YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Talmudic *Aggadot***

**Rav Dr. Yonatan Feintuch**

**Shiur #19: The Story of Rabbi Sheila -
A Purim Story from Massekhet Berakhot, Part II**

**A. The subject of the ninth chapter of Massekhet Berakhot**

In the previous *shiur,* we explored the story of R. Sheila as a closed literary unit. Now we will broaden our perspective and examine the ninth chapter of *Massekhet Berakhot*, considering the relationship between the *aggada* and the context within which it appears.

The chapter deals with the blessings that are to be recited in response to different situations. In contrast to the preceding chapters of the *massekhet*, here we do not find fixed commandments that accompany a person at specific times on a daily basis, such as the recitation of *Shema*, the prayer services, or *Birkat Ha-mazon* (Grace after meals). Rather, the focus is on situations that may arise only occasionally, such as encountering a place where a significant historical event in Jewish history took place, or personal events that a person may experience.

Some of the phenomena recorded in the Mishna, for which a person is required to recite a blessing, are positive experiences for the person involved, such as moving into a new house or acquiring new vessels (Mishna 3), awe-inspiring natural phenomena (Mishna 2), or safely emerging from some dangerous situation (Mishna 4). Some are positive experiences on the national or religious level, such as seeing a place from which idolatry has been uprooted, or a place where miracles were performed for Am Yisrael (Mishna 1). However, the chapter also mentions situations where a person is required to recite a blessing over an event or phenomenon that he experiences as negative. Some natural phenomena that are profoundly impressive can also be extremely dangerous, such as comets and earthquakes. There is a blessing to be recited upon hearing bad news (Mishna 3), and an obligation “to bless for the bad just as one does for the good” (Mishna 5). In the Tosefta (chapter 6), the requirement is stated even more starkly:[[1]](#footnote-1) along with the place from which idolatry has been removed, mention is also made of a blessing for a place where idolatry still exists; along with beautiful natural phenomena for which we recite the blessing, “…Who undertakes the work of Creation”, mention is also made of deformities and other unfortunate phenomena for which a blessing is recited, including seeing someone who is blind, struck with boils, or has an unusual skin disorder.

**B. The meaning of a “blessing for the bad”**

What is the meaning of reciting a blessing over experiences or phenomena that we experience as negative? We might understand it in the limited sense of a religious obligation: the halakha expects a person to be able to accept whatever happens with love and wholehearted devotion, and to bless God. This sort of position seems to be reflected in a number of statements by Amoraim that are cited at the beginning of the *sugya* (60b), concerning the Mishna, “A person is obligated to bless for the bad just as one would for the good”:

“What is meant by being ‘obligated to bless for the bad just as one does for the good’? Does is mean that just as for good one recites the blessing, ‘…Who is good and bestows good’, so one should likewise recite for evil the blessing, ‘Who is good and bestows good’? [Surely not,] for we have learned in the Mishna, ‘For good news one says, ‘Who is good and bestows good’; for bad news one says, ‘Blessed is the true Judge.’

Rabba said: What is meant is that one must receive [the bad news] with gladness.

Rabbi Acha said in the name of R. Levi: What is meant by the verse, ‘I will sing of mercy and justice; to You, O Lord, I will give praise’ (Tehillim 101)? [It means,] ‘If it is mercy – I will sing, and it if it justice – I will sing.’ R. Shmuel bar Nachmani said: We learn it from here: ‘In the Lord I will praise His word, in God I will praise His word’ (Tehillim 56): ‘In the Lord I will praise His word’ – this speaks of a positive dispensation; ‘In God I will praise His word’ – this speaks of a negative dispensation.

R. Tanchum said: We learn it from here: ‘I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the Name of the Lord’ (Tehillim 116:13); ‘I found trouble and sorrow, but I called upon the Name of the Lord’ (Tehillim 116:3).

And the Rabbis said, We learn it from here: ‘The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the Name of the Lord’ (Iyov 1).”

These statements reflect no effort to understand God’s actions or His stewardship of the world; they merely reinforce a person’s obligation to accept whatever happens – even bad or painful events – with equanimity, or, at least, to bless God for them.

