**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 #24: The Story of Rav Sheshet and the Heretic (*Berakhot* 58a) (1)**

**The story of Rav Sheshet and its immediate halakhic context**

In the past few *shiurim*, I discussed the story of Herod from the point of view of his royal identity, as well as the first part of the “Story of the Seven Beggars,” which also deals with royal status. The story goes on to introduce seven beggars, each of whom is afflicted with some physical handicap. Before we discuss these characters, let us look at another story from the Gemara, about a Sage who suffered from a physical affliction:

Rav Sheshet was blind.

Everyone was going to greet the king, and Rav Sheshet stood up and went along with them. A heretic found him there and said to him: Jugs [that are intact] go to the river; where do the broken ones go?

Rav Sheshet said to him: Come and see that I know more than you do.

The first troop passed, and when the noise grew louder, this heretic said to him: The king is coming.

Rav Sheshet said to him: The king is not coming.

The second troop passed, and when the noise grew louder, this heretic said to him: Now the king is coming.

Rav Sheshet said to him: The king is not coming.

The third troop passed, and when there was silence, Rav Sheshet said to him: Certainly now the king is coming.

This heretic said to him: How do you know this?

Rav Sheshet said to him: Royalty on earth is like royalty in the heavens, as it is written [with regard to God’s revelation to Eliyahu at Chorev]: “And He said: Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord. And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire a still small voice.” (I *Melakhim* 19)

When the king came, Rav Sheshet began to bless him.

The heretic said to him: Can you then bless someone you do not see?

What was the end of this heretic? Some say that his friends gouged out his eyes, and some say that Rav Sheshet fixed his gaze upon him, and the heretic became a pile of bones.

Rav Sheshet, who was blind, was amongst a crowd that went out to see the king, and there he encountered a heretic who was disrespectful towards him. (According to one manuscript version (Paris 671), this was a Jew who had turned his back on the *beit* *midrash*. This may explain his familiarity with the laws of blessings and his questioning of Rav Sheshet’s blessing of the king.) It later turns out that Rav Sheshet, despite his blindness, has a better grasp of what is going on than the seeing heretic.

Although this story is quite short (much shorter than the one about Herod), it contains several themes that are worthy of discussion. This story, too, touches on the subject of royalty. Everyone goes out to see the king pass by – or, more precisely, to see the royal procession, the sight of royalty, which seems more interesting than the king himself as an individual. This story maintains a dialogue with the previous one, not only surrounding the subject of royalty, but also in terms of the senses of sight and hearing, and the relationship between them, which is also a significant element in both. Our story also deals with additional topics. We will discuss it from several angles, addressing these various themes.

**Senses – or, how do we "know"?**

The heretic’s disdain of Rav Sheshet is hurtful and disrespectful, but the point he makes is factually correct: Rav Sheshet will not actually see the king. The response that Rav Sheshet gives is interesting: "Come and see that I know more than you do." If we pay careful attention to the language, we notice that he mentions seeing – precisely the sense that he lacks, and the area in which the heretic seemingly has an advantage over him. And it is specifically through the use of this sense that the heretic will discover that it is Rav Sheshet who has better knowledge, despite his handicap in the area of sight.

Through the formulation of R. Sheshet’s response, the narrator hints, already at this early stage, that – surprisingly enough – knowledge will turn out not to have its source in seeing, even though there is often a direct connection between seeing and knowing.[[1]](#footnote-1) Indeed, knowledge can be obtained in all sorts of ways, and the story raises the question of whether seeing is even the main or most dominant way of knowing something.

When the royal procession finally arrives, the story makes a sharp transition in the medium of experience, from the sense of sight to the sense of hearing. It is hearing that ultimately allows R. Sheshet to accurately anticipate the king's arrival. At this stage we might ask ourselves whether this story, like the story about Herod, should also be understood as contrasting what we perceive through sight with what we absorb through hearing. However, that does not seem to be the focus here, because the heretic, too, uses his hearing. We might have predicted that Rav Sheshet, owing to his blindness, has sharper hearing than the heretic, but the story does not go in that direction. The heretic hears the same things – but reaches different conclusions.

The point that is made about senses in general, and the sense of hearing in particular, is therefore a more complex one. First and foremost, the story expresses the understanding that the senses, in and of themselves, provide only partial knowledge. Information taken in by the senses still requires processing and interpretation, and the conclusions one draws from what he sees or hears will always have a subjective dimension. The interpretation differs from one person to the next and depends on many different factors that mold his world of associations. The story offers one important tool for processing and interpreting what the characters hear. Yona Frankel notes that the Sage perceives the moment of the king's arrival more accurately because, unlike the heretic, he does not rely only on his senses, but also uses biblical verses to interpret the information that he absorbs. The distinction between the two characters, according to Frankel, is that the heretic relies on his senses alone, while Rav Sheshet relies on his Torah knowledge to understand that which he hears: "Reality is not interpreted from within itself, simply through seeing. Rather, the biblical verses are needed in order to arrive at the correct interpretation."[[2]](#footnote-2)

Rav Sheshet's knowledge of Torah takes him to the verses from i in which Eliyahu experiences God's revelation not through an earthquake or fire, but rather in a "thin, small voice." We might understand the quiet appearance of the king as an expression of nobility, or of the fact that his royal status – which in his case (unlike Herod, for example) is genuine and internal – gives him an inner confidence that obviates the need for noise and fuss. However, we can develop this idea further and enrich its conceptualization through reference to R. Nachman’s “Story of the Seven Beggars.” I will address the story in greater detail in the next few *shiurim*; suffice it here to quote a few lines from the deaf beggar in the story:

“You all think I’m deaf, but I am not deaf at all – only, the whole world does not matter to me at all, that I should hear their lacking. For all voices in the world are only about needs, since everybody screams about what he lacks; and even the world's celebrations, they are all only because of lacking, as someone rejoices over what he had been missing, that he now has. But the entire world doesn't come across me at all, that their lacking should enter my ears, for I live a good life with no lack at all..."

