**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 #16:   
The Talmudic *Chassid* and the Stone-Clearer, and Chassidic Tales (2)**

In the previous *shiur*, we looked at the story from the *Bavli* about the *chassid* and the *mesakkel*:

Our Sages taught: A person should not remove stones from his domain to the public domain.

A certain person was once removing stones from his domain to the public domain.

A certain *chassid* came upon him and said to him, “Foolish one! Why are you removing stones from the domain that is not yours, to your domain?”

[The man] scorned him.

Some time later, the man was forced to sell his field,

As he walked about in that public domain and stumbled over those stones, he said, “That *chassid* was correct when he said to me, ‘Why are you removing stones from the domain that is not yours, to your domain?'” (*Bava Kama* 50b)

The dialogue between the *chassid* (as the term is used by *Chazal*) and the *mesakkel* recalls a later Chassidic story about the Rebbe of Kotzk (*Siach Sarfei Kodesh*, *Re’eh*, p. 126):

It once happened that the holy Rebbe, R. Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, of blessed and saintly memory, went to Peshiskhe, to [visit] R. Bunim, of blessed and saintly memory.

On the way, he encountered a wealthy aristocrat who had grown up with him.

This aristocrat was sitting in a carriage with the choicest horses, and he called to the holy Rebbe of Kotzk to join him in the carriage. Now, this wealthy man was not religious.

As they sat together, they discussed words of wisdom and *mussar*, as befitting the holy Rebbe of Kotzk. As they spoke, the holy Rebbe asked the man:

“Where do you have your *olam ha-zeh* (‘this world’)?”

The man laughed: “Do you not see, respected Rabbi, what I have at home, and in the field, oxen and donkeys and all the trappings of aristocracy?”

Then the holy Rebbe answered him, “That is your *olam ha-ba* (world to come), but I ask you: Where is your *olam ha-zeh*?”

The words of the holy Rebbe, of saintly memory, sank in, and the man became a *ba’al teshuva.*

There are some interesting points in this story that can be considered in dialogue with the narrative in *Bava Kama*. The Chassidic story, too, features a man who possesses great wealth, and a “*chassid*” who rebukes him. Attention should also be paid to the manner of the rebuke: the Rebbe of Kotzk, too, poses a surprising question that has a de-familiarizing effect – both for the character in the story and for us, the readers. In both stories, the individual who is being criticized does not understand the message, and scoffs at the rebuke.

In the Chassidic story, the Rebbe responds patiently to the scorn and explains his message. In the wake of his explanation, the aristocrat internalizes the lesson and undergoes a real change. In the rabbinic narrative, on the other hand, the change does not come about immediately. It happens only sometime later, when the *mesakkel* comes face to face with a new reality and only then, in retrospect, understands what the *chassid* was telling him. But both stories are built on the same principle: the main point lies not in the direct rebuke, but rather in the undermining of a perception that is fundamental to the subject’s understanding of reality or of his life. I tend to agree with Avisar Har-Shefi,[[1]](#footnote-1) who suggests that if the Rebbe had asked the more self-evident question – “Where is your *olam ha-ba*?” – he would have received no response. The aristocrat is familiar with the question and has already made up his mind: he has chosen this world – wealth, property, convenience – over the world to come. It is specifically the question about his *olam ha-zeh* that catches him unprepared and unsettles him, because it places a great question mark over everything: Is what he has chosen everything that he believes it to be? Is it indeed good? Does it bring him joy? Apparently, deep down, the answer is in the negative.

The significant idea arising from both stories is that placing a person outside of his usual patterns of thinking can awaken something in him, giving rise to a new perspective and a change in how he lives his life. To some extent, this happens to the *mesakkel*, too. The *chassid* does not address the immediate issue – the man’s removal of stones from his private property into the public domain – but rather calls into question his broader concept of ownership, including the perception that the field he currently owns is indeed his. The *chassid* shifts the *mesakkel* to a different conceptual framework. Although his insight is internalized by the *mesakkel* himself only when it is already “too late” – he no longer owns the field, and is stumbling over the same stones that he had previously dumped in the public domain – the change does ultimately occur. Moreover, the story has the power to generate a similar process in the mind of the reader; it invites the reader to reevaluate his ideas about ownership and property.

The message arising from the story of the *mesakkel* can also play a role in the broader context of the *sugya*. The *chassid’s* remark, which undermines the usual way of thinking, also serves to place an ethical and philosophical question mark over the legal conventions guiding those opinions which, in the halakhic discussion, exempt a person who digs a pit that is not in his domain or under his ownership from paying damages to others who suffer harm because of it.

