**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 #50: Choni’s Long Sleep, and Chasidic Stories About Dreams (1)**

In *Massekhet Ta’anit* in the *Bavli*, following the well-known story of how Choni Ha-Me’agel (Choni the Circle-Drawer) brought rain, we find the story of his long sleep:

1. R. Yochanan said: Throughout that *tzaddik*’s [i.e., Choni’s] life, he struggled with the verse that says, “A song of ascents: When the Lord brought back those who returned to Tzion, we were like dreamers” (*Tehillim* 126:1). He said, “[Can one then spend] seventy years [the length of the first exile] in a dream?!”
2. One day he was walking on the road and saw a man planting a carob tree. He said to him, “A carob gives fruit only after seventy years; is it clear to you that you will live for seventy years, and [be able to] eat from it?”

He said to him, “I found a world with carob trees. [I.e., they were here for me when I was born.] Just as my forefathers planted for me, so I am planting for my offspring.”

[Choni] sat down, ate some bread, became drowsy, and fell asleep. A cliff formed around him and concealed him from sight, and he slept for seventy years. When he awakened, he saw someone picking the fruit of that carob tree.

He said to him, “Do you know who planted that carob tree?”

[The man] said, “My father’s father.”

[Choni] said to him, “Indeed, then, one can spend seventy years in a dream.”

1. He went to his house, and said to someone, “Is the son of Choni Ha-Me’agel still alive?”

They said to him, “His son is not here; his son’s son is here.”

He said to them, “I am he [Choni].” They did not believe him.

He went to the *beit midrash*, and heard the sages saying, “The *sugyot* are as clear to us as during the years of Choni Ha-Me’agel – for when he would enter the *beit* midrash, any textual difficulty that the sages had would be resolved.”

He said to them, “I am he.”

They did not believe him, and did not treat him with the respect he deserved.

He was upset, and prayed for [Divine] mercy, and died.

1. Rabba said: This is what people mean when they say, “Friendship or death.” (*Bavli* *Ta’anit* 23a, in accordance with MS Oxford 23)

**Structure of the story and its sources**

The story consists of three parts and an appendix. R. Yochanan’s introductory account of Choni Ha-Me’agel serves as the first stage of the plot (A). This is followed by the story of the encounter with the planter, Choni’s long sleep, and his awakening (C). Then come Choni’s visits – after his seventy-year sleep – to his home and to the *beit midrash* (C), and finally, Rabba’s insight – “Friendship or death” (D).

As Jeffrey Rubenstein points out in his commentary on the structure of this story,[[1]](#footnote-1) parts A and B form a “story within a story.” The outer story concerns Choni’s question on the verse, “When the Lord brought back those who returned to Tzion, we were like dreamers” (A). This question is resolved when he comes to understand, in the wake of his long sleep, that seventy years can indeed pass in a dream (end of B). In the inner story (B), Choni comes across the planter and questions his investment of effort in a tree whose fruits the planter himself will never enjoy, following which he falls into a seventy-year sleep. When he wakes up, he witnesses the closing of the inner circle of the tree planting when he observes the carob tree, whose fruits are being enjoyed by the planter’s offspring.

This structure produces two stories that overlap: the story of Choni, who is trying to understand how it is possible for someone to sleep for seventy years (we will discuss below his strange reading of the verse), and the story of the planter, whose efforts on behalf of future generations bear fruit, as we see his descendants enjoy the benefit. Each of these stories could stand alone (with minor additions to round out the picture). The redactors chose to combine them here in such a way that each is a factor in advancing the other. In the combined narrative, by virtue of Choni’s long sleep, we have an opportunity to see through his eyes how the story of the planter reaches full circle, and thanks to the carob tree that is planted, Choni is able to understand that he slept for seventy years, and he brings the story of the verse and his long sleep to its conclusion.

