**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Rabbinic Tales: In the Talmud and in Chasidut**

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**Shiur #38: Destined for Theft – in Rabbinical Narratives and Chasidic Stories (1)**

The *Bavli* tells the following story about a person who, according to astrologers, was destined to become a thief:

The mother of Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak was told by the Chaldean [astrologers]: “Your son will be a thief.” [Consequently,] she did not allow him [to go about] bareheaded, and told him, “Cover your head, in order that the fear of Heaven will be upon you, and seek [Divine] mercy.” He did not know why she told him this. One day he was sitting and studying under a palm tree; the cloak slipped off his head; he lifted his eyes and saw the palm. His appetite overcame him; he climbed up and cut off a bunch [of dates] with his teeth. (*Shabbat* 156b)

This is a strange and disturbing story, and it gives rise to all sorts of questions: How does a mother feel upon being told that her son is going to be a thief? What is the meaning of the astrological prediction of a person’s actions according to this story, and in rabbinical sources in general? What degree of influence or determinism does such a prediction have – in other words, what is the relationship between what the stars hold in store and free choice? What is the proper course of action upon hearing such a prediction? Did Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak’s mother act properly? (Of course, there are also questions as to the attitude of *halakha* towards astrological predictions and attributing truth to them. These questions have been discussed at length in halakhic literature, and they are not the subject of our discussion here.)

The story is very short, and the plot is simple. We will address the relatively sparse details of the plot later on, but as in the case of many other stories from the Talmud, a full understanding of the significance of the narrative requires familiarity with the broader context in which it appears, and our discussion this time will begin with the context. The story of Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak concludes a “cycle” of three stories that appear together in a *sugya* in *Massekhet Shabbat*. The *sugya* and the cycle of stories have been subjected to thorough and detailed discussion by Prof. Jeffrey Rubenstein,[[1]](#footnote-1) and the discussion below will borrow from some of his analysis.

This cycle of stories appears in a *sugya* dealing with the prohibition of kneading on Shabbat. It starts (155b) with a discussion of the Mishna (*Shabbat* 24:3) that states, “And one may add water to bran [what remains of the grain after milling, used as animal feed] but one may not knead [the mixture]” – since it falls under the *melakha* of kneading (*lash*). Further on (156a), the Gemara brings two quotes concerning “kneading” on Shabbat that were written in the “notes” of different Sages. The second quote is from the notes of Levi (a first-generation *Amora* of *Eretz Yisrael*). Following the discussion about the quote from his notes, there is a quote from the notes of his son, R. Yehoshua ben Levi, which is unconnected to the subject of the *sugya*; it deals with predictions as to the character or fate of people in accordance with their birthdate. This introduces a secondary discussion in the *sugya* – seemingly unrelated to the main discussion about kneading on Shabbat – on the topic of the stars and their influence over Israel.

It is within this discussion (156b) that we find the cycle of three stories, of which the story of Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak is the third. Each of the three stories is preceded by the same heading introducing the story as an example of the principle that “*mazal* does not apply to Israel” – i.e., the forecast of the stars has no absolute influence over Jews. The following are the two preceding stories:

And from [the story] of Shmuel too, *mazal* does not apply to Israel. For Shmuel and [the gentile sage] Avlet were sitting [together] and [they saw] people going to the lake. Avlet said to Shmuel: “That person is going, but he will not return, for a serpent will bite him and he will die.” Shmuel said to him, “If he is a Jew, he will go and also return.” While they sat, [the man] went and returned. Avlet got up and threw down the man’s sack; he found a snake inside, cut and cast in two pieces. Shmuel said to him, “What did you do [to merit being saved from death]?” He answered, “Every day we all take bread [together] and eat. Today there was one of us who didn’t have bread, and he was embarrassed. I said to them, ‘I will go and take [the bread].’ When I came to him, I pretended that I was taking [bread] from him, so that he wouldn’t be embarrassed.” He said to him, “You did a mitzva.”

Shmuel then went out and taught: “’And *tzedaka* saves from death (*Mishlei* 10:2)’ – this doesn’t mean that it saves one [necessarily] from an unnatural death, but [even] from death itself.”

And from [the story] of Rabbi Akiva too, *mazal* does not apply to Israel. For R. Akiva had a daughter. The Chaldean [astrologers] told him, “The day she enters the wedding canopy, a snake will bite her and she will die.” He was very worried about this. On the day [of her wedding], she took the pin [from her hair covering] and stuck it into the wall [for safekeeping], and it happened to penetrate the eye of a snake. In the morning, when she took [the pin], the snake was pulled out with it. Her father said to her, “What did you do [to merit this salvation from death]?” She said, “Last night, a poor person came to our door. Everyone was preoccupied with the [wedding] feast, and no one heard him. I got up, took the portion that you had given me, and gave it to him.” He said to her, “You performed a mitzva.”

