YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Talmudic *Aggadot***

**Rav Dr. Yonatan Feintuch**

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**This shiur is dedicated *le-zekher nishmot* Amelia Ray and Morris Ray
on the occasion of their ninth *yahrtzeits*
by their children Patti Ray and Allen Ray**

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**Shiur #18: The Story of Rabbi Sheila -
A Purim Story from *Massekhet Berakhot*, Part I**

A. The story of R. Sheila

In the ninth chapter of *Massekhet Berakhot*, in the midst of a *sugya* (58a), we find the story of the Amora R. Sheila: [[1]](#footnote-1)

“R. Sheila administered lashes to a man who had engaged in intercourse with a Gentile woman. The man went and informed against him to the king. He said, ‘There is a man among the Jews who passes judgment without the permission of the king.’ [R. Sheila] was sent for. When he came they asked him, ‘Why did you flog this man?’ He answered them, ‘He engaged in intercourse with a she-ass.’ They said to him, ‘Do you have witnesses?’ He answered, ‘Yes.’ [The prophet] Eliyahu appeared in the form of a man, and gave testimony. They said to him, ‘If so, then he is deserving of death!’ He told them, ‘Since the day that we were exiled from our land, we have no authority to pass a death sentence, but you – you may do to him as you wish.’ While they were considering his case, R. Sheila declared: ‘Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power…’ (Divrei Ha-yamim I 29). They asked him, ‘What did you say?’ He said, ‘What I said was: Blessed is the Lord Who has cast an earthly monarchy in the model of the heavenly Kingship, and has invested you with dominion, and made you lovers of justice.’ They said, ‘So beloved to him is the honor of the monarchy?!’ They gave him a staff and said to him, ‘You may serve as judge.’ When he left, that man said to him, ‘Does God then perform miracles for liars?’ He replied, ‘Wicked one! Are they not called asses? For it is written, ‘…whose flesh is [as] the flesh of asses’ (Yechezkel 23).’ When he saw that the man was about to inform on him for calling them asses, he said, ‘This man is a persecutor, and the Torah states, ‘If someone comes to kill you, arise and kill him first.’ So he struck him with the staff and killed him.”

B. Preliminary analysis of the story

R. Sheila delivers lashes to a man who has engaged in intercourse with a Gentile woman. The man informs on him to the authorities, claiming that R. Sheila’s assumption of authority to mete out punishment is unlawful. When questioned, R. Sheila accuses the man of bestiality; he succeeds, through what seems like a sophisticated and artful but not entirely truthful answer, to fool the authorities, escape punishment, and – no less – receive official license to sit in judgment and mete out punishment. The man whom he had originally flogged, who is obviously very disappointed by how things have turned out, accuses him of lying. R. Sheila explains that based on the verse in Yechezkel, his answer to the authorities was not actually a lie. Seeing that the man is now ready to use this new information to make another attempt at having R. Sheila put to death, he treats him as a persecutor and kills him with the staff that the authorities have given him.

What is the message of the story? A superficial reading might suggest that it is possible (perhaps even desirable) to use subtlety and shrewdness and even compromise on the truth in order to save oneself from Gentile authorities (and in order to punish Jewish criminals). The story, with its dose of irony, presents us with a Sage who, with his quick wits and verbal resourcefulness, manages to deceive the Gentile authorities, punish the Jewish sinner, and emerge victorious.

Is this the entire message of the story – scorn for the stupidity of the Gentile rulers and the helplessness of the sinner, showing how the Sage prevails over all? Such a reading would likely arouse mixed feelings: on one hand, the man has committed a sin – one that was viewed by the Amoraim of Babylonia as a particularly grave sin, punishable by lashes even though they were not authorized by the authorities to mete out corporal punishment. The same idea arises from a different source (*Ta’anit* 24b) which also describes an instance of lashes issued (in this case from the beit din of Rabba) for the act of sleeping with a Gentile woman. There, too, the punishment is carried out to the displeasure of the authorities in Babylonia, and there, too, the Amora who administers the lashes is not punished.[[2]](#footnote-2)