And his good life was: he ate bread and drank water…

The point about hearing that is made in this excerpt is interesting in the context of the king’s appearance in the story of Rav Sheshet. The deaf beggar’s statement connects crying out – and voice in general – with want. He chooses not to hear these voices because he is above concern with what is lacking. He lives a “good life,” which is equated with a lack of deficiency. What is the positive content of his good life? One might have imagined that he is rich and lives a life of luxury. But this is not the case: he is a beggar, possessing almost nothing. At the same time, the minimum that he does possess – bread and water – satisfies him. From his point of view, he has everything, and his life is good. Lack, from this perspective, is subjective; it is a matter of a person’s consciousness. Indeed, many of the things that we purchase or obtain – a certain car, a certain garment, a certain device, etc. – are not necessarily things that we truly need, though it feels like it at the time.

What sort of king is “above” all of this? Not just any king that we are familiar with. To use kabbalistic language, *Malkhut* is described as “having nothing of itself.” In its ideal state, it is wholly given over to its role, to its subjects and their needs, while possessing nothing of its own and needing nothing for itself. A king can, in the physical sense, dwell in a palace and wear precious garments, but if he is a real king, he knows that all of this is external and is actually meant for his subjects, so they can see their king in respectable garb and in a splendid setting; this gives them the sense that he is their king.

Does such a king exist? It is said that R. Yisrael of Ruzhin lived in a palace, traveled in a grand carriage, and wore luxurious clothes and golden shoes. But it is recounted:

Sometimes [the holy Rebbe] would wear special, shiny shoes, in the style of the landowners. Once they went out to recite the special prayer for the new moon in the cold of winter, with snow covering the ground. When they returned home, the holy Rebbe tried to pull his feet by force out of the frozen ice, until they bled… And [those who were present] realized that his shoes had no soles. (Mordechai Mottel Michelson, Zvi Yechezkel Mikhelson, *Maamar Mordechai*, Pyotrekov, Natan Neta Kranenberg, 5667, p. 263)

R. Yisrael of Ruzhin himself said, “A true *tzaddik*… who is on the level of complete equanimity – such a *tzaddik* may pursue honor” (*Irin Kaddishin* p. 102). Here, the Ruzhiner refers to the ability not to be influenced or motivated to any degree by external luxury or honor.

I believe that this equanimity corresponds in some sense to the “still, small voice” of *Malkhut* that appears in *Sefer Melakhim* and in the story of Rav Sheshet. The still, small voice is connected to the quality of royalty, attributed to the kabbalistic *sefira* of *Malkhut*, which “has nothing of its own.” It is royalty that exists entirely for the sake of its subjects, and which itself is a sort of “nothingness,” symbolized by the quiet. It seems to me that this insight into the quality of *Malkhut* also explains why the story in the Gemara presents a conflict between a heretic and a Sage who is specifically blind. Theoretically, a seeing Sage could also find himself in a “guessing game” with the heretic as to when the king would appear, and could also “win” thanks to his insights from the verses of *Sefer Melakhim*. Admittedly, the fact that R. Sheshet is blind serves to intensify the drama of the story, because it causes the heretic’s disdain for his going out to meet the king. However, Rav Sheshet’s blindness may also play another role: it emphasizes that *malkhut* does not draw its strength and power from external grandeur or any aspect of external appearance. It is more a symbolic matter than anything physical, but something about Rav Sheshet’s blindness helps him to be less “dazzled” by the outer trappings of royalty, and to be better attuned to its inner power, which is expressed in its quiet. All of the senses allow perception of an external or internal reality, but it seems that in relation to the sense of sight, the perception of the outer appearance – which may conceal something more internal – is most dominant, for most people. Therefore, the character who represents the ability to absorb a more internal reality is blind.

In other words, the story also teaches us that there are different ways of encountering reality. One way is to encounter it on its external level, which creates certain expectations. The heretic, who is able to encounter reality only on the external level, expects the king to appear with great noise, pomp, and ceremony. Another possibility is to encounter reality’s more inner layers, when the outer “background noise” is quieted, and thus one encounters its divinity.

In the next *shiur*, we will examine other aspects of the story of R. Sheshet and the heretic, and see how a reading of different points in the story is reinforced by the broader context. We will also enrich our reading of the story with additional Chassidic sources.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

1. In this context, it is worth noting that the concept of seeing, as opposed to knowing in other ways, plays a central role in the legal realm. For example, we find in *Vayikra* 5:1, "and he is a witness, by seeing, or knowing…." In halakhic jurisprudence, visual testimony occupies a central place, but another option is "knowledge," which may sometimes be based on hearing; see S. Albeck, *Ha-Raayot be-Dinei ha-Talmud*, Ramat Gan 5747, pp. 314-316. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Y. Frankel, *Sippur ha-Aggada: Achdut shel Tochen ve-Tzura*, pp. 208-212. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)