However, if we take the matter a step further and ask what the blessing means about God’s stewardship of the world, we might say that the meaning of a blessing over bad news means attributing everything that happens to God. There is no phenomenon or event that is severed from or independent of Him, or that takes place without His willing it. This is seemingly a rather problematic statement. What does it mean when we assert that evil, too, emanates from God?[[2]](#footnote-2)

The explanation that seem to emerge within the framework of the chapter relates to the limitations of human understanding at any given time. In other words, everything is a matter of interpretation: a certain event may be interpreted by an individual as very bad. However, from the point of view of someone else, or from a broader perspective on the world – or even in the mind of the very same person at a later stage in life, or taking a longer-term view - things may look different. This understanding finds expression further on in the *sugya,* where, after the series of teachings quoted above concerning a person’s obligation to bless, the discussion takes a slightly different direction:

“R. Huna said in the name of Rav, citing R. Meir, and so it was taught in the name of R. Akiva: A person should accustom himself always to say, ‘Whatever the All-Merciful does, He does for the good.’”

Here the discussion has moved beyond the obligation of a person to bless, to addressing the phenomenon itself: even if it looks bad right now, it is in fact happening for the good. In this context, the discussion goes on to recall the well-known story about R. Akiva, which supports the view that is cited in his name:

“R. Akiva was once walking on the road, and he came to a certain town and sought lodgings, but everywhere he was refused. He said, ‘Whatever the All-Merciful does, He does for the good’ – and he went and spent the night in an open field. He had with him a rooster, a donkey, and a lamp. A gust of wind came and blew out the lamp. A cat came and ate the rooster. A lion came and ate the donkey. He said, ‘Whatever the All-Merciful does, He does for the good.’ The same night some brigands came and carried off the inhabitants of the town. He said to them, Did I not say to you, ‘Whatever the All-Merciful does, He does for the good’?”

This account suggests that our perception of a certain event or phenomenon as bad arises from our interpretation of it – which may arise from a limited understanding at that given moment. Understanding things properly requires a broader perspective, which a person sometimes acquires, and sometimes does not. In some instances our perspective is broadened as events continue to develop over a timeline, as happened to R. Akiva. At other times, the perspective broadens with maturity or new knowledge, by means of which it becomes apparent that what seems bad to one person may bring much good to many others, such that in the final analysis it is more “good” than “bad”.[[3]](#footnote-3)

There are many phenomena in the world that can be given either a positive or negative interpretation. Moreover, we may suggest that at least in some situations, the interpretation that is given to some or other event may actually influence its character. This applies, for instance, to everyday events that happen to a person, where his attitude toward them – which is sometimes a matter of his own choosing – can also determine whether they will be good or bad. There is great significance to the way in which a person interprets and experiences things; some might even say that a person’s choice of whether to focus on the good or the bad may influence the way in which things develop.

**C. “All dreams go according to what is said” (literally, “according to the mouth”)**

A similar sort of view finds expression in an interesting and lengthy discussion that ends off with a fascinating story, concerning the interpretation of dreams. At the beginning of the *sugya* about dreams (55a) we find:

“R. Chisda said: A dream that is not interpreted is like a letter left unread.”

In other words, the dream does not stand alone, but rather is dependent on its interpretation. Later on, the discussion turns to the awarding of a positive interpretation to a dream (55b):

“R. Huna ben Ami said in the name of R. Pedat, who heard it from R. Yochanan: If a person has a dream and is disturbed by it, he should go and interpret it in the presence of three. [What is the meaning of the term] ‘interpret it’? Did R. Chisda not say, ‘A dream that is not interpreted is like a letter that remains unread’? Rather, then, we should say, ‘He should have it given a good turn in the presence of three.’ Let him bring three and say to them: ‘I have seen a good dream’, and they should say to him, ‘It is good, and may it be good; may the All-Merciful turn it to the good. Seven times shall they decree upon you from Heaven that it be good – and it shall be good.”

Eventually, the Gemara states more explicitly that the meaning of the dream comes about in reality in accordance with its interpretation - ‘All dreams follow the mouth”:

“When Shmuel had a bad dream, he used to say, ‘The dreams speak falsely.’ When he had a good dream, he would say: ‘Dreams speak falsely?! But it is written (concerning prophecy), ‘in a dream I speak with him.’