At the same time, the reader is left with a strong feeling that ultimately, the two stories – and the characters in them – do not really meet. Choni, the main character, who also continues into the next part of the story, at first does not understand the logic of the planter’s work: Why is he laboring to plant a carob tree whose fruit he will never enjoy? As the story progresses, we expect that when he awakens from his sleep and sees the planter’s grandson enjoying the fruit of the carob tree, he will close the circle of his conversation with the planter with an acknowledgment that the latter had been correct, and with an internalization of the lesson about planting – and investing effort in general – for the sake of future generations. Surprisingly enough, this is not what happens. Observing the planter’s grandson neither deepens Choni’s understanding nor changes his perception of the planter; it merely provides him with an answer to his original question about sleeping for seventy years. Something in the seam between the two stories is not smooth.

Rubenstein also suggests, correctly, how this “wrinkle” in the transition at the end of part B might be evidence of the process through which the story was created: apparently, the redactors brought together different sources to create the story, and such composites are sometimes characterized by “wrinkles” in their progression.[[2]](#footnote-2) Sleeps that last for years and awakenings into future realities are a well-known motif that features in many folk tales from around the world.[[3]](#footnote-3) In the case of the story from the *Bavli*, it is reasonable to suggest that the narrators started off with an earlier source, from Eretz Yisrael – such as the following, which appears in the *Yerushalmi*:

R. Yudan Giria said: This Choni the Circle-Drawer was the grandson of the original Choni the Circle-Drawer. Near the time of the destruction of the Temple, he went out to the field, to his workers. While he was there, it rained. He went into a cave […] and fell asleep. He remained sound asleep for seventy years, while the Temple was destroyed and rebuilt. At the end of the seventy years, he awoke from his sleep. He emerged from the cave and saw a different world. […]

They said to him, “Who are you?” He said to them, “Choni the Circle Drawer.” They said to him, “We heard that when he would go into the Temple courtyard, it would be illuminated.” He went in and illuminated the place, and recited the following verse concerning himself: “When the Lord brought back those who returned to Tzion, we were like dreamers.” (*Yerushalmi, Ta’anit* 3:10)

This story is much simpler than the version in the *Bavli*. It features a character named Choni, a seventy-year sleep, a question about his identity after he awakens (here, the listeners believe him!), and a homiletical interpretation by Choni on the verse in *Tehillim* 126. We also see Choni entering the Temple courtyard, which parallels his entry into the *beit midrash* in the *Bavli*. Of course, there are also many differences between the two accounts, and these will be addressed below, in the discussion of the content of the story.

The planter who plants for future generations is likewise a well-known motif. In one of the previous *shiurim* in this series, we reviewed a midrashic story about an old man who plants, built on the same motif.[[4]](#footnote-4) The closing words of Rabba, too, are found elsewhere – including, for example in the *Bavli*, *Bava Batra* 16b, in an aggadic *sugya* dealing with Iyov – such that his words were not necessarily originally uttered in the present context.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Content of the story**

What, then, is the unique content that the narrators sought to create in this composite narrative? How do the different parts fit together? In his commentary on the story,[[6]](#footnote-6) Prof. Yona Frankel attempts to join the fragments together as follows: From the end of the story, we deduce that Choni is accustomed to being treated with the respect his Torah scholarship deserves in the *beit midrash*. This is a type of “payback” for his investment of effort and his success in study. For this reason, he has trouble understanding the planter’s investment of effort, since he will receive no personal reward. This idea is expressed, inter alia, by a wordplay that Frankel points out in Choni’s words to the planter: *ta’in*, referring to the fruit of the carob tree, echoes “*nata*’” (the act of planting) in the previous sentence, hinting – according to Frankel – to the idea that Choni believes that a person only makes an effort when he expects to receive some reward. Choni is used to enjoying the rewards of his study himself. The encounter with the planter is supposed to teach him about investing effort with no expectation of personal gain or reward.

