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 #09: Adam (4)**

**C. Parallels to the *Bavli* in Eretz Yisrael (continued)**

In the previous *shiur*, we looked at the story in *Bereishit Rabba* that parallels the second story from the *sugya* in the *Bavli* (*Avoda Zara* 8a), about Adam on *Motzaei Shabbat*.

2. The *Yerushalmi* Parallel

Another source from Eretz Yisrael, the *Yerushalmi*, contains a parallel to the first story from the *sugya*, about Adam and the winter solstice:

Rav said: Kalends was established by Adam. When he saw the nights becoming longer, he said, “Woe is me! Perhaps the one of whom it is written, ‘He shall strike your head [ישופך ראש] and you shall strike his heel [תשופנו עקב]’ (*Bereishit* 3:15) – perhaps he will come and bite me: ‘Surely darkness shall bruise/envelop me [ישופני]’ (*Tehillim* 139:11).” When he saw the days getting longer [again], he said, “Kalends!”[[1]](#footnote-1) (*Yerushalmi Avoda Zara* chapter 1, *halakha* 2, 39c)

As the nights grow longer, Adam feels a growing anxiety, which he experiences as fear of a snakebite – a bite of the same serpent that tempted him to sin in the Garden of Eden, as in the story from *Bereishit Rabba* that we discussed in the previous *shiur*. It is reasonable to assume that the motif of the snake, which occupies a central place here, was inspired by the parallel story (in *Bereishit Rabba*) about Adam immediately after the Creation and the sin in the Garden of Eden.

The story in the *Yerushalmi* is on the level of *derash*, like the parallel in *Bereishit Rabba*, and we shall delve a little deeper into its meaning. At the center of the story is a *midrash* on the verse from *Tehillim*, “Surely darkness shall envelop me….” The *derasha* reads the verse in a very interesting way. In this chapter of *Tehillim* in general, and in this verse in particular, the psalmist describes the experience of being continually exposed and revealed before God, and the stress it causes: “Where shall I go from Your spirit? And where shall I flee from Your presence? If I go up to heaven – there You are; if I make my bed in Sheol – behold, You are here” (139:7-8). The psalmist seeks some place where he will not be so exposed – and finds nowhere. As part of this description, in verse 11, he considers seeking cover in darkness: “I said, Surely darkness shall envelop me – but the night was light for me!”

The word ישופני in this verse is not entirely clear, and the commentators deliberate its exact meaning. It is clear from the context that the psalmist thinks the darkness will envelop or cover him, but then discovers that even darkness provides nowhere to hide from God. In his original thought, expressed in the words, “Surely darkness shall envelop me,” the word “ישופני” symbolizes protection. Some scholars have suggested that it is meant here in the same sense as in other places, as a “crushing” or “bruising.”[[2]](#footnote-2) This interpretation is appropriate for the verses in *Parashat Bereishit*, where man crushes the head of the snake and the snake, by biting, may also carry out a “crushing” action. In our verse, we are speaking of “heavy” darkness (itself a metaphor), so perhaps it is also “crushing,” but it also hides man – or at least, so he thinks, until he realizes his mistake.

The *derasha* here turns the meaning of the verse on its head. “Surely darkness shall envelop/crush me” is a threat – like “it shall crush your heel.” The darkness is not portrayed as having potential to protect, but rather as an element that is itself dangerous. Adam’s anxiety is fundamentally bound up with the sin in the Garden of Eden, the guilt over it, and the punishment that it brings in its wake – recalling Adam’s words in the *Bavli*: “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.” When the days start getting longer again and the danger has passed, Adam reacts with a cry of joy. The word he uses here is the Latin word “Kalends,” the name of the pagan festival. The *Yerushalmi* interprets this word – or, more precisely, offers a *derasha* – in the form of a word play: “*kalon dio*.” (The intent may be *kalon diem* – a mixture of Greek and Latin, meaning “beautiful day.” This could conceivably be Adam’s cry of joy upon discovering that the sun has not disappeared forever, and that day will indeed return.[[3]](#footnote-3))

This story is simpler than the one in the *Bavli*. It illustrates in vibrant, living terms both Adam’s anxiety and its connection to the sin in the Garden of Eden, but aside from the anxiety, nothing happens in the first part of the story. Unlike the story in the *Bavli*, here there is no mention of Adam establishing days of fasting or prayer. After the relief that comes with the solstice, his reaction is likewise muted: he expresses his joy in a single word, which the *Yerushalmi* connects with the name of the Latin/Roman festival – Kalends. The reader is primarily left with the impression of a sense of anxiety followed by relief.