R. Bizna ben Zavda said in the name of R. Akiva, who had it from R. Panda, who had it from Rav Nachum, who had it from R. Biryam, who had it from a certain elder (and who was this? R. Bena’a): ‘There were twenty-four interpreters of dreams in Jerusalem. I once dreamt a dream and went around to all of them, and they all gave different interpretations, and all were fulfilled, thus confirming that which is written: ‘All dreams follow the mouth.’”

One of the climaxes of this discussion is the fantastic story of Rabba, Abaye, and the interpreter of dreams known as Bar Hadya. The story is very long, and we therefore cite just parts of it:

“Bar Hadya was an interpreter of dreams. To someone who paid him he would give a favorable interpretation, while to one who did not pay him he gave an unfavorable interpretation. Abaye and Rabba each had a dream. Abaye gave him a *zuz*, while Rabba did not give him anything. They said to him, In our dream, we had to read the verse, ‘Your ox shall be slain before your eyes’ (*Devarim* 28). To Rabba he said, ‘Your business will be a failure, and you will be so grieved that you will not eat.’ To Abaye he said, ‘Your business will prosper and you will be so joyful that you will not eat.’

They then said to him, ‘[In our dream] we had to read the verse, ‘You will beget sons and daughters, but they shall not be yours, for they shall go into captivity’. To Rabba he interpreted it in its (literal) unfavorable sense. To Abaye he said, ‘You will have numerous sons and daughters, and your daughters will be married and go away, and it will seem to you as if they have gone into captivity…’

[They said to him, ‘In our dream] we were made to read the verse, ‘And all the peoples of the earth shall see that the Name of the Lord is called upon you, and they shall fear you.’ To Abaye he said, ‘Your name will become famous as a Rosh Yeshiva, and everyone will be in awe of you.’ To Rabba he said, ‘The king’s treasury will be broken into, and you will be arrested at a thief, and everyone will speak of you as a lesson to be learned.’ The next day, the king’s treasury was broken into, and they came and arrested Rabba. […]

Then Rabba went to him alone, and he said to him: ‘I dreamed that an outer door fell down.’ He said to him, ‘Your wife will die.’ He told him, ‘I dreamed that my teeth fell out.’ He said, ‘Your sons and daughters will die.’ He said, ‘I saw two pigeons flying.’ He said, ‘You will divorce two wives.’ […]

Finally, Rabba went and paid him a fee. He said to him, ‘I saw a wall falling down.’ He said, ‘You will acquire endless wealth.’ He said, “I dreamt that Abaye’s house fell in, and the dust of it covered me.’ He replied, ‘Abaye will die and [the position of head of] his yeshiva will be offered to you.’ […]

He said, ‘In my dream I was made to read the Hallel of Egypt.’ He replied, ‘Miracles will happen to you.’

[Bar Hadya] then traveled with Rabba in a boat. He said to himself, ‘Why should I accompany a man to whom a miracle will happen?’ [Perhaps some catastrophe will occur, and only he will be saved.] As he was disembarking, his book slipped and fell. Rabba found it and saw written in it, ‘All dreams follow the mouth.’ He said, ‘Wicked one! It all depended on you, and you caused me such anguish! I forgive you everything except for [what you said concerning] the daughter of Rav Chisda [Rabba’s wife, who died in accordance with Bar Hadya’s interpretation of one of his dreams.] May it be God’s will that this man be delivered into the hands of the government, and that they have no mercy on him!’ [Bar Hadya] said, ‘What shall I do? We have been taught that a curse uttered by a Sage – even when undeserved – is fulfilled; how much more then in the case of Rabba, who was justified in his curse!’ He said, ‘I will arise and go into exile, for it is said that exile atones for sin.’ He arose and fled to the Romans. He went and sat at the door of the keeper of the king’s wardrobe. The keeper had a dream, and said to him: ‘I dreamed that a needle pierced my finger.’ He said to him, ‘Give me a *zuz*.’ He refused to give him one, and so he told him nothing. He said to him, ‘I dreamed that a worm fell between my two fingers.’ He said, ‘Give me a *zuz*,’ but he would not give him any, so Bar Hadya would not tell him. He said to him, ‘I dreamed that a worm filled the whole of my hand.’ He said to him, ‘Worms have infested all the silk garments.’ This [situation] became known in the palace, and they brought the keeper of the wardrobe in order to put him to death. He said to them, ‘Why execute me? Bring the man who knew [about the problem] but would not tell.’ So they brought Bar Hadya, and said to him: ‘Because of your [insistence on receiving a] *zuz*, all the king’s silken garments have been ruined.’ They tied two palm trees together with a rope, tied one of his legs to one palm and the other to the other, and released the rope, so that even his head was split.”