On the other hand, we might still feel some discomfort about R. Sheila’s conduct. The man demands the truth and is astounded at the heavenly aid awarded to R. Sheila. R. Sheila has falsely accused him of a more serious transgression than the one in which he actually engaged; in fact, the accusation is so severe that even the Gentile authorities are shocked and their attention is diverted away from R. Sheila’s deviation from his sphere of authority. Later on, R. Sheila murmurs some verses. When questioned as to what he is saying, he once again gives an answer that is not entirely truthful and sounds obsequious towards the Gentiles – who respond by awarding him a new level of authority. In light of all of this, some might feel at least some identification with the angry claim of the man. One might argue that R. Sheila has no choice, since he has to save himself from the situation that the sinner has initiated; it is reasonable to assume that R. Sheila’s life is at stake. On the other hand, if R. Sheila truly enjoys Divine aid, as the sinner himself notes, then could God not perform His miracles if R. Sheila were to adhere strictly to the truth? And even if we agree that a deviation from the truth is in fact the best solution in his situation, since a Jew starts off in a position of weakness before the Gentile authorities, we come back to our original question: is the entire message of the story that one is permitted to deviate from the truth in order to save oneself?

C. Analysis in greater depth

Literary devices in the story

Prof. Yona Frankel, in an article discussing this *aggada,* shows that the above message is not the point of the story.[[3]](#footnote-3) Through an in-depth literary analysis, he shows that R. Shilo does not simply utter lies or half-truths in order to save himself; rather, behind his words lies a depth of meaning which is the true message of the story. We shall re-read the story, this time from the perspective of Prof. Frankel’s analysis.[[4]](#footnote-4) Thereafter, we will look beyond this *aggada* and see how the messages of the story connect with its broader context in the Gemara.

Before re-examining the story it must be pointed out that one of the most common and conspicuous literary devices is the double entendre. Dual meaning is not limited to being created by the narrator and directed toward the reader. The main character in a story can be aware of it and use it in his interaction with other characters. Thus, the same sentences that R. Sheila utters as seeming half-truths actually have two different meanings that are aimed in two different directions, as we shall see. He resorts to this technique because of the weak position of the Jews in exile, under foreign rule. In this situation, it is not always possible to state the full truth clearly at any given moment. Nevertheless, as we shall see, R. Sheila does not lie, but rather expresses himself in a way that carries dual significance.

Another literary device in the molding of the story, as noted by Frankel, is the structure. Our story follows a chiastic structure:

A1 – R. Sheila flogs the sinner

 B1 – The sinner informs on R. Sheila

 C1 – R. Sheila accuses the sinner of bestiality

D1 – R. Sheila claims that he has no authority to pass a death sentence in exile

E1 – R. prays – “Yours, O Lord, is the greatness…”

F – R. Sheila is asked, ‘What did you say?’

 E2 – R. explains: ‘Blessed is God…’

 D2 – The king awards R. Sheila the power to judge

C2 – R. Sheila justifies himself on the basis of the verse, ‘the flesh of asses’

 B2 – The sinner prepares to report him once again

A2 – R. Sheila strikes the man and kills him.

Sections C1 and C2

R. Sheila’s words appear in C1 and are explained in C2. He is brought before the Gentile king. He cannot say that he flogged the man for engaging in intercourse with a Gentile woman, so he reports instead that the man engaged in relations with an ass. When the man later claims that this was a lie, R. Sheila quotes the verse from Yechezkel – “… whose flesh is the flesh of asses.” At first, it might appear that this is not a serious answer, since obviously the verse does not mean to tell us that in every aspect of reality, Gentiles are like asses. However, as Frankel notes, R. Sheila’s intention is not to suggest that they are absolutely alike. Only in the context of this sinner, whose deed is bound up with animalistic desire and the physical contact of flesh, does R. Sheila draw the parallel. Thus, he offers an altogether serious interpretation of the verse with a message of truth.

