YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Talmudic *Aggadot***

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**Shiur #17: Disguise and Disaster –**

**The Story of R. Chiya b. Ashi and his Wife**

1. **Preface**

In previous *shiurim,* we dealt with *aggadot* whose literary molding included allusions to biblical narratives. A reading of a biblical story that forms the background of an *aggada* serves to enrich the molding of the *aggada* and its message. The story of Yosef and his goblet was the background to the story of Mar Zutra and the stolen goblet; the story of the splitting of the Reed Sea and Moshe’s leadership were the background to the story of R. Pinchas b. Yair and helped to build the character of R. Pinchas.

In this *shiur*, too, we will examine an *aggada* that has a biblical story as its background, but here the situation is more complex. The allusion to the biblical story is subtler, and the relationship between the biblical story and the *aggada* is not straightforward, as we shall see.

1. **The story of R. Chiya b. Ashi and his wife (*Bavli*, *Kiddushin* 81b)**

A.

R. Chiya b. Ashi, whenever he fell upon his face [in the Tachanun prayer], used to say: ‘May the Merciful One save us from the evil inclination (*yetzer*).’

B.

One day, his wife heard him. She said, ‘It has been many years that he has separated himself from me; why then should he say thus?’

C.

One day, while he was studying in his garden, she adorned herself and walked back and forth before him. He said, ‘Who are you?’ She said, ‘I am Charuta; I returned a day ago.’ He desired her. She said to him, ‘Bring me that pomegranate from the uppermost branch of the tree.’ He jumped up, went, and brought it to her.

D.

When he returned home, his wife was firing the oven. He went up and sat in it. She said to him, ‘What is the meaning of this?’ He said, ‘Such-and-such happened.’ She said to him, ‘It was I.’ He paid no attention to her until she gave him proof. He said to her, ‘Nevertheless, my intention was sinful.’

Appendix

That righteous man fasted his whole life, until he died from it. For it is written (*Bamidbar* 30), ‘Her husband has voided [her vows], and the Lord shall forgive her’ – What situation is the Torah describing? A woman who had made a nazirite vow, and her husband heard it and annulled it, but she, not knowing that her husband had annulled it, nevertheless drank wine and contracted ritual impurity through contact with the dead. When R. Akiva would reach this verse, he would weep. He would say, ‘If, concerning someone who intended to eat the flesh of a pig but ended up eating mutton, the Torah decrees that he requires atonement and forgiveness, how much more so concerning one who intended to eat the flesh of a pig and ended up actually doing so!’

Likewise, we read (Vayikra 5), ‘… Even though he was unaware, he is guilty, and shall bear his iniquity.’ When R. Akiva would reach this verse, he used to weep. ‘If, concerning someone who intended to eat ‘*shuman’* [permitted fat] but chanced upon ‘*chelev’* [forbidden fat], the Torah says, ‘Even though he was unaware, he is guilty, and shall bear his iniquity’, then all the more so concerning one whose intention in the first place was to eat [forbidden] *chelev*, and he actually did so.’”

1. **Analysis of the story**

**Three parts**

The story is divided into four parts, marked above as A-D, and an appendix. There is an exposition, describing a situation that has remained constant over some time, serving as a sort of background to the story. Then there are three acts that take place at different times, but in close succession, each act introduced by some notation of time (One day… one day… When he returned home…). Finally, there is a sort of appendix consisting of two statements by Rabbi Akiva; the first is connected to the story, because it speaks about someone who commits a certain act with the intention of sinning, but ends up (unintentionally) not sinning.

The story opens by introducing R. Chiya b. Ashi, who beseeches God every day, during his Tachanun prayer, to spare him from the evil inclination. This introduction arouses our curiosity: what is he so concerned about? Surely, a request like this that repeats itself day after day must be based on some background situation that is not known to the reader.