This story illustrates, in very stark terms, the principle that reality itself is influenced by interpretation. Symbolically, both Bat Hadya’s name (‘*hadya’* means ‘explained’) and his fate are related to the theme: his punishment is that he is tied to two bent palm trees, and when they straighten his body is split in half – symbolizing the dichotomous manner in which he divided reality, for good or for bad, according to monetary considerations.

Even if the description in the story is conveyed in a very extreme manner, the message, within the framework of the *sugya*, is clear: interpretation has the power to influence one’s view of reality, the way in which it is experienced, and even the way in which it actually happens and develops. The discussions that are mentioned deal with dreams, but also with the actual reality that is realized in the wake of the dreams.

**D. Context of the story of R. Sheila in the chapter**

Indeed, it seems that the whole discussion in the *sugya* about the dream is meant to teach this principle, in relation to the question of good and evil in the Mishna; the story of the dream has no direct connection to the Mishna. The discussion rambles seemingly by accident, via association: the *sugya* on 54b, in the wake of the Mishna about the blessings to be recited in various situations, addresses the statement of R. Yehuda concerning the four situations in which people are obligated to give thanks to God – those who go down to the sea, etc. From there, the Gemara goes on via association to list other teachings by the same Amora, R. Yehuda, which enumerate series of different categories of specific number: three things that require guarding; three things that give a person long life; three things that shorten one’s life; and finally – three who require compassion, one of them being a person who experiences a good dream. After a brief discussion of a similar teaching by R. Yochanan (“Three things are announced by the Holy One, blessed be He, Himself…”), the Gemara focuses on the issue of the dream, which had been mentioned in the previous teaching of R. Yehuda, and elaborates at great length. It seems that it is not by accident that the Gemara chooses to focus so intensively on one detail out of the teachings that were presented – and one that is not even connected to the subject of the chapter. It appears that the discussion about the dream is actually thematically related to a central idea in the *mishnayot* of this chapter – the idea of blessing over the bad just as one blesses over the good. The discussion about dreams greatly amplifies the power of the interpretation over reality. The same might apply to the issue of phenomena in the world that are perceived as evil or painful: perhaps our evaluation of many of them, in terms of their positive or negative nature, is dependent on our interpretation – and may even actually be influenced by it.

Some might take this idea in the direction of an almost magical influence, as arising to some extent from the story about Abaye and Rabba. Admittedly, according to many classic views in Judaism, this approach is rather problematic on the philosophical level. If we follow these classic views, we are forced to interpret the story in some way other than its literal level (the scope of our discussion does not allow for elaboration). However, even on a more rationalist level, we witness in our own lives how, within certain limitations, the way in which a person perceives events has an influence on reality, which can also be explained in a scientific, rational way. For instance, there are studies showing that when people who are suffering from certain illnesses are optimistic and happy, their positive state of mind can have a biological, hormonal impact, with a positive influence on the medical outcome.[[4]](#footnote-4) To take an example from a different sphere: success at work or in the social realm is sometimes influenced by a person’s self-perception. If a person has a positive, optimistic view of himself, others are more likely to perceive him in a positive light, and this in itself can lead to professional and social success.

Thus, one of the ways of dealing with the attribution of seemingly negative phenomena to God pertains to perspective and interpretation. However, whether or not we accept this explanation, the meaning of “blessing over the bad” in the Mishna is the recognition that all phenomena in the world truly emanate from God; they all have the same source: “… Who forms light and creates darkness, Who makes peace and creates evil” (*Yishayahu* 45:7). The Mishna does not suggest that we should negate the distinction between good and bad in the world; there is even halakhic expression for the difference between good things and bad things. As the first *sugya* discussed above emphasizes, we do not recite the same blessing for all that happens. There is a difference between the blessing of “… Who is good and Who bestows good”, and the blessing “… the true Judge”. Nevertheless, for whatever happens we are obligated to bless God, thereby expressing the consciousness that all emanates from the same Source.