Indeed, a review of the verse that he cites and the surrounding verses shows that this is exactly the context:

(11) “And her sister Aholiva saw this, yet she was more corrupt in her inordinate lasciviousness than she, and in her harlotries more than her sister in her harlotries.

(12) She doted upon the children of Ashur, her neighbors, captains and rulers clothed most gorgeously, horsemen riding upon horses, all of the charming young men. …

(15) Girded with girdles upon their loins, with flowing turbans upon their heads, all of them looking like captains, after the manner of the children of Babylonia in Kasdim, the land of their nativity. …

(17) And the children of Babylonia came to her into the bed of love, and they defiled her with their lust, and she was polluted with them, and her mind was alienated from them. …

(20) For she doted upon her paramours there, whose flesh was like the flesh of asses, and whose issue was like that of horses. …”

The verses mention prostitution with the children of Babylonia, and it is in this context that we find the expression, “Whose flesh was like the flesh of asses…”. The plain reading of these verses would understand this as a metaphor, a sort of allegory describing the sin of idolatry committed by the kingdom of Yehuda. However, R. Sheila offers a sophisticated interpretation of the metaphor, bringing it back to the simple meaning of the image. He is dealing with a Jew who has engaged in sexual relations with a Babylonian woman, and in this context he refers to the woman as a she-ass. The sinner now intends to inform the Babylonian authorities that R. Sheila refers to the Babylonians as asses. In doing so, it is he who is speaking falsely, since he seeks to quote R. Sheila out of context. R. Sheila’s interpretation of the verse is meant as learned discourse between Jews, and is directed specifically at the sinner, expressing a halakhic and spiritual perspective of his deed. The king is incapable of understanding this sort of Jewish discourse centering on a moralistic reading of a biblical text. He will certainly understand the statement as a sweeping and offensive comment on the Babylonians, and will put R. Shilo to death. Hence, in reporting him, the sinner would be speaking falsely as well as persecuting R. Sheila.

Parts D1 and D2

When the king asks R. Sheila why he did not put the sinner to death, his answer is that since the Jews were exiled, they do not have the authority to pass a death sentence. This declaration, too, has a double meaning. For the Gentile king, it means that the Jews lack independence; they are ruled by foreign powers and therefore cannot mete out capital punishment. However, this is only the external meaning of the statement. Its inner religious significance is that the loss of Jewish independence, including the ability to rule on capital cases, is God’s decision. Since God wished to punish and exile His people, they lost their independence. It was not because of the strength of the Gentiles; their power over Israel, too, arises only from the will of God. Therefore, when R. Sheila declares himself limited in the scope of his judicial authority, the external implication is that this is so because of the power of the Gentile kingdom. The inner and essential meaning, however, is the acknowledgment that Israel’s weakness in exile and its absence of authority is the will of God. The same two levels are manifest in the corresponding limb, D2: outwardly, R. Sheila is invested with the authority to judge by those who have the power to decide this. Inwardly, he feels that he is now receiving authority from God: it is only by the will of God that the Gentile king has given him this authority. Therefore, he is reconciled with his new status, and ultimately uses his authority to put the sinner to death.

Parts E1 and E2

We now turn our attention to E1 and E2, the limbs straddling the central axis of the chiastic structure. R. Sheila is still in a delicate position: he has managed to shock the Gentile authorities by accusing the sinner of bestiality, and has thereby deflected their attention from the question of his own deviation from his sphere of authority, but they have yet to make a final decision. R. Sheila therefore prays, and he murmurs to himself the verses, “Yours, O Lord, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty, for all that is in heaven and on hearth is Yours; Yours is the Kingdom, O Lord, and You are exalted as head above all.”[[5]](#footnote-5) In doing so, he expresses his inner faith that everything that happens in the world, happens by the will of God. Whatever the Gentile king decides will in fact be the decision and will of the true King, the King of kings. Thus, R. Sheila entrusts his fate to God, and asks for His salvation.