The words uttered by the planter make this clear. He speaks about how he was born into a world in which carob trees exist, whose planters did not enjoy their fruits, and he is likewise leaving carob trees in the world, whose fruit he will not personally enjoy. The very act of planting a carob tree is thus, by definition, a selfless act. However, this idea is not limited to the level of theoretical discussion between the characters. Choni experiences something else: he sees with his own eyes how the planter’s grandson enjoys the carobs, thanks to his grandfather’s selfless efforts. This could have taught Choni the lesson of the value of putting in effort even without deriving any personal benefit, so that others can reap the fruits of one’s labors. This is more than a moral lesson to be learned on an intellectual level; it is a powerful, unmediated human experience to see descendants benefitting from their parents’ efforts, and one which can give a person the sense that the parents’ investment was worthwhile. However, according to Frankel, Choni fails to appreciate this lesson. Instead, the conclusion he draws from his encounter with the planter and his long sleep concerns only the first part of the story – a practical, technical lesson regarding the possibility of sleeping for seventy years.

After this, Choni comes to the *beit midrash*, where no one recognizes him. This may be a punishment of sorts: he was unwilling to recognize the value of investing in future generations, and he ends up suffering a lack of recognition by those same generations. He is unable to enjoy the fruits of his study, as he is accustomed to doing, in the form of recognition and respect in the *beit midrash*. His encounter begins with his own living grandson – which parallels his encounter with the grandson of the planter. This parallel emphasizes the idea of “measure for measure,” where Choni is not shown recognition and respect in the generation of his grandchildren. He ultimately seeks death, an end that is expressed through another wordplay: because he does not receive respect *ki-de’mib’ei lei* (as he deserves), he *ba’a* (seeks) death.

Frankel’s interpretation, which is a possible reading of the story, is very harsh towards Choni. I would like to propose a different understanding of the story, which seems to me more accurate, viewing Choni in a more positive light, while trying to understand the progression of the story and its message.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Why does Choni himself not initially understand the value of action on behalf of future generations? And why does he offer such a strange and seemingly simplistic interpretation of the verse from *Tehillim*? Perhaps we can illuminate the story from a different angle by considering it against the background of its broader context in the *sugya* – an angle which Frankel ignores, here as elsewhere, in his literary analysis.

As noted, the story of Choni’s long sleep follows on the story of his prayer for rain – which depicts him as exerting great effort on behalf of the drought-afflicted nation.[[8]](#footnote-8) The redactors of the *sugya* emphasize the continuity by not mentioning Choni’s name at the beginning of the story about the sleep; instead, he is referred to as “that *tzaddik*.” The story about Choni’s sleep is then followed by a series of wondrous stories concerning Choni’s grandchildren, who also show great devotion on behalf of others. All of these narratives depict Choni and his household in a positive light, as devoted people who are concerned for the welfare of the nation. Considering all of this, it is difficult to accept Frankel’s critical view of Choni as a self-centered character who seeks honor and personal gain.

Before proposing a different view, let us define the question more clearly. The second story about Choni is introduced with the question that bothers him about the verse from *Tehillim*: is it possible that someone could sleep and be “like a dreamer” for seventy years? Of course, the question itself is puzzling, because it is clear that “like dreamers” is not meant here in the literal sense of dreaming during sleep. It may be meant as a sort of metaphor, whereby the exiles from Babylon, upon returning to Eretz Yisrael, describe their experience as something that seems like a dream. Another possibility is that they view the return to the land as the realization of their long-held dream, or that of their parents and grandparents who were exiled to Babylon and could only dream of returning. This sense of the term “dream” is not related to sleep, but rather to a desire or fantasy. Here, too, Choni “fails to understand” something that is seemingly self-evident, just as he later seems not to understand why someone would spend time and effort on planting a tree whose fruits he will never eat. After he awakens and sees the grandson eating the fruit of his grandfather’s labor, he still fails to understand the planter’s approach; all he concludes is that it is indeed possible to sleep for seventy years – thus affirming his strange, literal interpretation of the verse.