R. Akiva then went out and taught: “'And *tzedaka* saves from death (*Mishlei* 10:2)’ – this doesn’t mean that it saves one from an unnatural death, but [even] from death itself.”

And from [the story] of Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak too, *mazal* does not apply to Israel. For the mother of Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak was told by the Chaldean [astrologers]…

The first story deals with the astrological prediction of a Babylonian or Persian sage by the name of Avlet, concerning a man who is on his way to work and is destined not to return alive. Shmuel (who appears together with Avlet in other places in the Talmud as well) rejects Avlet’s prediction, telling him that if the man is a Jew, he will return safely. The man does indeed return, and it turns out that he was saved from death by snakebite by virtue of the kindness that he performs for one of his companions. The focus of the story could have been the reward for the mitzva, or the relationship between the astrological forecast and man’s actions in determining his fate. I will try to present a more clearly defined understanding of the theme of the story below.

The second story, concerning R. Akiva’s daughter, is very well known. Yona Frankel,[[2]](#footnote-2) in his commentary on the story, focuses on the relationship between the fate determined by the stars and man’s actions as the central theme of the story. He argues that the message of the story is that what the stars hold in store has no real power. What affects a person and his life are his choices. If he sins, punishment will be decreed for him; if he performs *mitzvot*, he will be rewarded. The stars merely reflect the punishment or reward that is coming to him as a result of his sins or *mitzvot*. Thus, the death that was decreed for R. Akiva’s daughter, according to the stars, came about because of the future sin of apathy and cold-heartedness of those partaking of the wedding feast towards the poor man who was walking about among them. The moment the bride overturned this sin, through her act of kindness, her fate changed accordingly.

I find Frankel’s interpretation problematic. It diverts the focus of the story to the axis of sin and punishment / mitzva and reward, while the stars play a secondary role, merely reflecting what will happen to the person in the wake of his deeds. What shows up prominently in Frankel’s analysis is the deficiency that comes from ignoring the broader context of the story, as I will explain below. Besides this, Frankel’s interpretation also raises an intra-narrative difficulty: it is difficult to say that the death decree, which has hovered over the girl since her birth, or at least an early age, long before her wedding, is related specifically to a misdeed that will happen at her wedding. Seemingly, if the stars were able to reflect the choice of the wedding participants to ignore the poor beggar, they could also reflect the bride’s choice to show kindness to him. From a plain reading of the story, it doesn’t seem that the original prediction was connected to any sin. So too in other rabbinic narratives about astrological forecasts of this sort, both in this *sugya* and elsewhere (such as the well-known story about Yosef Who Honors Shabbat), the prediction stands on its own, without any explanation or any connection to sin. Therefore, it seems more appropriate to understand the destiny set by the stars in our story as standing on its own, with no known explanation – a sort of blind fate – but by virtue of her act of kindness, the young woman is saved from death.

Eli Yassif,[[3]](#footnote-3) in his book about story cycles, looks at the cycle in which the story appears, and not just at the story itself. However, he chooses to focus on the verse “*Tzedaka* saves from death” and the principle that it teaches about the power of kindness to save one from death as a unifying theme. The problem with this proposal is that the third story does not mention this verse, and the hero of the story is not saved because of an act of *tzedaka*.[[4]](#footnote-4) This perspective, too, is missing the broader context of the *sugya*, which offers the key to the story cycle.

Jeffrey Rubenstein, in contrast to the above scholars, does address the stories within their context in the *sugya*, and arrives at the simple conclusion that their common denominator is the question of the relationship, for *Am Yisrael*, between *mazal* – astrological forecast – and a person’s actual fate. The *sugya* in which the stories appear addresses this question and cites different opinions as to whether “*mazal* applies to Israel” or “*mazal* does not apply to Israel” – in other words, whether Jews are subject to the influence of the stars. Each story is introduced by a heading stating explicitly that what we can learn from the story is that “*mazal* does not apply to Israel,” hence it is logical to posit that for the redactors of the *sugya*, this is its main theme. Indeed, in each of the three stories, the danger of the fate determined by the stars hangs over the hero, but there are actions within the religious and moral sphere that can save the hero from what the stars have supposedly determined for him.[[5]](#footnote-5) In the first two stories, the act is a gesture of kindness; in the third story, the hero is saved from his fate (of becoming a thief) by covering his head and maintaining his fear of Heaven. In general, despite their unequivocal headings, the message arising from the stories is a complex one: the fate determined by the stars does exist; it has no known explanation; it does not in itself proceed from man’s actions; and it does have a certain power. However, it is not the sole determining factor – at least, not for *Am Yisrael*; rather, a person’s choices can prevail over this fate.