The exposition that introduces the story, as noted, provides background for what is about to happen. The plot itself, taking place in “real time,” actually starts only in part B. Here we find that “one day” – one of the many days when R. Chiya b. Ashi would recite his supplication – R. Chiya b. Ashi’s wife overhears him. Her thoughts are “shared” with the reader, as it were, revealing an important piece of information: a considerable time has passed since they last engaged in marital intimacy, and, as Rashi explains, we understand that she attributes this to her husband’s advanced age. His strength and his inclination, she assumes, are greatly weakened. She is therefore most surprised by his prayer, which testifies to an inclination with which he struggles and from which he seeks deliverance.

In the next section, the wife apparently decides to test her husband and see whether she understands the situation correctly; perhaps she also wants to test his loyalty to her. She adorns herself, disguising herself as a younger woman. She then parades before him as he studies, in such a way that he is unable to ignore her. When he asks who she is, she presents herself as a woman named “Charuta” – apparently a woman known for her great beauty and loose morals (see Rashi ad loc.) - and tells him that she has just returned from somewhere. Prof. Yona Frankel, who devotes a few brief paragraphs to this *aggada* in his latest book, also discusses the name of this woman.[[1]](#footnote-1) He suggests that it is deliberately ambiguous, since the word “*charuta*” appears in the Mishna, *Massekhet Chullin*, with a different meaning:

“These are permitted for cattle… or [one that is] shriveled [*charuta*] at the hands of Heaven…” (*Mishna Chullin* 3:2).

The *beraita* cited in the Gemara explains the meaning of the expression “*charuta* at the hands of Heaven”:

“Our Rabbis taught: what is considered ‘*charuta*?’ Whatever has a lung that has shriveled…” (*Chullin* 55b)

The simple meaning of the word in the context of our story is the name of a particular woman, who has returned from a certain place. It is also quite possible, in the context of this story, that the name alludes to the “*cherut*” – freedom – that this woman permits herself with regard to halakha and behavioral norms. However, we might also read it differently: as a woman who was “dried up” and “wrinkled,” and who has now “returned” (to being young and fresh-faced).[[2]](#footnote-2) Frankel cites another meaning of “*Charuta”* in the name of H. Kohot, who mentions the midrash from Tanchuma Balak. That midrash characterizes Pi ha-Chirot as a place of prostitution.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Indeed, the evil inclination overcomes R. Chiya b. Ashi and he desires the woman. In order to test how strong this desire is and what powers it brings, the woman asks that he first bring her a pomegranate from the top of the tree. Her husband, although no longer a youngster, discovers new strength within himself, too; he jumps up and brings her the pomegranate.

What then transpires between the two of them is omitted from the story, and the next stage sees R. Chiya b. Ashi returning home. In this “act,” each character reverts to himself/herself and to his/her stage in life, and they meet in the most natural of surroundings – the home they share.

R. Chiya b. Ashi is consumed with guilt and regret. He finds his wife stoking the oven, and he jumps inside to punish himself for his sin. Essentially, he sentences himself to death by burning. Perhaps in a manner paralleling the *kohen’s* daughter who has prostituted herself and is put to death by fire for bringing dishonor upon her Kohen father, R. Chiya b. Ashi feels that he, too, has brought dishonor upon his family, or that as a Sage he has desecrated God’s Name. His wife asks what he is doing, and he confesses the entire story. At this point his wife reveals that it was she who disguised herself and tempted him – certain that he will thereby be saved from the terrible death that he has sentenced himself. Apparently, although he fails the test that she set up for him, and although her intention had been to rebuke him for that and to cause him to acknowledge his neglect towards her, she certainly has not meant for the experiment to end in his death. However, R. Chiya b. Ashi is not comforted by her revelation. He does not believe her story, until she brings proof (perhaps the pomegranate that he gave her).[[4]](#footnote-4) Even then, however, he judges himself stringently: perhaps the fact that the temptress was actually his wife changes the objective situation, such that he has not actually sinned by engaging in relations with another woman. The inner truth, however – his personal failure, his defeat and submission to the evil inclination – cannot be erased or mitigated. He insists: “My intention was sinful.”