Part F

At the center of the structure is the moment where the king asks R. Sheila what he is saying. Frankel notes that this is the central axis because it represents the turning point in the story. We might add that the question, “What did you say?” is a central axis not only of the plot, but also of the deeper meaning of the story: the entire story revolves around R. Sheila’s words and the interplay of their different meanings. Thus, it is symbolic that the heart of the structure of the story is the question, “What did you say?” What is R. Sheila actually saying?

In part E2, which parallels the verse from *Divrei Ha-yamim*, R. Sheila explains that he was blessing God, Who “has cast an earthly monarchy on the model of the heavenly Kingship, and has invested you with dominion, and made you lovers of justice.” Is R. Sheila lying? Here, Frankel refers us to the Aramaic translation (Targum) of the verse from *Divrei Ha-yamim*, which is not a literal translation but rather an interpretation:

“And You are Ruler over them, and bear all that is in heaven and all that is on earth; Yours is the Kingdom of the sky, and You are elevated above all; [above] the angels that are in heaven and above those who are appointed as heads on earth. And the wealth of the wealthy and the honor of kings and rulers is given to them from before You, and You rule over all, and You have the power to give greatness and strength to all.” (*Divrei* *Ha*-*yamim* I 29:11-12)

On the basis of the Targum, we can certainly say that R. Sheila is blessing God, Who has placed kingship in the world in the image of heavenly Kingship. Admittedly, he conceals the true and inner meaning of what he is saying – i.e., that all the power of the earthly king comes from God; the king of Bayblonia has no independent power, and any power that he seems to have is mere illusion. However, the king would never understand or accept this idea, and so R. Sheila reveals only part of the meaning: that he is blessing God Who has empowered the rule of the Gentile king on earth. Ironically, the king understands this as recognition of his own power and sovereignty. Not only is R. Sheila saved, but his “recognition” of the regime renders him worthy of being awarded the authority to judge. As we have seen, from R. Sheila’s perspective this authority is actually given to him by God Himself, Whose will at that moment is expressed in the decision of the Gentile king.

Two layers of reality

Thus, R. Sheila’s telling of only part of the truth, is more than just a way of saving himself. This technique of speaking represents a reflection of his view that there are two layers of reality: an outer layer and an inner one. The Gentiles see only the outer layer; they are convinced of their own strength, and the dependence of the Jews’ fate on Gentile decisions. The Jews, in contrast, know that their weak situation in exile in fact flows from the will of God; He is the true King and it is He Who actually directs the events of the world. The moment that God decides to, He can take the power from the Gentiles and give it to Israel. For the meantime, however, Israel is in exile by the will of God, and the power lies in the hands of the Gentiles.

The situation of exile for Israel is also an exile of the Shekhina, as we learn in many different sources. Indeed, when the people of Israel are in their land, the Divine Presence is revealed and God’s will and His actions are clear and manifest. Exile is a situation of a “hiding of God’s face,” and God’s will is concealed. God does not reveal Himself openly, but rather operates “behind the scenes,” via the will and decisions of the Gentiles. Nevertheless, the true sovereignty is His, and even the actions of the Gentiles are by His will – only the connection is invisible.

D. Our story and Megillat Esther

The idea that there are two layers of reality, and that the outer reality is in fact directed by the inner, concealed reality, is the connection between our story and the story of the *Megilla*, and the two narratives in fact share many parallels. In the *Megilla*, too, there is a king who is not altogether aware of the true discourse and the actual struggle being waged between two sides. Like Achashverosh who thinks that he is in control of the situation, the king of Babylonia (who is in fact Persian) similarly believes that he understands what is happening and that he has the power to make decisions. In the story of R. Sheila, with a great deal of irony that likewise recalls the irony of the *Megilla*, the Jewish Sage manipulates the king who believes in his own firm authority, while in the background something else altogether is going on. As in the *Megilla*, everything is turned around: R. Sheila, in the wake of the sinner’s report to the king, is meant to be punished by the king for meting out punishment without the proper authority. Instead, not only does he emerge unscathed, but he is in fact also strengthened, now possessing official authority to judge. The sinner, who had hoped to cause harm to R. Sheila, is led to death by his own actions. If we were to imagine the face of this man as he emerges from the king’s palace, knowing that R. Sheila has somehow turned the situation to his own advantage, it would no doubt look very similar to that of Haman as he is forced to lead Mordechai on the royal horse.

