YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Before Sinai: Jewish Values and Jewish Law**

**By Rav Dr. Judah Goldberg**

**Shiur #62: Spirituality (17):**

**Law vs. Spirituality (1): Torah and Purity of Heart**

The last *shiur* ended with consideration of Torah study as a supreme expression of spirituality and a fusion of the love and awe experiences. Thirst for Torah learning was offered as an example of spiritual ambition that seems to be inspired by something more primordial than mere commandment and that can be frustrated by limitations, even those (legal or physical) imposed by God Himself.

This *shiur* revisits the topic of Torah study, but from a different vantage point. At the same time that Torah study, in rabbinic literature, can be a powerful source of spirituality, it also appears to live in certain tension with raw spiritual yearning. In other words, while *berit Avot* spirituality and *berit Sinai* religiosity primarily complement each other, they can also clash, to a degree. Full, robust Jewish living, then, will inevitably require careful reflection upon the interplay between these two dimensions and thoughtful calibration between them.

**Law and Spirituality – Tensions and Tradeoffs**

A number of passages scattered throughout the Talmud describe the religious state of affairs in Jewish Babylonia under successive generations of rabbinic leaders: Rav Yehuda, student of the first-generation *Amora’im* Rav and Shmuel, and founder of the academy of Pumpedita and its *rosh yeshiva* (head) until 299 CE; Rav Yehuda’s student Rabba, *rosh yeshiva* from 299-320; Rabba’s nephew and student Abbaye, *rosh yeshiva* from 323-338; and Abbaye’s contemporary and colleague Rava, who succeeded him as *rosh yeshiva* from 338-352.[[1]](#footnote-1)

*Berakhot* 20a relates the following story:

Rav Pappa said to Abbaye: “What is different about the earlier [generations], for whom miracles occurred, and what is different about us, for whom miracles do not occur?

If it is because of [Torah] learning – in the years of Rav Yehuda, all of the learning was in [the Order of] *Nezikin*, but we study [all] six orders [of the Mishna]…. And yet, when Rav Yehuda would [merely] remove one of his shoes [in observance of a strict fast day because of drought],[[2]](#footnote-2) rain would come; while we afflict ourselves and cry out, but no one pays us heed!”

[Abbaye] said to him: “The earlier ones would make sacrifices (*maseri nafshaiyhu*) for the sanctification of [God’s] name; we do not make sacrifices for the sanctification of the name.”

Rav Pappa wonders why his own generation is not privy to the same kind of providence that Rav Yehuda’s enjoyed; after all, the current engagement with Torah scholarship is far more expansive. As an example, Rav Pappa cites how Rav Yehuda struggled with a passage in *Uktzin* – the last tractate in the Order of *Taharot* (laws of ritual purity and impurity) – while Rav Pappa and colleagues have mastered *Uktzin*.

His mentor, Abbaye, responds that the knowledge of earlier generations may have been more limited, but their piety was greater – specifically, their willingness to be “*moseir nefesh*” (literally, to hand over one’s life, but the phrase can refer to any significant sacrifice) for the sake of God. The contemporaries of Rav Pappa and Abbaye are preoccupied with the law – that is, the content of *berit Sinai* – in all of its intellectual glory, but at the expense of a certain raw intensity. They stand in contrast to their predecessors, who were not as intellectually accomplished but whose spirit dwarfs that of this later generation.

But from where might this spirit derive? Who originally taught us a value of *mesirut nefesh* for the sake of God? Avraham, of course! Avraham was willing to martyr himself, not because of a ruling in Rambam’s *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah*, but out of spontaneous, overpowering love for and dedication to God (see *shiur* #50). It is in Avraham’s path that Rav Yehuda’s generation walked, even though their Torah knowledge was not as vast. Abbaye’s colleagues, on the other hand, surpassed their predecessors as students of Moshe, but did not possess the same Avraham-like courage; and thus, the miracles did not come.

