YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

**By Rav Dr. Yonatan Feintuch**

**Shiur #11: The Parable of the Merchant’s Wife,**

**and the Story of R. Chiya bar Ashi and His Wife (2)**

In the previous *shiur*, we explored the Baal Shem Tov’s parable of a merchant’s wife, which tells of a marriage relationship with sharp ups and downs. In this parable, the husband disguises himself as a sailor, holds his wife captive on a ship at sea, and forces her to engage in intimate relations with him. The combination of the disguise and the subsequent sexual relations between the couple, with one party unaware that the other party is actually the spouse, offers some analogies to a Talmudic story of R. Chiya bar Ashi and his wife, as well as to other stories recorded in the same *sugya* (*Kiddushin* 71b). We will compare the two narratives in the next *shiur*, but let us first look at the story in the Gemara, with an interpretation that focuses on the points that will be relevant to our comparison. My suggestion to readers is to think, while reading this *shiur*, about points of comparison between this story and the Baal Shem Tov’s parable that we read last week.

The Talmudic story is as follows, divided into four sections:

A. R. Chiya bar Ashi was accustomed, whenever he prostrated himself [in prayer], to say: May the Merciful One save us from the evil inclination.

B. One day, his wife heard him. She said: For some years already he has been separate from me [i.e., not engaging in intimate relations]; why does he say this?

C. One day, while he was studying in his garden, she dressed herself up and passed to and fro before him.

He said to her: Who are you?

She said: I am Cheruta, having returned from the day. [This phrase will be explained later.]

He propositioned her [to engage in intimate relations].

She said to him: Bring me that pomegranate that is at the top of the tree.

He jumped up and went and brought it to her.

D. When he came home, his wife was heating the oven.

He went and sat inside it.

She said to him: What is this?

He said to her: Such and such happened.

She said to him: It was I.

He would not believe her until she showed him signs [that proved it].[[1]](#footnote-1)

He said to her: Nevertheless, my intention was [to engage in relations with another woman - ] an act that is prohibited.

For the rest of that tzaddik’s life he fasted, until he died that same death.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The story starts with a description of a daily routine on the part of R. Chiya bar Ashi – “he was accustomed…,” along with a further specification of time: “whenever….” Together, these expressions create the impression of a situation that is fixed and ongoing. The situation reveals itself in R. Chiya’s silent prayer, uttered when he prostrates himself (the most intimate position of prayer): his struggle with his evil inclination. This is not a one-time challenge that he happened to encounter. It is an everyday reality, a constant struggle.

In part B. the focus turns to his wife. We discover that she, too, lives a painful ongoing, everyday reality, revealed to us by what she says to herself when she happens to overhear her husband’s prayer. Her ongoing reality is one of an empty, unfulfilled marriage. It has been many years since R. Chiya last engaged in intimate relations with his wife. She had apparently attributed this, in the static everyday presented to us in the introduction to the story, to physical weakness and a weakened libido, perhaps arising from R. Chiya’s advanced age. The coincidence that finds them in the same place at the same time, and her overhearing of his personal prayer, undermine the mental picture that she has held until now. She is greatly surprised by his words, which suggest that he still possesses a sexual drive – so powerful that he struggles with it and prays to be saved from it. His vitality is still there, but he is not there for her.

In section C, the wife decides to seduce her husband – perhaps in order to test his faithfulness to her, perhaps to teach him a lesson for separating himself from her, or perhaps both. She changes her appearance, dressing herself up and beautifying herself, and parades in front of him while he is studying, until he can no longer ignore her presence. When he asks who she is, she presents herself as “Cheruta, having returned from the day.” This title appears to convey more than one meaning, and I shall not elaborate here on the various possibilities.[[3]](#footnote-3) In any event, R. Chiya at this point is conscious only of her attractive outer appearance, and he gives in to temptation. After meeting the condition that she stipulates – bringing her a pomegranate from the tree – they apparently engage in physical intimacy, although this is not stated explicitly.

The two of them, both in their real identities, then meet up again in their “natural” setting – their shared home. R. Chiya bar Ashi, who is conscious of his sin, is filled with feelings of guilt and regret. He finds his wife busy heating the oven, and he climbs inside, seeking to punish himself with death by burning. There is symbolism in the manner in which he seeks to carry out his own death sentence: just as the woman “ignited” his evil inclination and he acceded, as expressed in his willingness to climb the tall tree, here too, the woman is lighting the oven and he seeks to burn his body in its fire. Here too, the movement is one of ascent, of “going up” in flames.