Choni’s peculiar understanding of the verse, and his peculiar reaction to the planter, appear not to be coincidental; they seem to be connected to each other. They do not arise from ignorance, nor from self-centeredness or ego (as Frankel suggests), but rather from the unique way in which Choni lives and experiences the world – which is different from the usual human perspective. In the story about rain, Choni’s stance in prayer is described as being “like a son who nags his father”: when his prayer is not immediately answered with rain, he draws a circle on the ground and vows not to leave it until there is rain. When rain does come, but not in the exact manner that Choni has in mind, he immediately objects: “This is not what I asked for, but rather….” This story depicts Choni as someone who, by virtue of the special relationship between himself and God, is used to immediate, precise Divine responses to the needs of the moment; he is accustomed to miracles. There are spiritual advantages to this way of life, although it is criticized by some of the Sages (see the accounts in the Mishna, and in the *sugya* in the *Bavli* as well as in the parallel *sugya* in the *Yerushalmi*). It involves very powerful trust in the connection with God and in His provision of all needs. It is very powerfully focused on the “here and now,” and relies on ongoing communication with God. To a considerable extent, it recalls the miraculous form of life of the generation of the wilderness – a life lived in close proximity to the Divine Presence, subsisting on the miraculous manna that fell in measured quantities, just enough for one day at a time, “here and now,” and requiring no long-term planning.

At the same time, it comes with a price. This form of life, in which one is accustomed to miracles, may come with a lack of understanding of the natural, “usual” way of life in the world, which requires that one take the longer term into consideration as well. Preparing for the longer term requires intensive work in advance, which is not always immediately rewarded. In addition, a focus on the “here and now” also pays less heed to the past. It is perhaps for this reason that when Choni stands inside the circle, he demands rain with no regard for the spiritual state of the nation – which, in view of the harsh drought, would seem to be in need of work. The story of the planter demonstrates exactly the opposite: the efforts of his forefathers in the past, for the sake of his own generation, fill him with strength and motivation to act for the sake of the generations to come.

The planter, who puts in effort despite knowing that he will not enjoy the fruits of the tree, lives with a type of dream. It is not the sort of dream that is necessarily dreamed at night, during sleep. Rather, it is a dream that can exist also by day; a sort of vision that he maintains, by virtue of which he plants the carob tree. In his natural perception of the world, carob trees that are planted do not produce fruit for many years, and so he is able to look at the young sapling, which is giving him nothing now or in the near future, and to visualize, as though in a dream, the adult tree that it will become and the fruit that it will produce. Choni, as a symbolic character, has never needed this. His way of life, based on miracles, with every need fulfilled fully and precisely in real time, keeps him firmly fixed in the present. Fruit will always be available to him, and likewise to others, in generations to come. In the story of the rain, we read that “Shimon ben Shetach sent to him… ‘You nag the Almighty, and He does your bidding, like a son who nags his father and he does his bidding; he says, Father… give me nuts, almonds, peaches, and pomegranates – and he gives them to him.’” Hence, Choni has no need to sow seeds or plant trees that will produce nothing useful in the present. His needs are provided for and available here and now, and he believes that when the future becomes the present, the needs of that time will be taken care of in the same manner. He has no need for dreams, and therefore he does not understand the action of the planter, who dreams of the future fruit-laden tree which he himself will never get to see.