There is an interesting source in the first chapter of *Massekhet Megilla* that relates to the *Megilla* but also recalls the story of R. Sheila, thereby strengthening the connection between them:

“’And the king said to his wise men’ – Who are these wise men? The rabbis; ‘who knew the times’ – meaning, they knew how to intercalate years and determine the time of the new moon. He said to them, ‘Try her [Vashti] for me.’ They said, ‘What shall we do? If we tell him that he should kill her, then tomorrow when he is sober he will require her from us. If we tell him to leave her, all respect for the royalty will be lost.’ So they told him, ‘Since the day that the Temple was destroyed and we were exiled from our land, counsel has been taken from us and we do not know how to judge capital cases…’.” (*Megilla* 12b)

According to this midrash, the king’s “wise men who knew the times” were in fact Jewish Sages, and it was they who were entrusted with passing sentence on Vashti. However, this decision was a trap: if they advised him to have her executed, they would be blamed when the king returned to sobriety and regretted losing his queen. If they passed a more lenient sentence, this would show scorn towards the king’s honor – and this, too, would anger him. They therefore offer an excuse similar to the one offered by R. Sheila: that since the Destruction of the Temple, they are unable to judge capital cases. This extricates them from the impossible situation in which they find themselves. This is a way of managing the weakness of the Jewish position in exile, under the rule of a cruel or foolish Gentile king. In uttering their excuse, they also acknowledge the reason for their weakness and their impossible choices: the Destruction and the exile.

In both the story about R. Sheila and the story of *Megilat Esther*, the Jewish heroes are aware that the king’s power is merely an illusion. The real power behind this illusion is that of the King of the universe. However, they keep this consciousness and this truth to themselves, and play by the rules of the Gentile court. The story of R. Sheila reveals the deeper meaning, which is also relevant to the *Megilla* – that even playing by the Gentile rules is in fact, at the present time, the will of God, who has caused Israel to be in exile. This is the logic behind the conduct of Mordechai and Esther, too, when they make astute use of the power given to them by the Gentile regime. So long as they know that the true source of their strength and their salvation (as well as of Haman’s decrees) is “from Elsewhere”, their conduct is a fulfillment of God’s will. R. Sheila shows honor to the Gentile king in Babylonia, and thereby succeeds in prevailing over the Jewish sinner. Through his inner consciousness, as expressed in his prayer, he recognizes that the only true King is God, Who is concealed in exile and remains behind the scenes.

In the next *shiur,* we will look at the broader context of this story in *Massekhet* *Berakhot*.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. The identity of this Amora is difficult to establish, since there were several figures during the period of the Amoraim in Babylonia who all shared this name. It is possible that he was of the first generation in Babylonia. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The account there reads:

“Once a certain man was sentenced by the beit din of Rabba to receive lashes for having engaged in intercourse with a Gentile woman. Rabba had him flogged and he died. The matter reached the ears of King Shapur, and he sought to punish Rabba. Ifra Hormiz, the mother of King Shapur, said to him, ‘Do not interfere with the Jews, because whatever they ask of their God – He grants them…”. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Y. Frankel, “Ma’aseh be-Rabbi Sheila”, *Tarbitz* 40 (5731), pp. 33-40 (= *Sippur ha-Aggadah – Achdut shel Tokhen ve-Tzura*, Tel Aviv 5761, pp. 261-272). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. While Prof. Frankel’s analysis is the basis for the reading that we propose here, we might add, omit, or change certain details, and thus he might not necessarily agree with all that is written here. The reader is referred to his original analysis – see n. 3 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In kabbalistic teachings, the various qualities mentioned here are related to the ten *sefirot*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)