His wife asks why he is acting as he does, and he confesses. In response, she reveals that it was she who dressed up and tempted him – certain that this will save him from the terrible death to which he has sentenced himself. Even if she was angry at him for keeping himself away from her, and even though he failed the test that she set up for him with a view to making him understand how he had wronged her, she never intended for him to die. However, his wife’s revelation brings R. Chiya bar Ashi no consolation; he still judges himself strictly. The fact that the woman he fell for turns out to have been his wife may change he external reality, such that he did not actually commit a sin by engaging in relations with her, but for him there is no possibility of changing his internal reality: the stinging personal failure; the fact that he yielded to his evil inclination, which has brought him such shame. For him, the overriding truth is, “Nevertheless, my intention was [to engage in relations with another woman - ] an act that is prohibited.”

The printed Gemara contains a concluding sentence, indicating that R. Chiya got out of the oven but spent the rest of his life in regret and fasting, ultimately dying “that same death” – perhaps meaning that he died as a result of damage from his time in the oven. However, this sentence does not appear in the manuscripts of the Bavli,[[4]](#footnote-4) and does not seem to be part of the original story. According to the version that appears in the manuscripts, the exchange (and the story) ends with R. Chiya’s words, suggesting that R. Chiya remained in the oven and was burned. Just as the previous section of the story refrains from recording his sin explicitly, sufficing with what led up to it so that readers can infer what happened, the conclusion likewise refrains from explicitly stating how he died.

Let us now try to understand the meaning behind each section of the story. First of all, we must ask: Why did R. Chiya bar Ashi separate himself from his wife in the first place?

Some scholars have suggested that the story reflects a position that views any enjoyment of physical intimacy – even within the framework of marriage – as improper submission to the evil inclination. In this view, the sexual urge is fundamentally evil, and while enjoyment of sexual relations within marriage may be condoned (“*bediavad*”), it is not the ideal that one should strive for.[[5]](#footnote-5) According to this interpretation, R. Chiya bar Ashi decided, at a certain stage, to transcend his sexual drive and to live a more “spiritual” and less “physical” life. As a result, he refrains from engaging in permissible intimacy, and prays for Divine aid in his quest.

We might also adopt a more moderate interpretation: even if fulfillment of the sexual urge within the framework of marriage is regarded in a positive light, so long as that inclination is active, it has the potential to draw a person into forbidden relations. Perhaps R. Chiya bar Ashi decides to separate himself from his wife and take on celibacy as a tactic to help lessen the power of his sexual urge and make it a more marginal element in his life, so as to avoid improper fulfillment of this urge – a temptation that exerts its power even over someone who is married.

This latter interpretation of the story, which understands R. Chiya’s ongoing separation from his wife as a desire to fight his sexual urges, would seem to be supported by the broader context of the story within the *sugya*. The story of R. Chiya bar Ashi and his wife is the last in a series of stories that all center around the power of the sexual urge and its ability to cause even pious and learned individuals to stumble.[[6]](#footnote-6) In these stories, characters such as Rav Amram the *Chassid*, R. Meir, R. Akiva, and the *Tanna* named Plimo all find themselves struggling with the evil inclination, or with Satan, most of them meeting defeat. The story of R. Chiya bar Ashi can be read as a continuation of this series of narratives about the destructive power of the evil inclination, which even great men have trouble resisting. In the years preceding the episode recorded here, the evil inclination threatens R. Chiya bar Ashi, causing him to separate himself from his wife; in this episode, it at last causes him to stumble, ultimately leading to his tragic death. The story also records the great suffering that R. Chiya bar Ashi accepts in his willingness to die in order to atone for his sin. This harsh ending underlines the warning offered by the series of narratives as to the evil inclination and the destruction that it can bring in its wake.