We might understand the different approaches to the verse in *Tehillim* in a similar way. As noted, “we were like dreamers” can be an image of a wondrous reality that is experienced as something extraordinary and supernatural from the point of view of the subjects – the sort of reality that is usually experienced only in dreams. Alternatively, it is possible that “like dreamers” is meant here in the sense of a dream that was nurtured by the exiles in Babylonia day and night throughout many years, which has now been realized. Perhaps it is a dream that accompanied them while they were in Babylonia – that they would return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple – and this dream is realized with the return to Tzion. Or perhaps it is a dream that they must continue to dream even now that they have returned to the land. When we read the books of *Ezra* and *Nechemia* about that period, we realize that the exiles who returned from Babylonia to Eretz Yisrael faced a very stark and challenging reality. They faced endless obstacles and provocations by the other nations in the land as they strove to rebuild both a Jewish presence in the land and the Temple. The Temple that they eventually built looked rather dismal in relation to the magnificent building that had been destroyed seventy years earlier.[[9]](#footnote-9) The returnees, too, had to dream – about a different future, in which the situation of the Jews in Eretz Yisrael would improve, they would live in security, and the Temple would return to its former glory. Perhaps this was a dream that they dreamed, knowing that its realization would not be in their days, but in the lifetime of their progeny, and this dream gave them the strength and motivation to exert themselves and invest efforts in building up the land despite the scarce payback they would enjoy. Indeed, as we read in the continuation of the same chapter in *Tehillim*, they “sowed with tears”: The description, “Though he goes on his way weeping, he who bears the measure of seed,” portrays those who had seen the glory of the First Temple with their own eyes in their youth, as they stood before the relative simplicity of the Second Temple and wept. Nevertheless, they dreamed that they would “reap in joy,” that they would “come in joy bearing their sheaves,” even if it was difficult to see this happening in the current reality.

It is natural that Choni reads the verse in *Tehillim* differently from the returnees from exile. Supernatural phenomena – which exist for other people only in a dream – are part of his routine, day-to-day existence. In addition, Choni’s realistic interpretation of the phrase “we were like dreamers” most likely arises, first and foremost, from the story in the *Yerushalmi* – in which he views himself as the subject of the verse after he literally sleeps and awakens after the seventy years of exile. But somewhere in the transition to the *Bavli*, the narrators of the Aramaic version place in the mouth of Choni – the man of the “here and now,” who has no need for dreams and visions of the future – a more literal formulation which understands “we were like dreamers” in its simple, literal sense. It is not surprising that in his personal case, this is indeed realized, literally and in miraculous fashion, and he sleeps for seventy years.

The redactors’ merging of the stories of Choni and of the planter serves to present different aspects of Choni’s miraculous existence while also highlighting the advantages of a more natural sort of existence. This is not meant as criticism of Choni; rather, it makes room for a type of existence that entails hard work, with planning and building for the long term, and dreaming.

In the next *shiur*, we will address the final part of the story of Choni – his return home and to the *beit midrash*.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

1. Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud*, Baltimore, 2010, pp. 62-76. See also, by the same author, *The Land of Truth: Talmud Tales, Timeless Teachings*, Lincoln, 2018, pp. 3-20. Some of the discussion below was inspired by these two sources. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rubenstein (*Stories*, pp. 63-67) lists all the various “wrinkles” in our story. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rubenstein (ibid.) cites some examples. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The story in *Kohelet Rabba* about the planter who takes a basket of figs to the king, *shiur* #13. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Indeed, Rubenstein (ibid., p. 66) notes that they are somewhat out of place here, since in part C of the story itself, what disturbs Choni is more the lack of respect shown to him, and less the lack of friends and peers. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Y. Frankel, *Sippur ha-Aggada: Achdut shel Tochen ve-Tzura*, Tel Aviv 2001, pp. 182-189. The explanation below includes some suggestions by Rubenstein, ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Rubenstein, *Land* (above, n. 2), proposes another interesting point of connection between the verse in *Tehillim* about the seventy years of exile, and the story of the planter: in both, we observe the ability to look to the future that lies beyond our immediate situation, to the reality in which future generations live their lives. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Gemara brings the story of his prayer for rain as a *beraita* in response to a similar story in the *Mishna*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. “But many of the *kohanim* and *leviim* and heads of fathers' houses – the old men who had seen the First Temple standing on its foundation – wept with a loud voice when this house was before their eyes…” (*Ezra* 3:12). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)