**The Head and the Heart**

Elsewhere, Rava also comments on the same contrast between the generations, introducing it into an unrelated exchange about the Biblical characters Do’eg and Achitofel. Do’eg, we recall from *shiur* #48, was a contemporary of King David who was steeped in Torah knowledge but was morally corrupt; Achitofel, King David’s adviser a generation younger, embodied the same paradox.[[3]](#footnote-3) In demonstration of their intellectual prowess, the Gemara remarks that “Do’eg and Achitofel asked 400 questions about a cabinet that is suspended in the air,” to which Rava retorts:

Is there greatness in posing questions? In the years of Rav Yehuda, all of the learning was in *Nezikin*, while we engage a lot in learning [even] *Uktzin*…. But Rav Yehuda would remove his shoe, and rain would come; while we cry out, but no one pays us heed.

Rather, the Holy One, blessed be He, desires[[4]](#footnote-4) the heart, as it says, “But God sees the heart (*leivav*)” (I *Shmuel* 16:7). (*Sanhedrin* 106b)

Rava begins and ends with Do’eg and Achitofel; his prooftext for God’s desire for “the heart” is actually a remark about King David, their foil. Here, the contrast is not between intellectual achievement and moral action, but between intellectual achievement and purity of heart. Rava observes that Do’eg and Achitofel excelled in their studies but lacked pure intention and devotion, which is what God truly seeks.

Of course, worshipping “with all your heart” is a common refrain in *berit Sinai*,[[5]](#footnote-5) but perhaps this trait, too, originates with Avraham. Though *Sefer Bereishit* doesn’t describe Avraham’s heart (or his love for God, for that matter), Nechemya declares, “And You made his name Avraham; and You found **his heart (*levavo*) faithful** before You” (9:7-8). An association of “the heart” with the *Avot*’s worship is also implied by King Shlomo, who praises God as:

[He] Who safeguards the covenant and the kindness for Your servants **who walk before you with all their heart**. (I *Melakhim* 8:23; II *Divrei Ha-yamim* 6:14)

The phrase “Who safeguards the covenant and the kindness” is taken from *Devarim* 7:6-13, where it refers to God’s promises to the *Avot* and is interwoven with the theme of bilateral love.[[6]](#footnote-6) “Who walk before You” clearly echoes *Bereishit* 17:1 – “Walk before Me and be whole (*tamim*)” – but here, the modifier “with all their heart” takes the place of *temimut*. In other words, those who walk before God “with all their heart” are following in the footsteps of our *Avot* and their *temimut*, and are thus privy to God’s “covenant and kindness” – the blessings of *berit Avot.*

Our Sages further highlight Avraham’s purity of heart and its intersection with his more explicit qualities of *temimut* and love for God. For instance, on the command to love God with all one’s heart (*Devarim* 6:5), R. Meir comments, “‘With all your **heart’** – like your father Avraham” (*Sifrei* ad loc.).[[7]](#footnote-7) On a verse that states, “***Tamim*** is his way” (*Tehillim* 18:31),[[8]](#footnote-8) the *midrash* remarks, “This is Avraham, as it says, “And You found **his heart faithful** before You.” (*Bereishit Rabba* 44:1). Finally, the following *midrash* touches on all of the elements above, as well as on the idea of God as a friend:

“[Who] **loves** (***ohev***) the **pure-hearted** (***tehor-lev***); whose lips are gracious, his **friend** (***rei’a***) is the king” (*Mishlei* 22:11) – the Holy One, blessed be He, **loves** anyone who is ***tehor-lev***; and whoever has grace upon his lips, the King is his ***rei’a***.

This is Avraham, who was ***tamim*** and ***tehor-leivav*** and became an **adorer** (***ohavo***) of God, as it says, “Progeny of Avraham, ***ohavi*** (*Yeshayahu* 41:8).” And because he had grace upon his lips, as it says, “And the matter of strength, and the grace of his arrangement [of speech],”[[9]](#footnote-9) (*Iyov* 41:4), [so] the Holy One, blessed be He, became his ***rei’a***, for out of His **love** for him, He said to him, “To your progeny I have given this land” (*Bereishit* 15:18). (*Bereishit Rabba* 41:11)

Here, *temimut* and purity of heart are intertwined and form the basis of Avraham’s love for God. When combined with ethical virtue – “grace upon his lips” – they elicit God’s love, friendship, and, ultimately, His covenant in return – “to your progeny I have given this land.”