Here we come back to the story of R. Sheila. Firstly, there are several linguistic links between the story and the *mishnayot* in our chapter. For instance, at the climax of the story R. Sheila explains to the king that he is blessing God Who grants power to the mortal kingdom on earth. This “blessing” connects to the *sugya* preceding the story, which deals with the blessing that is to be recited when seeing Gentile kings. The context of the *sugya* is the blessing to be recited when one sees a place from which idolatry has been uprooted. At the beginning of the *sugya*, there are *beraitot* that also mention the blessings over reverse situations – one who sees a place where idolatry still exists, and more generally, blessings over other peoples and countries. It is within this context that the story of R. Sheila, who “blesses God” over a Gentile kingdom, is included, even though this is not necessarily a good situation.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Secondly, the theme of the story is also closely bound with that of the chapter. Close literary analysis of the story showed that one of the important ideas that it expresses is R. Sheila’s perception of the world in general, and of the Jewish historical events in particular. According to this perception, everything that happens to both the individual and the nation happens by God’s will. Therefore, even Am Yisrael’s weak position in exile is part of the Divine will, and by the same token the major or minor victories of the Jews over the nations have their source in that same Divine will. It is God Who gives power to the nations to dominate Israel, and it is He Who allows Israel, in certain situations, to be saved from persecution. However, in exile the Divine Presence and God’s ways are hidden, and events unfold in the garb of human decisions and motivations – usually those of the other nations.

R. Sheila does more than simply dismiss the king’s suspicions concerning the words that he mumbles. According to R. Sheila’s view of the world, there really is reason to bless God for the Gentile kingdom. Even if it acts harshly toward Israel, all of its strength and its very existence is by the will of God. Hence, this blessing truly emanates from the verses that he recites to himself: “Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power…”[[6]](#footnote-6) This reflects the perspective which we have seen to be central to our chapter – that positive phenomena as well as seemingly evil ones, such as exile and Gentile dominion, all emanate from God, and the blessings for all types of phenomena express this. Therefore, the story of R. Sheila, which at first glance seems unrelated to the *mishnayot*, is actually profoundly integrated within the chapter and its messages.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. For a comprehensive discussion of the relationship between the Tosefta and the Mishna in this chapter, see A. Walfish, 'Approaching the Text and Approaching God: The Redaction of Mishnah and Tosefta Berakhot', *Jewish Studies* 43 (2005-2006), pp. 21-79 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This issue obviously entails extensive philosophical debate and analysis, and much has been written in this regard over the generations. We shall not elaborate here; our intention is to express the views reflected in this chapter of the Gemara. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For the purposes of our discussion we will not address more extreme instances, such as the Holocaust, where the issues are more complex. In addition, it should be pointed out that even personal catastrophes are sometimes unbearably painful, and we do not presume to suggest that it is always possible or easy to supply a positive interpretation. In general, our intention here is not to address the entire philosophical question of evil in the world; we are examining only what our chapter of *Berakhot* says in this regard. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The significance of this impact is reflected in the fact that in clinical trials for new drugs, the control group does not comprise patients who do not receive the drug, but rather patients who receive a placebo. The very belief that one is receiving medication already has a therapeutic effect, and therefore a new drug must prove greater effectiveness than the effect of the placebo. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Another connection is that the Mishna at the end of the chapter mentions the verse, ‘From eternity and forever (literally, “from [this] world to [that] world”)”, which was instituted to counter the claims of the heretics that there is only this world. This expression also introduces David’s verses of praise from *Divrei Ha-yamim*, which appear in the story in the prayer offered by R. Sheila:

“And David blessed the Lord before all of the congregation, and David said: Blessed are You, Lord, God of Israel, our Father, from eternity and forever. Yours, O Lord, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty…” (*Divrei Ha-yamim* I 29:10-11). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In kabbalistic teachings, the “greatness” and the “power” referred to in this verse relate to two *sefirot* – “*chessed*” and “*gevura,*” representing the Divine attributes of loving-kindness on one hand, and justice and strict measure on the other. This relates back to the Mishna, which speaks of the contrasting phenomena in the world: “One blesses over the good as he does over the evil.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)