The story in the *Bavli*, as we have seen, takes us in a different direction. Fear of the snake – a feeling so real and central to Adam’s experience in the *Yerushalmi* – is nowhere to be found in the *Bavli*. The appearance of the snake in the *Yerushalmi* seems to relate to the connection between the two stories: this story about Adam, and the story in *Bereishit Rabba* about *Motzaei Shabbat*, in which the shadow of the snake – which has just caused Adam and Chava to sin in the Garden of Eden – is a live presence. In the context of the *Bavli*, it is of less significance to mention the snake. In the *Bavli*, it is more important to formulate Adam’s anxiety in terms of the central themes of the *sugya*: light and darkness. The sense of guilt and the fear of punishment are therefore linked to the original, ultimate darkness – the “chaos and void” – which likewise threatens man in the wake of his sin.

Another significant difference between the stories is that in the *Bavli*, the element of establishing special times is very well developed: the first eight days, devoted to prayer and fasting, and then the festival. Thus, in contrast to the *Yerushalmi*, which focuses on man’s anxiety, the *Bavli* focuses on the religious activity into which man channels his anxiety – as well as his relief and joy, when the danger passes. By focusing on these actions of man, the *Bavli* emphasizes his communication with God.

The comparison with the story in the *Yerushalmi* underlines more strongly the connection we noted in the previous *shiur* between the story about Adam in the *Bavli* and the verse quoted in the preceding statement in the Gemara: “Behind and in front You created/surrounded me.” This verse is from the same chapter in *Tehillim* (139:5) as the verse quoted in the *midrash* from Eretz Yisrael: “And I said, Surely darkness shall envelop me…” (139:11). The fact that these two verses are located in such close proximity to each other does not seem coincidental, and leads me to think that the redactors of the *Bavli* were aware of the *midrash* from Eretz Yisrael, in some form – and that they deliberately chose to replace fear of the snake with light and darkness, chaos and void, and also to replace the verse “And I said, Surely darkness shall envelop me” with a different one: “Behind and in front You created me” – which admittedly is not integrated into the story itself, but is juxtaposed to it and serves to enrich the story’s message.

The verse “Behind and in front You surrounded me” may express anxiety, as in the original context of the chapter in *Tehillim*. Perhaps this is the first expression of a negative attitude towards the pagan festivals mentioned in the *sugya*, in the comment of Rav Chanan bar Rava. At the same time, however, as we saw in the previous *shiur*, it also expresses a connection – or unification – of opposites, which is itself an interesting message in the context of paganism and its belief in separate powers. This idea is also expressed in the story itself, through the creation of two identical 8-day festivals out of what had originally been eight days of fasting and praying followed by eight days of festivities. This unification creates a continuum between “behind” and “in front,” the high and the low, viewing both as part of an all-encompassing unity behind which stands a single Creator. This may be a meditation on man’s stance before God as including days where we are “facing forward,” or “face-to-face,” in closeness, along with times of distance, “back-to-back.” Using the language and interpretations offered by *Chassidut*, as we saw in the previous *shiur*, we can look even deeper and see how a backward “regression” can contribute significantly to a new surge of progress, which is built inter alia on that which was acquired “back there.”

**Dialogue with a Chassidic parable**

A well-known Chassidic “parable of the walls” echoes the different religious movements that occur over the course of the story, while at the same time taking us in a different direction in thinking about “the way of the world” and God’s place in the world and in Nature. There are different versions of this parable; this is one of them:

I heard a parable from my teacher, of blessed memory: There was once a king who set up many barriers and walls, one inside the other, in an optical illusion surrounding the king. And he instructed that money should be scattered at all the gates of the wall, such that the more inward the wall, the more money would be scattered there, in order to see how eager the citizens were, [and] how each would overcome [the obstacles] and push himself to come to the king.

Some people turned back after they received money at the [outer] gates of the walls; others turned back at the second gate or the third. And a lone few had no desire to collect the physical reward, but rather wished to come to the king…

The story, up to this point, presents two models of simple people who wish to approach the king. For the first kind, a treasure will suffice: they receive something concrete for their efforts, and they withdraw to the warm security of their homes. Of course, there is the monetary element here, which is tempting. But the story also seems to raise the question of how much each person really wants to reach the king – an unmediated encounter, as opposed to an encounter that comes via the intermediary (the money). This second type of person has no interest in receiving something that is not the king himself; all he wants is “to come to the king.”

The desire to get to the king himself, and not to suffice with a gift from him, may be viewed as a parallel to the second stage seen in the story of Adam, where he celebrates the essence of his connection with God, rather than something that he has obtained. We may also view the first and second types of people as different developmental stages within the same person.