More specifically, points of connection between the story of R. Chiya bar Ashi and the story of Rav Amram serve to reinforce the cohesion of the series of narratives, helping to create the impression that this series is organized within the *sugya* with a specific, defined purpose. The *sugya* deals with the prohibition of *yichud* that appears in the Mishna – the prohibition of a man and woman who are not married to each other spending time alone together in a closed or secluded place. Looking at the *sugya* as a whole, the collection of stories seems to be intended as a justification for the prohibition of *yichud*. The prohibited act itself, as we find in the Mishna, seems like an “*issur kal*” – a relatively less serious transgression: there is no physical contact involved, and no violation of any of the prohibited sexual relations enumerated in the Torah. It may even be that the woman involved is single, such that the situation offers no potential for violation of the prohibited relations set forth in the Torah. It seems that it is specifically for this reason that the sugya seeks to spotlight the evil inclination and the danger it represents, to reinforce the prohibition of *yichud*. The various stories in the *sugya* collectively emphasize the power of the evil inclination and the potential destruction that it can wreak, warning a person to exercise great caution.[[7]](#footnote-7) The conclusion of the series with the story of R. Chiya bar Ashi highlights this message even more clearly. This is a story of ongoing struggle against the evil inclination on the part of a leading sage who was fully conscious of its presence and did not underestimate its power. Nevertheless, the evil inclination manages to overcome him in a moment, with all parties paying a terrible price.

However, there is a different way of reading both the story and, consequently, the *sugya* as a whole. This reading arises from consideration of the biblical story of Yehuda and Tamar, which shares some parallels with our narrative: a woman who remains alone due to a unilateral decision on the part of a man who fails to take her feelings into consideration; the woman’s disguise and her seduction of the man; and the motif of death by burning as punishment for one of the characters, for engaging in a seemingly forbidden sexual union.[[8]](#footnote-8)

When we read the story of Tamar as a background to the story in the Gemara, the loneliness and helplessness forced on Tamar bring the situation of R. Chiya bar Ashi’s wife into sharper focus. This woman lives with constant anguish, owing to the disconnect that has prevailed between herself and her husband for many years – at least in terms of physical contact, which must surely influence the emotional realm as well. All this time, she has believed that this disconnect was due to her husband’s physical weakness, but the reader knows that he prays daily to be saved from his evil inclination. As noted above, we might conclude that he has decreed upon himself an extreme asceticism because he views even permissible relations with his wife either as submission to the evil inclination or as strengthening of it, which he seeks to avoid.[[9]](#footnote-9) However, the comparison that the narrator creates by raising associations with the story of Yehuda and Tamar does not support this view. Yehuda does not neglect Tamar and withhold his son from her because of some personal principal or value. Rather, he does so because he does not want her, specifically, to marry his son, since he believes she caused the death of his other two sons. This might point to a similar conclusion with regard to R. Chiya bar Ashi: his separation from his wife does not arise from a decision in principle to embrace extreme abstention from sexual relations, but rather a specific shunning of his wife, a loss of attraction between them. His sexual drive is alive and well, and he prays that it will not overcome him in forbidden places – specifically because he cannot fulfill his urge in a legitimate manner within his marriage, which for him has lost its vitality.

As in the story of Yehuda and Tamar, so too when it comes to R. Chiya bar Ashi and his wife, the lack of interest is one-sided: he shuns her, but she seeks connection with him. A superficial reading of the story suggests that R. Chiya's wife wants to test him and to teach him a lesson, but in light of the comparison with Tamar, we might consider the possibility that she has an entirely different intention: to revive the bond between them. According to this reading, the disguise is not meant to punish or humiliate him, but rather to cause him to desire her, thereby facilitating a renewal and rejuvenation of their relationship. Indeed, a careful review of the story reveals that the text does not mention her "disguising herself,” but rather "dressing up" (literally, "decorating/beautifying herself"). This appears in many places in *Chazal's* teachings as a legitimate tactic employed by a woman to attract her husband.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The pomegranate that she asks of him – a fruit that symbolizes intimate relations[[11]](#footnote-11) and fertility – would likewise seem to hint to her intention of rehabilitating their relationship and bearing its fruit, in the most straightforward sense. She seems to hope that her one-time act performed "in disguise" will help her husband to "rediscover" her as "Cheruta,” and that this will revitalize their relationship. She takes on the appearance of a younger woman, he climbs a tree with youthful energy, and together they discover that even at their advanced age, they retain the same vigor that they possessed in the past.