What eventually becomes of R. Chiya b. Ashi is not entirely clear. A plain reading of the story suggests that he emerges from the oven, but spends the rest of his life in fasting and affliction, and his death appears to be connected to the damage caused to him from the oven. Frankel maintains that the final sentence does not appear in the manuscripts and is not an integral part of the original story. According to this view, R. Chiya b. Ashi does not listen to his wife at all; rather, he remains in the oven and burns. Either way, R. Chiya b. Ashi cannot forgive himself based on the knowledge that the woman is in fact his wife, and he punishes himself most severely.

**Appendix**

The “appendix” to the story adds a general statement in the spirit of R. Chiya b. Ashi’s conclusion. The biblical rule that is cited states that a woman who has intended to violate her vow, and then finds that she did not in fact sin because her vow has already been nullified nevertheless requires atonement. R. Chiya b. Ashi seems to judge himself by an even stricter standard than this, because he not only seeks God’s forgiveness and atonement for his sin, but also imposes a very stringent punishment on himself.

What we have, then, is a story that speaks of the destructive power of the evil inclination, and especially the inclination for forbidden sexual relations, which presents a difficult challenge even for great and righteous individuals. The story presents the repair that R. Chiya b. Ashi undertakes for his sin, which involves suffering and a readiness to give up his life in order to achieve atonement. The bitter and tragic end of the story, expressed in the suffering that this righteous individual takes upon himself, amplifies the warning against the evil inclination and the destruction that it may bring.

**The tragic ending**

It must be emphasized that this is a most extreme conclusion. Not all the Talmudic stories of great, God-fearing men who fall victim to their evil inclination end in such pitiful tragedy. There are more optimistic accounts, teaching that even from a great and dramatic fall, a person is able to repair. For instance, there is the well-known story in *Menachot* (43b) concerning a man who is careful in his observance of the mitzvah of *tzitzit*. He travels to a famous harlot with the intention of sinning, but at the last moment is saved by his *tzitzit.* which remind him of his values and prevent him from the fall. The story ends with the woman converting and marrying him. Of course, Jewish philosophy throughout the ages has had much to say about the power of repentance and the ability to raise oneself even from the lowest depths; we shall not elaborate here. Perhaps the reason that such a bitter story is chosen to appear here in the Gemara has something to do with the broader context of the *sugya*.

1. **The broader context of the *sugya***

The story we have just read is part of a series of narratives that are included in the *sugya* toward the end of *Massekhet Kiddushin*. The *sugya* discusses the Mishna (*Kiddushin* 4:12) that specifies what is prohibited under the definition of “*yichud*” (seclusion of a man and woman who are not married to each other). Following the halakhic discussion of the boundaries of the prohibition, the Gemara describes various strategies of caution and distance that were practiced by some of the great Amoraim (such as Rabba and Abaye). Then we find five stories showing how the Satan – the evil inclination – manages to prevail even over pious men and Sages. The series opens with the well-known story of R. Amram Chassida, who takes the preliminary caution of having the heavy ladder removed from the entry to the attic where captive women are housed, so that he will have no physical possibility of reaching them. Nevertheless, aroused by passion, he manages to move the ladder single-handedly and begins to climb. His inner strength ultimately prevails and he stops halfway up the ladder, but is forced to call others to come to his aid in order to vanquish his evil inclination completely. In the stories that follow, the Satan teaches a lesson to those Sages who belittle its power and believe that their spiritual stature prevents them from falling prey to his traps and schemes.

The story we are focusing on is the last of the series, and the two lessons that form the appendix to our story conclude the *sugya*. It seems that the Gemara chooses to end with this especially harsh and tragic story in order to reinforce deterrence with regard to the law discussed in the *sugya*. The prohibition under discussion, *yichud*, is seemingly “light”: it involves no actual deed; Sometimes, when the woman involved is unmarried, there is no potential for any prohibited sexual union (i.e., there is no reason why the two people involved could not marry one another). It is specifically for this reason that the *sugya* seeks to warn against violation, and emphasizes the power of the evil inclination and the terrible potential destruction that lurks in its shadow. Our story is one of ongoing struggle with the evil inclination, which – in a split second – overcomes this Sage, and he pays a heavy and tragic price. In the context of the *sugya*, then, the power of the evil inclination and the great caution required to avoid it would seem to be the message of the story.