However, the story then goes on to say something more about the second type of person (or second stage of a person’s life):

And after several efforts, when they reached the king, they saw that there was no wall or barrier, but rather that it was an illusion….

In this parable, when the seekers reach the king, they discover that the walls were an illusion. What is the meaning of this statement? The walls and barriers are all the things that conceal the King and hide the fact that He operates everything in the world, via “remote control.” In the words of the Gemara – the walls and barriers are “the way of the world.” The Baal Shem Tov does not deny that there is a “way of the world”; this is the essence of the world that we live in. God’s Providence and His Majesty are certainly hidden behind barriers – not physical walls, but rather the laws of Nature. It is behind these that He is concealed. In other words, the regular, natural conduct of the world does not replace God’s action, but rather conceals it. However, His existence can be exposed if one is determined enough to reach Him.

A reading of these two stories – the Talmudic narrative and the Chassidic parable – creates an interesting developmental continuum. The impression we get from the story in the Gemara is that Adam is not led astray by the favors waiting along the way (the “money behind each wall,” as it were); instead, he is headed directly towards his aim, seeking connection with the King for its own sake. At the same time, he has not yet discovered that the walls are an illusion. He is at an intermediary stage. The Chassidic parable allows us to go a step further. Here again, communication with God is conducted with an understanding of “the way of the world.” Therefore, prayer does not focus on changing Nature.[[4]](#footnote-4) On the other hand, there is an understanding that the “way of the world” has an illusory aspect, in the sense that it conceals God’s immanence in the world; His Presence is hidden.

The Torah itself describes a slightly different process of maturation in Adam after the sin: the introduction of clothing. There is an interesting parallel between the covering of Adam with clothes and the world’s “covering” (concerning which *Chassidut* offers the play on words: *olam*, world = *he’elem,* hidden) of God’s Presence and His activity, by following the laws of Nature.

Indeed, in Chassidic teachings, the covering of man with clothing is likewise interpreted as a sort of barrier between him and a direct encounter with God. For example, let us consider the following excerpt from *Be’er Mayim Chayim* (*Bereishit* 3:21) by R. Chaim of Chernowitz, a spiritual leader of the third generation of Chassidism:

“And the Lord made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins, and clothed them” – For the Holy One, blessed be He, saw that man took pleasure in seeing and understanding God’s goodness and His greatness and the radiance of His majestic splendor. But it was impossible to show it to [mankind] clearly, in its entirety. Moreover, having walked about in darkness, if he were to suddenly look at the powerful, awesome [Divine] light, he would be blinded and unable to receive any light at all. Nevertheless, “if a person seeks to purify himself, he is aided,” and God wanted to enable him to enjoy His great light – so what did He do? He provided light for him via an intermediary [literally: separating] filter so he could look and receive that light. Hence, He “made for them garments of skins.”

This offers a new perspective on the garments God made for Adam and Chava. First of all, according to this interpretation, God views the eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge (also?) in a positive light – as reflecting a desire to perceive and understand God’s goodness and greatness. But to really see God – a direct encounter with Him – is impossible for a human being. Therefore, God creates a filter so that man can encounter Him and receive some of the Divine light, on one hand, while not being harmed by “over-exposure,” on the other.

Further on, R. Chaim connects the “garments of skin (or leather)” to *tefillin*, which contain *parshiyot* with the Divine light of Torah inside boxes of leather. In other words, “garments of skin/leather,” according to this homiletical-Chassidic reading of the verse, are not meant to cover man, but rather to cover (partially) the Divine light *for man’s sake*, such that it is both covered and revealed. This is the intermediary stage that *Chazal* describe, where man encounters the covering, the “way of the world.”

Thus we complete our discussion of the story of Adam and the light by noting the insight arising from it – the “way of the world” – and the religious significance of this insight: its ramifications for the type of communication that can be maintained with God. The Chassidic sources that we cited, based on the Baal Shem Tov’s “parable of the walls,” take this insight and show us how, within this world, we might discover the true meaning of “the way of the world” – Nature – which includes an aspect of illusion; a wall behind which the Divine Presence conceals itself.

[Translated by Kaeren Fish]

1. The meaning of this exclamation will be discussed below. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As suggested by the *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Some scholars propose instead that the meaning here is *Kalos Theos* – “God is good.” See Lieberman, *Yevanit ve-Yevanut* (in English, pp. 10-11). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Admittedly, in other Chassidic sources, such as R. Nachman’s teaching, such prayer also sometimes appears. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)