds that a person experiences as different elements of his connection with God.

2. A parallel story

A few lines further down on the same page in *Avoda Zara* (8a), we find another *beraita* with a similar story, this time about Adam’s first experience of night:

The Sages taught: On the day that Adam was created, when the sun set upon him, he said, “Woe is me! Perhaps it is because I sinned that the world is becoming dark around me, and returning to chaos and void. And this is the death that is imposed upon me by heaven.” He sat weeping all night,[[3]](#footnote-3) with Chava crying opposite him.

When dawn arrived, he said, “This is the way of the world.” He arose and sacrificed a bull whose horns preceded its hoofs, in keeping with the verse, “And it shall please the Lord better than a bull that has horns and hoofs [with the ‘horns’ appearing before the ‘hoofs’]” (*Tehillim* 69:32).

And said Rav Yehuda in the name of Shmuel: The bull that Adam sacrificed had a single horn on its forehead, as it is written, “And it shall please the Lord better than a bull that has horns [*makrin*] and hoofs [*mafris*].” But the word *makrin* is a plural, indicating two horns! R. Nachman bar Yitzchak said: It is written *mi-keren* [i.e., without the *yud*, making the word appear singular; thus, it can be interpreted as indicating that there was only one horn].

The beginning of this story is very similar to the previous one, but here things develop in a different direction. Adam in this story does not pray or fast, but “sits and weeps.” Chava is mentioned here as weeping “opposite him,” unlike the previous story, which did not mention her. There is no mention of Adam establishing a festival in the wake of the discovery that the sun returns after the night. What he does do is offer a sacrifice, and the story notes an interesting fact about the animal that he offers: its “horns precede its hoofs.” The story interprets the order of the words in the verse “*makrin mafris*” as indicating that the horns come before the hoofs. This would seem to indicate a bull created specially at the time of Creation, rather than a bull that was born in the usual way. When this original, primal bull was created from the ground (“Let the earth bring forth the living creature after its kind,” *Bereishit* 1:24), its horns and head emerged first, with its legs and hoofs appearing only later.

The same picture is drawn in a different source in the *Bavli*, which quotes the same teachings:

R. Yehuda said: The bull that Adam sacrificed had a single horn on its forehead, as it is written, “And it shall please the Lord better than a bull that has horns and hoofs” (*Tehillim* 69:32). But the word *makrin* is a plural, indicating two horns! R. Nachman bar Yitzchak said: It is written *mi-keren* [i.e., without the *yud*, making the word appear singular; thus, it can be interpreted as indicating that there was only one horn].

And R. Yehuda said: The bull that Adam sacrificed – its horns preceded its hoofs, as it is written, “And it shall please the Lord better than a bull that has horns and hoofs.” The word ‘horns’ [*makrin*] appears first, and only afterwards, ‘hoofs’ [*mafris*].

And this supports the statement of R. Yehoshua ben Levi, who said: Everything that was created at the time of Creation was created in its full stature, with its full intelligence, and with its full form… (*Chullin* 60a)

The description “its horns preceded its hoofs” is understood here as indicating that we are talking about the original, primal bull, which is part of the Creation, and which was created “in its full stature” – in adult form and size.[[4]](#footnote-4)

What does this story add to the previous one? Why does the Gemara bring this story as well?

One element that stands out to me in the second story, more so than in the first, is the sense of loneliness. Adam doesn’t even pray; he just weeps. He makes no effort at communication; he has nowhere to turn. It might be proposed that the appearance of Chava in this story, likewise weeping, alleviates some of the loneliness. I am not sure this is the case, since she is not described as weeping “with” him, but rather “opposite” him (*kenegdo*). The impression arising from “Chava weeping opposite him” seems to be one of even greater loneliness, specifically because of what is not taking place between them. Two people exist together in the same space, feeling the same emotion, reacting in the same way, but they are completely separate and alone. To my mind, it recalls a description from another story in the *Bavli*, about the son and daughter of R. Yishmael who were taken captive at the time of the destruction:

R. Yehuda said in the name of Rav: It happened that the son and daughter of R. Yishmael ben Elisha were taken captive (and enslaved) to two different masters. Eventually, the two of them were paired together in the same place… They put them into a room; he sat in one corner, she sat in another. He said, “I am a *kohen*, descended from *kohanim* *gedolim*; shall I now marry a maidservant?” And she said, “I am a *kohenet*, descended from *kohanim gedolim*; shall I now marry a slave?” And they wept all night… (*Gittin* 58a)

Here too, the brother and sister both weep, with exactly the same feelings. They have lived through the same experiences, and are asking themselves the same questions. Nevertheless, each is completely alone. The fact that they weep simultaneously only serves to highlight more intensely the loneliness that each feels, preventing them even from sharing their sorrow with the companion who happens to be there. Perhaps in the story of Adam, too, it is specifically the mention of Chava – not as someone who joins Adam, such that their togetherness could bring some measure of solace or at least companionship, but rather “opposite him” (and perhaps this hints at the midrashic reading of the word *‘kenegdo’* in the expression “*ezer kenegdo*” – a helper/against him?[[5]](#footnote-5)) – that emphasizes the existential loneliness, the sense of having no one to turn to.

In the morning, when Adam discovers that night and day are “the way of the world,” he offers up this original primal bull. What is the meaning of his offering of this bull, with the horns (or horn) and the hoofs? Why is this sacrifice connected with the question of light and darkness?

In a recently published article, Yishai Kiel shows that the idea of a “primal” unicorn, offered by Adam as a sacrifice, existed among neighboring cultures with which the Sages were familiar, in the Persian environment in Babylonia.[[6]](#footnote-6) Kiel suggests that the story in the *Bavli* uses this motif as a sort of response to the way in which it appears in the neighboring culture. Some of the non-Jewish mythologies he reviews also describe such a bull, or its sacrifice, in the context of struggles between light and darkness or between the sun and moon, where the night/moon is represented by a bull with a single horn. If we read the *aggada* in the *Bavli* against the background of these eastern pagan legends, we might see the *Bavli* as presenting an alternative to the dualistic perceptions upon which they are based – worldviews that portray the cycles of natural phenomena as a struggle between different forces in the world, where the force of light struggles against the force of darkness and overcomes it.

The *aggada* in the *Bavli* does indeed tell a different story, in which the victory of light over darkness is part of a natural system devised by the single God, who “forms light and creates darkness.” In the Jewish version, the bull with the single horn is not killed as part of the struggle between different pagan forces, but rather is sacrificed to the One God, who encompasses the “unification of opposites.” The transformation of the bull’s horns into a single horn, in some of the teachings, serves to underline this theme of unity – the unity of all parts, the hoofs and the horn, in the direction of the One God.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Whether or not the *Bavli* describes the sacrifice of the bull as a response to Persian mythology, we can still take the narrator’s choice a step further and deeper. With regard to the first story in the *sugya*, we discussed the joining of extremes, of lower and higher planes in life, in the wake of the verse, “From behind and in front You encompassed/formed me.” In the second story, the description of the horns and the hoofs, the bull’s two extremities, gives rise to a similar idea. Added to this, perhaps, is the dual meaning of the word *keren.* The simple meaning here is the horn, but it may hint to a “*keren or*” – a ray of light; the same light whose gradual disappearance Adam agonizes over and whose return he celebrates. This reading reinforces the connection between the symbols – the horns and hoofs, and the light and darkness. Like the “*achor*” and “*kedem*,” the horn/ray and hoofs can symbolize two different psychological states – higher and lower, or spiritual and earthly (the horns face towards the sky; the hoofs tread on the earth). Adam offers a sacrifice that includes both of these extremities, both poles, in the same animal. This sacrifice views all aspects as exemplifying the variations – the ups and downs – that are set in nature, and also in the psyche. The lower portions are sometimes vital for progress. If we view them as part of the process, a necessary element in the journey of life, then even these lower parts and lower aspects are raised up to God (as the Ba’al Shem Tov teaches concerning “*achor va-kedem tzartani*”).