Consequently, one who similarly worships with purity of heart can be said to be following in the path of Avraham. The *Avot*, one might say, brought very little to their worship other than untainted devotion. Few demands were made upon them, and few boundaries were set on their behavior. All they had to offer was purity of heart and *temimut*, and God welcomed them to walk before Him with just that.

Their progeny, the recipients of *berit Sinai*, must busy themselves with a world of concrete directives to practice and to study, but hopefully not to the total neglect of the *Avot*’s inner devotion and earnestness. Do’eg and Achitofel, however, fell into exactly this trap. They imbibed much Torah, but the Sages comment that it was only “from the lips outward” (*Sanhedrin*, ibid.). God, however, can see into the heart, and its purity – found in figures like Avraham and King David – is what He most desires.

Furthermore, when Torah is learned without purity of heart, the content itself becomes warped:

Rav Mesharshiyya said: Do’eg and Achitofel did not know how to analyze a [halakhic] discussion. (*Sanhedrin*, ibid.)

Mar Zutra protests that tradition attests to their great scholarship; how, then, can one claim they lacked comprehension?! Rather, it is explained that their analyses never led to accepted halakhic practice, for it says, “God’s secrets [are revealed] to those who are in awe of Him” (*Tehillim* 25:14).

Regarding David, on the other hand, the Sages claim that Do’eg himself concedes, “‘God is with him’ (*I Shmuel* 16:18) – that halakha follows him in all areas” (*Sanhedrin* 93b; see also *Zevachim* 54b). Genuine spirituality is not only a moral prerequisite for Torah learning; her secrets are only accessible to one who is pure-hearted.

**From Rav Yehuda to Abbaye and Rava**

How, though, can Rava be so sure of what God seeks most? Because he draws upon his own lived experience. Rava senses that the academy of Rav Yehuda’s time possessed a quality that it currently lacks. Despite the scholars’ greater breadth of knowledge in Rava’s day, they are nonetheless less worthy. As with Do’eg and Achitofel, intellectual prowess has somehow come at the expense of “the heart.” Ironically, the Sages bend their minds over the Order of *Taharot* – the laws of ritual purity – but the purity that God most seeks is missing, to some degree, from their hearts.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Intriguingly, Rava is not the first scholar to reflect upon the figures of Do’eg and Achitofel and the fact that their learning did not assure them piety.[[11]](#footnote-11) *Chagiga* 15b relates that the great Rav Yehuda was once crying. When Shmuel, his mentor, asks why he is so distraught, Rav Yehuda responds:

Rabbi Ami said: Do’eg and Achitofel asked 300 questions about a cabinet that is suspended in the air. Yet the Mishna states: “Three kings and four commoners [among them, Do’eg and Achitofel] have no share in the World to Come” (*Sanhedrin* 90a); we, what will be with us?!

[Shmuel] said to him: Sharp one, there was **impurity in their hearts**.

Rav Yehuda can’t help but wonder why the same fate that befell renowned scholars like Do’eg and Achitofel is not awaiting him. Shmuel reassures him that Do’eg and Achitofel were corrupt at the core, which their erudition only masked. And, indeed, by Rava’s account, Rav Yehuda maintained purity of heart, as evidenced by the miracles to which he was privileged.

A generation later, though, Rabba had expanded the curriculum,[[12]](#footnote-12) but the miracles were no longer happening:

Rabba declared a fast. He asked for mercy, but rain did not come. They said to him: But when Rav Yehuda would declare a fast, the rain would come! He said to them: What shall I do? If it is because of the learning – we are better than they are; for in the years of Rav Yehuda, all of the learning was in *Nezikin*, but we learn [all] six orders [of the Mishna]…. But when Rav Yehuda would remove one of his shoes, rain would come; while we cry out all day long, but no one pays us heed!

If it is because of an [unseemly] matter – if there is someone who has seen something, let him say!

Rather, what can the leaders of a generation do when their generation isn’t similarly worthy?[[13]](#footnote-13) (*Ta’anit* 24a-b)

Rabba is willing to take responsibility for the lack of rain, but after careful introspection, he cannot find fault with the rabbinic leadership. By the next generation, however, Abbaye and Rava aren’t so sure. Something has changed, besides the scope of study, and it is not with the commonfolk.