However, we might read the story in a slightly different way. The reading that we propose arises, *inter alia*, from reference to a biblical story that shares some details with our narrative: the story of Yehuda and Tamar in *Sefer Bereishit* (Chapter 38).

1. **Parallels to the story of Yehuda and Tamar**

**Similarities and differences**

There are several elements in the story of R. Chiya b. Ashi that recall the story of Yehuda and Tamar: in each, there is a woman who disguises herself as a prostitute and tempts a man from her family; the woman demands a certain object prior to engaging in relations; afterwards, one of the participants is sentenced to be burned; the woman produces evidence and proves to the man that it was she who tempted him. These parallels are so obvious that it is difficult to ignore the connection between the two narratives. We must therefore try to understand what message the parallel conveys. What does it add to our understanding of the story of R. Chiya b. Ashi?

Alongside the similarities, attention should also be paid to the considerable differences that exist between the stories. Firstly, in the story of Yehuda and Tamar, a sin does apparently take place – sexual relations between a father-in-law and daughter-in-law.[[5]](#footnote-5) In the story of R. Chiya b. Ashi, in contrast, there is actually no sin at all. On the other hand, one of the most conspicuous differences is the manner in which the story concludes. The episode involving Yehuda and Tamar has a positive ending: Yehuda acknowledges that Tamar was right and he was wrong, Tamar is delivered from being burned, and their union results in the birth of two children who are ultimately the foundations of the tribe of Yehuda. Among their descendants are David and his dynasty. The story of R. Chiya b. Ashi, in contrast, ends on a sad note.

**The focus of the story of R. Chiya b. Ashi**

A reading of the story of R. Chiya b. Ashi against the background of the story of Yehuda and Tamar shows that the tragedy here consists of more than just the submission to the evil inclination or the death at the end. The parallel places the focus somewhere else entirely: the relations between R. Chiya b. Ashi and his wife.

In the biblical story, Tamar carries out her scheme against Yehuda because of the injustice of his ignoring and forgetting her. Despite his promise, he does not give her his youngest son. His intention is to protect his son, but he thereby sentences an innocent Tamar to perpetual limbo, unable to marry anyone else and unable to bear and raise children. For any bride in those times, marriage meant leaving one’s family and joining the family of one’s husband. Now that Yehuda has turned his back to her, she will be forced to live in absolute solitude, no longer part of either her birth family or the family into which she married. Tamar’s scheme is meant not only to teach Yehuda an important lesson (which he indeed learns), but also to rejoin herself to the family, to bear children, and to ensure continuity. Her scheme succeeds, because Yehuda, in acknowledging his mistake, is suddenly able to understand her point of view. He therefore takes measures not only to exempt her from the terrible verdict that he has passed on her, but also to embrace her once again as part of the family. Her children, despite their problematic parentage, become the family’s glorious next generation. This is a story of the real possibility of repair, even from the most seemingly unredeemable of situations.

Tamar’s problem and the solitude decreed upon her bring the situation of the woman at the beginning of our story into sharper focus. After a long period of separation from her husband – at least in terms of physical intimacy – the wife suddenly discovers that this situation is not the result of her husband’s advanced age, but rather of something that has damaged his view of her or the bond between them. In light of the comparison to Tamar, her intention might be to revive their relationship, rather than just to test her husband or teach him a lesson, She disguises herself and tries to arouse her husband’s desire, seeking to achieve intimacy with him not just as a sort of test, but to fill her real need for that connection. Therefore, paradoxically, she may wish for her ruse to fail. Perhaps the fruit that she asks of him also hints to her wish that their relationship flourish and bear fruit: following the one-time intimacy that is achieved through disguise, she hopes that once she reveals her identity he will “rediscover” her and the love between them will be renewed and rejuvenated. She wants to restore the former bond between them by means of a temporary flashback to their youth – she with her youthful appearance, and he with his youthful strength, demonstrated through his climbing of the tree.