As Rubenstein demonstrates, despite the differences between the three stories, along with their common theme they also share elements of form and content. For example, they are built on the same pattern: each story is preceded by a heading: “And from X we learn that *mazal* does not apply to Israel”; the story itself is introduced with the forecast of a stargazer (Avlet or a “Chaldean”); there is a response (which differs in each case) by someone who is not the object of the forecast (Shmuel, R. Akiva, the mother of R. Nachman bar Yitzchak); the relationship, in two of the stories, between the parent who responds to the forecast and the child who is its object; the similar language used in the first two stories; the connection between the deliverance of the character from his/her fate and a covering of the head (the bridal crown of R. Akiva’s daughter; the head covering of Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak); the centrality of the imagery of cutting (the snake cut in half, the cutting off of the branch) in the first and third stories. All of these similarities may hint to intentional, systematic redaction of the story cycle in the *sugya* in the *Bavli*, creating thematic and formal unity that emphasizes the common denominator – the ability to influence the fate determined by the stars, through a positive religious act – as well as the various nuances arising in each story.

The nuances that vary from one story to the next create diversity, which is important as a way of enriching the message of the story cycle as a whole. For instance, what is the proper response on the part of the person who hears the prediction? We encounter different responses in these stories: Shmuel confidently dismisses Avlet’s prediction; R. Akiva worries, but takes no action to interfere with reality; the mother of Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak actively tries to prevent the realization of the forecast concerning her son. The three hearers of the respective forecasts also share a common denominator: it is clear to them that it would not be appropriate to reveal the forecast to the person concerned – perhaps with a view to sparing him or her unnecessary worry and anxiety, or, on a deeper level, perhaps because if he or she were to act out of a conscious attempt to fight against fate, it would be impossible to evade it.

The idea that the stories in their present form in the *Bavli* are the product of redaction and processing is further reinforced by a comparison between the story of Shmuel and Avlet and a parallel, very similar story in the *Yerushalmi*:

Two students of R. Channa went out to chop wood. A stargazer saw them [and said]: “These two [men] are going out, but will not come back.” As they went out, they met an old man. He said to them, “Share [your provisions] with me, for I have tasted nothing for three days.” They had a single loaf with them; they cut it in half and gave [half] to him. He ate, and prayed for them, saying to them: “May your lives be spared for you this day as you spared my life this day.” They went out in peace and returned in peace. There were people there who had heard what [the stargazer] had said. They said to him, “Did you not tell us that these two were going out but would not return?” He said, “We have here a man whose astrological sign is deceitful.” Nevertheless, they went and searched and found a snake, half of it in this knapsack and half in that. They said, “What did you do today?” [The two men] told them the story. [The stargazer] said, “So what can a person do if the God of the Jews is appeased by half a loaf of bread?” (*Yerushalmi Shabbat* 6:9, 8d)

It seems reasonable to posit, on the basis of the great similarity between the stories, that the *Bavli* used this story, or a similar one that was passed down, as the literary kernel around which the story of Shmuel and Avlet was created. This re-creation adapted the story about people who, according to the stargazer, were destined to die, but were saved because of an act of kindness that they performed, to fit the general pattern of the story cycle in the *Bavli*. This explains the details of the story in the *Bavli* that differ from those in the *Yerushalmi* but fit in with the other stories in the *Bavli*. Perhaps a similar process led to the story about the daughter of R. Akiva. We may assume that it, too, had its origin in *Eretz Yisrael*, even though we have no extant parallel narrative in any known source from *Eretz Yisrael*. In any event, the redactors of the *Bavli* gathered and processed three stories and then fixed them in a set format, creating a story cycle characterized by a measure of thematic and formal uniformity, whose contribution to the *sugya* is the idea that the stargazer’s prediction does have some weight and some meaning, but a religious act, such as the kindness that a person performs towards someone else, or maintaining one’s fear of Heaven, can influence – or even prevent entirely – its realization.

Thus far, we have acquainted ourselves in a general way with the *sugya* and the story cycle that it includes, in order to get an idea of the context in which the story of R. Nachman bar Yitzchak – and the prediction that he will become a thief – appears. The understanding of the context is important, as I have often emphasized, for an understanding of the story itself. In the next *shiur*, we will examine the story in greater depth.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

1. Jeffrey L Rubenstein, *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud*, Baltimore 2010, 150-181. See also his references to other interpretations of these stories. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Y. Frankel, *Iyyunim be-Olamo ha-Ruchani shel Sippur ha-Aggada*, Tel Aviv 5741, pp. 13-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. E. Yassif, *Sippur ha-Am ha-Ivri: Toldotav, Sugav u-Mashma’uto*, Jerusalem 5754, pp. 223-225. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Yassif explains that the third story was added as a technical, associative afterthought, but there is no reason to invoke this explanation if it is possible to find a different common denominator that connects all three stories. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Later, I will address further the integration of the conclusion that arises from these stories within the general discussion in the *sugya* about the relationship between *mazal* and the people of Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)