Did the sages of Abbaye and Rava’s time miss the mark? Perhaps. In Rava’s account, his generation excelled in scholarship but lacked a certain purity of heart that God seeks even more. The association with Do’eg and Achitofel, however cursory, is striking, and tinged, I think, with a sense of sorrow. Rava’s colleagues are not the equivalents of Do’eg and Achitofel, but there is a faint echo of their original error that has crept into the academy. In the dogged pursuit of knowledge, Rava suggests, the sages have given up on something even more precious.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Abbaye, too, may be chastising the generation for focusing too narrowly on its studies, at the expense of other dimensions of commitment and spirituality. Alternatively, perhaps his response should be read differently than Rava’s. In noting that “we do not make sacrifices for the sanctification of the name” as Rav Yehuda’s generation did, Abbaye might not be offering a confession but simply acknowledging a real, inherent tension in religious life: between intellectualism and passion; between cool, cerebral analysis and fiery spontaneity; between breadth of mind and depth of soul; between, we might say, the formalities of *berit Sinai* and the pulsating spirit of *berit Avot*.[[15]](#footnote-15)

According to this reading of *Berakhot* 20a, perhaps the miracles of Rav Yehuda’s generation were not a direct reward for greater piety, but the natural consequence of its attitude: As Rav Yehuda’s generation acted more spontaneously, perhaps God responded “spontaneously” in kind, with miracles that deviate from heaven’s standard operating procedure. The later generation, on the other hand, prided itself on its total immersion in the law, but the flipside was a more restrained, calculated approach – “we do not make sacrifices for the sanctification of the name.” Perhaps God, then, is more calculating as well, operating conservatively within the laws of nature instead of transcending them.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Whether Rava and Abbaye’s responses should be conflated or distinguished, they revolve around the same point: At the same time that Torah study supports and nurtures spirituality in some ways, it can also dampen it in others. For all that *berit Avot* and *berit Sinai* positively complement each other, there is an irresolvable tension between these two forces, and Jews, individually and collectively, must constantly navigate their careful balance. Whether the later sages of Babylonia regrettably veered from the trodden path or consciously forged a different one, the tradeoffs of their choices were real and unavoidable, and so, too, are the consequences of ours.

**Conclusion**

The next *shiur* will continue to analyze the possibility of tension between law and spirituality in Judaism and will conclude the entire unit on *berit-Avot* spirituality.