In the Chassidic story about the Rebbe of Kotzk, the conceptual undermining is slightly different, but here too it pertains to a person’s acquisitions in the world. The aristocrat is certain that ‘this world’ is his. What is good and proper and desirable for him to acquire are the expensive, luxurious material items that he likes. The Rebbe causes him to understand that such acquisitions are not really a good *olam ha-zeh*. As part of the explanation, we might invoke the insights and language of the story of the *mesakkel*: any material acquisition is temporary; it may easily be lost, and so it is not really “mine.” A good *olam ha-zeh* consists of those things that are not dependent on material ownership; things which a person acquires in a different way and maintains regardless of his financial situation. These might be intellectual insights and learning, or love, friendship, or connection with people or with God, all of which continue to accompany a person even when he “loses everything he has.” As in the story of the *mesakkel*, the de-familiarization prompted by the Rebbe’s strange question leads to a rethinking of the nature of the possessions that are acquired in this world.

***Mei Ha-Shiloach* –** “**What is mine – is yours, and what is yours – is yours**”

The idea of undermining conventional concepts of acquisition and ownership is developed in an interesting and different way in a teaching of the *Mei Ha-Shiloach* (Itzbitzer Rebbe). This teaching talks about the connection between *shemitta* and *yovel* and a trait that is mentioned in *Massekhet Avot*: “What is mine – is yours, and what is yours – is yours.” It takes the idea from the level of land and fields and expands it to all areas in which a person acquires possessions – both material and non-material. Some of these acquisitions are not really “his,” but rather belong, in a deeper sense, to someone else. This is a message of the *shemitta* year: when a person temporarily “releases” his land, he recognizes that the land is not under his absolute ownership, but rather belongs to God. When it comes to the *yovel* year, a person actually parts with some of his acquisitions, and is left with only that which he inherited from his ancestors:

“And you shall count for yourself seven *shabbatot* of years; seven times seven years… and you shall make proclamation by sounding the shofar…. And each of you shall return to his possession… In this *yovel* year, you shall return, each man to his possession” [*Vayikra* 25:8-13]: The idea of *shemitta* and *yovel* speaks to the traits mentioned in *Massekhet Avot* (5:10) – “What is mine – is yours, and what is yours – is yours.” *Shemitta* speaks to the concept of “What is mine – is yours.” In other words, although “the earth He has given to the children of men” [*Tehillim* 115:16] – that a person has an acquisition in the ground, such that he can extract from it all manner of good things… [nevertheless] in the seventh year he gives up the ground to the blessed God, for he desists from labor and from voluntary working of the ground, in accordance with God’s will, and he observes His commands; this is called “What is mine, is Yours”…

And *yovel* speaks to the concept of “What is yours – is yours,” for the mitzva of *yovel* is that each person returns to his possession, and each to his family, for in truth, God […] divided up an inheritance for each and every one in accordance with his level, as suited to him at his root… But since “they have sought out many inventions” (*Kohelet* 7:29), it happens that one person manages to raise himself up and expand his boundary and acquire his fellow man to work for him, while another sinks lower and sells off his inheritance until he eventually sells himself [into indentured servitude]. But since God’s word stands forever and will not be changed, heaven forfend, through human actions… for the blessed God created a time for each thing to return to its possession, and He created the *yovel* year in order that then every man would return to his place and his possession which belongs to him from God… until it is recognized that that which he has from the possession of his ancestors, through the blessed God giving it, will remain his, while that which comes to him through human action, even though it has been his property until now and belonged to him, since it is not his at its root, he has to return it to the place to which it belongs…

It might therefore occur to a person to say that if this is the case, and what remains his will be only that which the blessed God has given him at his root, then all his efforts – to accumulate wealth and to acquire possessions and to expand his boundaries – are in vain, since that which remains in his possession will be only that which the blessed God allotted to him! Concerning this, King Shlomo, of blessed memory, said, “a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor” (*Kohelet* 10:1). Meaning, it is true that through wisdom, a person understands that nothing will remain for him of all his efforts, and because of this, he will avoid exerting any effort in this world. But the “little folly” that exists in him causes him to exert effort and to accumulate possessions even though he understands with his wisdom that it is only temporary…

The *Mei Shiloach* translates the Torah’s concepts of land and the *yovel* into spiritual language. A person may acquire all sorts of belongings and possessions – both material and non-material – with his efforts and his money, even though a great many of them have no real affinity with his “root,” his essence, the place that he is meant to occupy in the world. However, from time to time there comes a “*yovel*” of sorts, and a person is left only with that which is truly connected to him in the world, so that every person can be in the place that is right for him, and not in the place of his fellow.