To add one further comment about the idea expressed by the image of the “unicorn” – the one-horned bull: Adam sacrifices this beast after arriving at the insight as to “the way of the world.” This is the same relief-inducing insight that we encountered in the first story. But where does this insight leave Adam? It does assuage his fear of death, but does it relieve his loneliness? “This is the way of the world” provides some security and puts things in order, but it leaves man alone, because the laws of nature are cold and unfeeling; they offer no connection or communication. It is specifically in a world that follows its “way,” with all its alienation, randomness, and separateness, that Adam chooses to offer a sacrifice (*korban* – derived from the root *‘k-r-v*’ – close). He initiates an act of giving; an act of creating contact. Nature is separateness, and separateness leads to loneliness. Thinking of the unity of Creation brings a turnaround to the opposite direction. The sacrifice of the bull, with its single horn, which is brought together with its hoofs in the verse “*makrin mafris*,” symbolizes the aspiration to look beyond the many elements and movements in Nature and to perceive Divine unity – one Creation, of which man is a part, rather than a separate entity standing alone. Behind the multiplicity within Creation there stands a Oneness – the Creator, with whom one can communicate and with whom one can share, alleviating the existential loneliness.

In the next *shiur*, we will broaden our perspective to include other parallels to our story.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

1. In the next *shiur*, we will consider the parallel story in the *Yerushalmi*, which will further justify finding a more meaningful reading of this verse in the context of the story – i.e., as more than a mere technicality. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For more on these sources, see the VBM series *Chassidut le-Parashat ha-Shavua* by Rav Itamar Eldar, *shiur* on *Parashat Vayetze*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Vilna edition of the Gemara includes the word “fasting” in parentheses, but the majority of manuscripts do not have this word and it seems not to belong here. See more on this below. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The very idea that Adam offered any sort of sacrifice, and specifically a bull, exists in only a small number of sources that preceded the *Bavli*. There is no mention of his sacrifice in Tanakh, but in the *Midrash Rabba*, created in Eretz Yisrael prior to the creation of the *Bavli*, in the context of the Torah’s account of Noach’s sacrifice after the Flood, we find that Adam sacrificed a bull: “‘And Noach built an altar to the Lord… and he took of all the pure animals….’ – R. Eliezer ben Yaakov said: Upon the great altar in Jerusalem, where Adam had [previously] sacrificed. ‘And it shall please the Lord better than a bull that has horns and hoofs’” (*Bereishit Rabba* 34:9).

   A different source (Tosefta *Chullin* 3:20) seems to be the first place where the idea of Adam’s bull appears, with its horns preceding its hoofs, as we have it here in our *sugya*: “Which bull had its horns preceding its hoofs? This refers to the bull of Adam, as it is written, ‘And it shall please the Lord better than a bull that has horns and hoofs.’” The significance of this detail – that its horns preceded its hoofs – is, as noted above, that we are not talking about a bull that was born in the usual manner, but rather about the original, primal bull. The other detail that appears in the *sugya* – that this bull (or “unicorn” of sorts) actually only had one horn – adds to its portrayal as a mystical creature. This feature appears in the Talmud *Yerushalmi* in several places. For instance, *Yerushalmi Shabbat* Chapter 2, *halakha* 3, 4:4: “R. Hoshaya taught: it was a unicorn; ‘And it shall please the Lord better than a bull that has horns and hoofs’ – the text says *mi-keren* [without the *yud*, indicating singular form].” What is unique to the *Bavli* is the merging of the tradition about this sacrifice offered by Adam with the story about his anxiety in the face of increasing darkness. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Yevamot* 63a: “And R. Elazar says: What is the meaning of the verse, ‘I shall make him a helper [*ezer*] opposite him [*kenegdo*]’? If he is worthy – she shall be his helper; if he is not worthy – she shall be against him.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Y. Kiel, “First Man, First Bovine: Talmudic Mythology in Context,” in: *The Aggada of the Bavli and its Cultural World* (Ed. Geoffrey Herman, Jeffrey L. Rubenstein), Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In the context of our *sugya*, this may be another interesting expression of “He established them for the sake of heaven, while they established them for idolatry,” although of course this phenomenon of *aggadot* that respond to legendary motifs in the neighboring culture, creating a “Jewish” version of them, exists in many other places as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)