**For Further Thought:**

1. Rava had plenty to say about both the power of Torah study when it is pursued correctly, as well as the latent dangers when it is not. For additional, salient examples, see *Berakhot* 17a; *Shabbat* 31a and 88b; *Ta’anit* 7a; and *Menachot* 110a. See also Harav Aharon Lichtenstein, “*Talmud* and *Ma’aseh* in *Pirkei Avot*,” *Varieties of Jewish Experience*, 39-62. Regarding Rav Yehuda and Rava on the balance between Torah and prayer, see *Rosh Hashana* 35a and *Shabbat* 10a, respectively; contrast with Rabbi Yochanan in *Yerushalmi Shabbat* 1:2.
1. For historical background, see, for example, *Encyclopedia Le-chakhmei Ha-Talmud Ve-ha-Geonim* (ed. Mordechai Margaliot). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See *Ta’anit* 12b. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See “For Further Thought” there. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In the original Aramaic, there seems to be a play on words between “questions” (*bayei*) and “desires” (*ba’i*); see Rashi. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See *Devarim* 4:29, 6:5, 10:12, 11:13, 13:4, 26:16, 30:2, 30:6 and 30:10; *Yehoshua* 22:5 and 23:14; I *Shmuel* 7:3, 12:20, and 12:24; I *Melakhim* 8:48 and 8:61; *Yirmiyahu* 24:7 and 29:13; *Yoel* 2:12; *Tehillim* 119:2; *Mishlei* 3:5;I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 22:19; and II *Divrei Ha-yamim* 6:38, 15:12, 15:15, and 19:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See also *Daniel* 9:4 and *Nechemya* 1:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See *Ba’al Ha-turim* and *Hadar Zekeinim* (ad loc.), who echo the *Sifrei* and cite *Nechemya* 9:8 as the prooftext. See also *Midrash Tehillim* on 24:4: “‘And pure of **heart (*leivav*)**’ – as it says, ‘And You found **his heart faithful** (***ne’eman***) before You,’ and it says, ‘And he **believed** (***he’emin***) in God’ (*Bereishit* 15:6).” See also *Bereishit Rabba* 43:1, which applies *Tehillim* 112:7-8 to Avraham. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See *Yefei To’ar* on *Midrash Rabba.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See *Bereishit Rabba* 49:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. If the laws of a “cabinet suspended in the air” that Do’eg and Achitofel contemplate are about ritual impurity (see Rashi and *Yad Rama*), then this irony belongs first and foremost to them. Furthermore, perhaps there is also a contrast between Do’eg and Achitofel, who spend their time on arcane, abstract subjects, and King David, whose “hands are dirty with blood and sacs and placentas in order to permit a woman to her husband” (*Berakhot* 4a; see also *Eruvin* 53a and Rashi). Similarly, Abbaye and Rava take pride in their knowledge of the Order of *Taharot*, while Rav Yehuda concentrates on the practical domain of *Nezikin* (interpersonal conflicts); see also *Bava Kamma* 30a. See also Mira Balberg and Moulie Vidas, “Impure Scholasticism: The Study of Purity Laws and Rabbinic Self-Criticism in the Babylonian Talmud,” *Prooftexts* 32:3 (Fall 2012), 312-356, including their reference to a manuscript of *Bava Metzia* 59a that has Rava again pitting Do’eg and Achitofel, forever preoccupied with their *Taharot* scholarship, against King David. About King David and the Order of *Taharot*, see also *Midrash Tehillim* 1:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See also *Sota* 21a. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See *Bava Metzia* 86a; compare to 114b. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. About Rabba and the local population, see *Shabbat* 153a and Rashi. Some manuscripts, however, attribute the story in *Ta’anit* to Rava (see *Dikdukei Soferim*), in which case it is a variation on the story in *Sanhedrin*. On the relationships between these different passages, see also *Tosafot Ha-Rosh* and *Petach Einayyim* on *Berakhot*, ad loc., and *Gevurot* *Ari* and *Mitzpe Eitan* on *Ta’anit*, ad loc. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Regarding Rava’s concerns for the scholars of his generation, see also *Yoma* 72b. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Abbaye’s intention may turn on the type of *mesirut nefesh* in question: Is he speaking about situations in which *mesirut nefesh* is technically obligated, or about those in which it is a spontaneous, unlegislated expression of fervor? The passage in *Berakhot* 20a continues with an illustrative story about Rav Ada bar Ahava, who ripped a garment he deemed inappropriate off of a woman in the marketplace. The *Arukh* and Rashi explain that the garment was immodest, in which case Rav Ada bar Ahava was acting on his own accord. R. Tzemach Gaon (see *Teshuvot Geonim Kadmonim*, 101; *Sefer Yuchasin*, “Rav Ada bar Ahava”), however, explains that it contained a mixture of wool and linen (*kil’ayyim*), and thus, Rav Ada bar Ahava’s intervention might have been mandatory; see Rambam, *Hilkhot Kil’ayyim* 10:29 and R. Yosef Korkos and Radvaz there, as well as *Beit Yosef*, YD 303.

Regarding Rav Ada bar Ahava and miracles, see *Ta’anit* 20b and *Yerushalmi Ta’anit* 3:11. Rashi, *Kiddushin* 72b, conflates him with Rav Ada of *Bava Batra* 22a. However, the two should likely be distinguished, as noted by Tosafot and by *Sefer Yuchasin*, ibid.: The former Rav Ada was a contemporary of Rav Yehuda and known for his piety, while the latter was a student of Rava who prized proficiency in *Taharot* but could sometimes behave abrasively (see also Ritva, *Bava Batra*, ibid.). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See *Iyyun Ya’akov* (printed in *Ein Ya’akov*), *Berakhot* ad loc., as well as *Nedarim* 32a. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)