However, the scheme fails. R. Chiya b. Ashi is horrified by what has happened, and seeks an immediate and radical repair. He sees only his fall, his terrible personal failure that requires atonement, and not the potential for rebuilding. His wife is certain that when she tells him that she was the woman with whom he engaged in relations, not only will he be spared a terrible death, but he will also view her differently, and they will become closer. The information that the woman involved had in fact been his wife could have eased his mind considerably, since it turns out that no sin occurred. This sense of relief could have led to a more constructive view, as in the case of Yehuda. Yehuda ceases to focus on the sin that he turns out to have committed, preferring to focus on building the family and his progeny. R. Chiya b. Ashi, for some reason, reacts differently.[[6]](#footnote-6) Even when his wife manages to convince him that his encounter was indeed with her, he does not accede to her “invitation” to rebuild their bond. He remains focused on his sin, his submission to the evil inclination, and the terrible punishment that appears to him as the only possibility for repair and atonement.

**Relations between the characters throughout the story**

This theme is emphasized through the way in which the relations between the characters are molded in the various parts of the story. In the introduction and the first part, each character is bound up with his/her own thoughts: R. Chiya b. Ashi is described as praying; his consciousness is directed toward himself and his relationship with God. His wife is described as thinking about what she hears. There is no dialogue between them in this section. In the next section, when the wife disguises herself as “Charuta,” real dialogue arises between them for the first time, and there is perhaps a glimmer of hope that this dialogue will continue. However, in the third section there is a remission – and it occurs after R. Chiya b. Ashi hears that the woman was actually his wife. This could have been a sort of climax to the story, as in the story of Yehuda and Tamar, where Tamar reveals that the pledge that she holds belongs to Yehuda. However, at that moment, with his wife hopeful that their relationship might be rekindled, R. Chiya b. Ashi abandons the dialogue and returns to his inner discourse, focused on his evil inclination and its ramifications. Indeed, as noted above, this is a most appropriate conclusion to a *sugya* whose subject is the struggle against the evil inclination and its dangerous and destructive effects.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**Different readings**

Thus, the *aggada* about R. Chiya b. Ashi may be read in different ways. The story is unquestionably a tragic one. The question is whether the essence of the tragedy is R. Chiya b. Ashi’s fall into the hands of his evil inclination and the terrible punishment that he decrees upon himself, or whether it is the irreparable relationship between R. Chiya b. Ashi and his wife. The broader context of the story within the *sugya* locates the *aggada* squarely within the theme of the evil inclination and its dangers. The parallel to the biblical story of Yehuda and Tamar highlights – inversely – the tragedy of a woman who remains locked in her solitude, and more broadly, the tragedy of R. Chiya b. Ashi and his wife as a couple whose relationship cannot be rebuilt.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. Y. Frankel, *Sippur ha-Aggada – Achdut shel Tochen ve-Tzura*, Tel Aviv 5761, pp. 63-65 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Frankel, ibid., p. 65 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Arukh ha-Shalem, “*ch-r*”, p. 483 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For the place of this element in the story, see Frankel, p. 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. However, *see Bereishit Rabba* 85:5; Ramban on *Bereishit* 38:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. It must be emphasized that this analysis, and the comparison to Yehuda, is not meant as criticism of this Sage; rather, it points to differing models of character and ways of dealing with personal failure. The distance between R. Chiya and his wife that grows even more acute in the third part of the story is likewise not necessarily his fault. The story does not include any indication of their relationship in the past, and there is no way of knowing what led to the situation as is. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. We might also posit the possibility of a connection between the first story in the *sugya*, concerning R. Amram Chassida, and a different biblical story – that of Yosef. The midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 87) describes how Yosef was almost tempted by Potifar’s wife, but managed at the last moment to overcome his inclination through exercising powerful physical control over his body in order to avoid sinning (“R. Yitzchak said: his semen was disseminated and it emerged through his fingernails…”). This is reminiscent of R. Amram Chassida who grasps the ladder with all his strength in order to save himself. Yosef, unlike Yehuda, succeeds at the last moment in avoiding sin. Similarly, R. Amram, unlike R. Chiya b. Ashi, manages to dominate his inclination. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)