This teaching also maintains a discourse with the story of the *mesakkel*. Both express a surprising, non-conventional stance concerning a person’s possessions in the world, but the *Mei Shiloach*’s message is slightly different: there are possessions that are truly “mine” – i.e., that are truly meant to be mine in the world. In the case of land, this would refer to the portion that I inherited from my ancestors, not land that I obtained through my work, my power, and my efforts. In other areas, this would refer to material and non-material acquisitions that are appropriate to the person that I am truly meant to be, and that serve my talents, abilities, personality, and soul.

This is relevant and important for the life of every individual. A person experiences and acquires all sorts of things, but they don’t always advance him and what is right for him, or the manner in which his strengths and abilities can best find expression and contribute to the world. Thus, a person accumulates both material and non-material assets that are not truly suited to and appropriate for his destiny.

For example, a person who does not actually possess any ability in the sphere of management may take a management course. A person with no musical talent may study music. A person with spiritual inclinations may take a cookery class or learn to do motor repairs, while a very practical person may devote himself to studying the humanities. Ultimately, according to the *Mei Ha-Shiloach*, out of all of this, what stays with a person in the long term is that which is actually profoundly connected with his inner essence. A person who is suited for living with the bare minimum may acquire many possessions, for all sorts of external reasons – for instance, a need to keep up social appearances – but eventually he will probably lose it all, since it is not right for him. On the other hand, there may be a person whose soul really needs to live in the sort of comfort and splendor that is created by luxurious property. For such a person, it may be appropriate to accumulate possessions.

In the final paragraph of the excerpt above, the *Mei Ha-Shiloach* adds another insight. All the above notwithstanding, every person may continue for some time on a path that is actually not suited to him. The innovative idea here is that this, too, is meant to be, and it is for this reason that God also gives a person “folly” – which causes him to ignore his exact personality structure and needs for a great deal of the time, and to think and make decisions in a way that is inappropriate for him. It turns out that all of this is actually not completely a waste of time.[[2]](#footnote-2) Apparently, God desires the journey in which a person experiences different things until he finds what is exactly right for him. When this eventually happens, he will experience a sort of “*yovel*” in which that which is not truly “his” will be taken from him.

Let us try to bring this idea into sharper focus. The *Mei Ha-Shiloach* defines the term “his” differently from the Gemara in the story of the *mesakkel*. According to the worldview of the *chassid* in the Gemara, all private property that a person acquires in the world is actually “not his”; only the public domain is “his.” The *Mei Ha-Shiloach* offers a softer, gentler perspective: there are things that a person acquires that are indeed “his” and that will remain “his” even when all that which is “not his” is lost in one way or another. What is common to both perspectives is their undermining of the conventional views that most people hold regarding what they possess.

We might compare the teaching of the *Mei Ha-Shiloach* here to the introduction to R. Nachman’s story of the *Baal Tefilla*:

Once there was a master of prayer (or “prayer leader” – *baal tefilla)* who was constantly engaged in prayer, and in singing songs and praise to God. He lived away from civilization but would often visit inhabited areas. When he came to visit someone […] he would speak with him and motivate him at length, until the person was persuaded and was willing to join himself to him. As soon as this happened, [the master of prayer] would take him and lead him to his place, away from civilization. For [the master of prayer] had chosen himself this place away from civilization, where there was a river, as well as trees with fruit that they could eat. He had little concern for clothing…

Another characteristic of this master of prayer was that he would provide each person with what he needed. If he understood that the mind of one of his followers was such that, for his Divine service, he needed to go about in golden robes, then he would provide them for him. And likewise the opposite: sometimes a wealthy person was drawn to him, and he would take him away from civilization, and when he understood that what this wealthy person needed was to go about in torn, shoddy clothing, he would instruct him accordingly. Everything was in accordance with what he knew to be the needs of each of them, which he would provide. (*Sippurei Ma’asiyot* 12)

I will not dwell on this story further here, but attention should be paid to R. Nachman’s expression of the understanding that different ways of relating to property are appropriate to different people.

In the next *shiur*, we will look at more stories and sources in which R. Nachman addresses the issue of ownership in this world, following on the idea that arises from the teaching of the *Mei Ha-Shiloach*.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

1. A. Har-Shefi, *Ha-Sippur ha-Po’el*, p. 180. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Later on, he explains that some impression will remain of what he acquired, even if it was not “his,” but we will not expand on this point here. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)