Moreover, the physical union forged between them via the disguise is not merely a means to a future end, but rather an end in itself – at least in the short term.

Unlike Tamar, the wife in *Chazal's* story ultimately fails to achieve her aim. She obtains momentary intimacy with her husband, but it does not last. Her provocative presence has the desired impact, and R. Chiya bar Ashi is immediately interested in pursuing her initiative, but his act is not the repair that his wife hopes for. R. Chiya remains alienated. He can see only his own lapse, a personal failing that requires atonement; the potential for rebuilding the bond with his wife lies outside of his perception. The knowledge that the woman he engaged in relations with was actually his wife should bring him relief, since in fact there was no sin. This relief could have allowed for constructive consideration, just as Yehuda chooses to focus not on his sin (engaging in relations with his daughter-in-law) but on rebuilding the family. R. Chiya, however, does not accede to his wife's invitation to revive their bond; instead, he continues to focus only on his sin and the tragic act that appears to him as the only possibility for repairing this failing: "Bring him out and let him be burned.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

According to this reading, the story plays a different role in the *sugya*. The episode has a tragic ending, but that ending seems to warn against something other than all the other stories in the *sugya*. It concludes the *sugya* with an inverse movement that may be meant to soften the harsh messages of the previous narratives, so as to make room for healthy, positive sexuality between husband and wife. It may be that the redactors of the *sugya* feared the emphasis on the power and danger of the evil inclination in the previous stories might lead people to precisely the same conclusion as R. Chiya – a tragic conclusion that dooms the marriage and the partners themselves. From this perspective, the story of R. Chiya bar Ashi and its grim ending are not meant to warn against the power of the evil inclination but rather the opposite – to warn against R. Chiya’s conclusion, i.e., going to the opposite extreme in an attempt to eradicate the evil inclination. Not only does the story give legitimacy to sexual desire within the marital relationship, but it offers a bold statement: the “evil inclination” is not essentially evil. It may be channeled in a positive direction, and what a person views as a wretched personal failure may serve as the basis for repair.

The comparison with Tamar also reinforces the legitimacy of the initiative taken by R. Chiya’s wife. In contrast to the story of Yehuda and Tamar, there is no actual forbidden sexual union in the story of “Cheruta.” The woman’s act of seduction, although experienced by the man, in the moment, as a sin, may be viewed as positive, since it contains the potential to arouse or rehabilitate a listless, tenuous relationship. The audaciousness of the story hints to a positive attitude on the part of the authors or redactors of the *sugya* towards a vital, passionate marriage. The story in the Gemara is not a copy of the story in the Torah, but rather its tragic mirror image, revealing what might happen when Yehuda’s healthy understanding is not applied. According to this interpretation, R. Chiya bar Ashi’s choice is misguided, and serves as a warning against a mistaken understanding or radical view of the caution that should be exercised in view of the evil inclination, whose power was highlighted in the previous parts of the *sugya*. Despite the tragic death of R. Chiya himself, the story, read together with its biblical parallel – as intended by the narrators in the Gemara who created this analogy – offers an optimistic and conciliatory message concerning the evil inclination, which readers can take with them.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

1. This sentence does not appear in the manuscripts; see below. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This sentence also does not appear in the manuscripts; see below. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For different interpretations of the name, see the discussion in *Panim El Panim: Shezirat ha-Halakha ve-ha-Aggada be-Talmud ha-Bavli*, Jerusalem 5779, pp. 135-136. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. E.g. MS Vatican 111 and MS Munich 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rozen-Tzvi, *Yetzer ha-Ra*, pp. 79-82. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For more detailed discussion of these stories, see the analysis in *Panim El Panim*, n. 3 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cf. Rozen-Tzvi, *Yetzer ha-Ra*, pp. 79-81. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For more detailed discussion, see *Panim El Panim*, pp. 141-143. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Rozen-Tzvi, *Yetzer ha-Ra*, p. 80, asserts with certainty that this is the motivation behind R. Chiya bar Ashi’s separating himself from his wife. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. As noted by Rozen-Tzvi, *Yetzer ha-Ra*, p. 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Cf. Shinan, “Isha*, Masekha ve-Tachposet,*” p. 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This theme is emphasized through the molding of the characters in the different parts of the story; see the detailed analysis in *Panim El Panim*, p. 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)