YESHIVAT HAR EZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Ein Yaakov - The World of Talmudic Aggada**

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**Lecture #22: Daf 6b
Time, Place, Motion**

In recent weeks, we have seen the Gemara comment numerous times on the sanctity of the synagogue, the importance of praying there, and appropriate prayer practices in general. In this *sugya*, the Gemara picks up on this theme, focusing on the need for consistency and regularity in one’s prayer and synagogue attendance. The Gemara presents the last in a series of statements by Rabin son of R. Adda:

Rabin son of R. Adda in the name of R. Yitzchak says:

If a man is accustomed to attend synagogue [daily]

and one day does not go,

the Holy One, blessed be He, makes inquiry about him.

For it is said:

‘Who is among you that fears the Lord,

that obeys the voice of His servant,

and now walks in darkness and hath no light?’ (*Yishayahu* 50:10).

If he absented himself on account of some religious purpose,

he shall have light.

But if he absented himself on account of a worldly purpose,

he shall have no light.

‘Let him trust in the name of the Lord.’

Why?

Because he ought to have trusted in the name of the Lord

and he did not trust.

This passage deals with the importance of daily synagogue attendance. The Gemara makes an interesting claim. It suggests that when one attends daily services in the synagogue, one risks a Divine investigation and possible punishment if one misses an occasional service. The implication is that one who does not attend services regularly is not subject to the same scrutiny.

Why should this be? I would like to suggest that by attending synagogue daily, one gains a special relationship with God, whose place, as we have said, is in the synagogue. God pays special attention to such people. While this is generally beneficial, it also means that the person is held to a higher standard and may be punished for it.

This passage also teaches us something about regular prayer in the synagogue. One might have thought that if one goes to synagogue most of the time, an occasional absence is not a big deal. In fact, however, the ideal of synagogue attendance is that one comes each and every day, unless one has a pressing moral or halakhic obligation that requires one to be away from the synagogue. A model for this daily service, come rain or shine, is the daily *Tamid* offerings in the Temple. If attending synagogue is like offering a sacrifice, that offering only rises to the level of the *Tamid* if it is offered each and every day.

Finally, I would to like to focus on the verse from *Yishayahu* quoted here and the Gemara’s interpretation of it. Translated literally, the entire verse reads:

Who among you fears the Lord

and obeys the voice of his servant,

That walks (or walked) in darkness

and has no light,

trusts in the name of the Lord

and relies upon his God?

This verse is most incongruous. Why would those people who “fear God” “obey His servant” and “trust in the name of the Lord,” also “walk in darkness?” Translators and commentators have offered various solutions to this problem. Our Gemara presents its own midrashic approach. As I reconstruct it, it goes as follows: First, the Gemara understands the phrase *mi bakhem,* translated here as meaning something like “who among you,” as meaning something like “where are you.” Next, it parses the verse so that it reads, “Where are you the servants of God… that left (lit. “walked”).” Who are these absent God-fearers that God seeks out? The Gemara understands that they are those who usually attend synagogue daily, but are suddenly absent. The punishment for such people is that they will dwell in “darkness, without light.” Finally, the Gemara interprets the final clause of the verse, “trusts in the name of the Lord…” as being an admonition to those who missed synagogue. They should have had faith in God, that no matter how urgent the business was that seemed to justify missing *minyan*, God would provide and make sure that everything would work out alright for those who steadfastly attend *minyan*. In sum, the Gemara reads the verse as follows: “Those of you who fear God and obey the voice of his servant (i.e. those of you who attend synagogue regularly,) who go away (i.e. fail to come to synagogue on a given day), they will find themselves in darkness without light. [They should have] trusted in the name of the Lord…”

The attentive reader will notice that my interpretation of the Gemara’s reading of this verse glosses over a key aspect of the reading. The Gemara states, “If he absented himself on account of some religious purpose, he shall have light. But if he absented himself on account of a worldly purpose, he shall have no light.” The Gemara appears to read this verse as referring to two different cases, one in which the person is absent from synagogue with a worthy alibi, and one in which he has no good excuse for not showing up. How can the verse refer to both cases? I would argue that the rabbis did not view the verse as directly referring to two different cases, with different outcomes. The verse, in their eyes, refers simply to a synagogue regular who misses services on a given day. However, such a reading is problematic for the Gemara.

This reading accords extreme significance to daily synagogue attendance, making it akin, as we have said, to the need for daily sacrifices in the Temple. The implication is that missing *minyan* is not acceptable under any circumstances. This position does not sit well with the Gemara’s overall understanding of the place of prayer within the halakhic system. As we discussed in our analysis of the story of the heavenly voice in the ruins, the Gemara ultimately champions a halakhic approach over a charismatic, mystical approach to prayer. Prayer is not a direct encounter with the Divine, which supersedes all other values and requirements. Rather, it is a halakhic requirement among many halakhic requirements that obligate a Jew. In some situations, other halakhic requirements have greater priority than attendance at the synagogue. In such cases, not only is it permitted; it is required to miss synagogue to attend to other needs. Hence, the Gemara tells us that this verse refers only to those who miss services without a good excuse. They shall suffer from darkness. The Gemara, however, informs us that implicit in this condemnation is an assurance that those who miss services in order to perform a more pressing *mitzvah* shall be rewarded.

The Gemara now continues with the theme of the importance of communal prayer in the synagogue:

R. Yochanan says:

Whenever the Holy One, blessed be He,

comes into a synagogue

and does not find ten persons there,

He becomes angry at once.

For it is said:

‘Wherefore, when I came, was there no man?

When I called, was there no answer?’ (*Yishayahu* 50:2)

When people do not show up to synagogue with quotidian regularity, at times there will be no *minyan*. In this case, not just the individual misses communal prayer, but the entire community. This passage picks up on the earlier statement that God dwells in the synagogue among ten or more men who assemble for worship. In the Gemara’s understanding, God as if appears at the synagogue at the appointed time for prayers. If a *minyan* is not gathered there, it is a direct affront to God. It is like a king who comes to visit a town, and no one comes out to greet him. This situation, understandably, makes God angry.

These two passages are linked not only because they both emphasize the importance of regular communal prayer, but also because they both cite verses from *Yishayahu* chapter 50. By comparing the original context of these verses with the way in which the rabbis interpret them, we can gain a sense of the difference between the prophetic sensibility of the Bible and the halakhic sensibility of the rabbis.

This chapter in *Yishayahu* deals with the coming of the redemption following the exile to Babylonia. God calls out to the faithful to follow Him and rebukes those who ignore His call. This chapter deals in national-historical terms. It discusses service of God in terms of an overall commitment to follow His ways. In contrast, the Gemara reads these verses in terms of a halakhic requirement for individuals and the community to pray with a quorum in the synagogue. The rabbis focus on the individual and local community, using terms of day to day practice and not one time opportunities for national redemption.

The rabbinic worldview is generally more oriented towards the individual and the local community, and focuses on technical legal obligations. The prophetic worldview is more oriented toward the nation as a whole and its historical relationship with God. The Gemara is not seeking to replace the prophetic worldview with their own, but, rather, to create a dialogue between these two approaches. Ultimately, we must embrace both of these worldviews and, between the two of them, chart a course in the world.

The Gemara continues its discussion of the proper location for prayer by presenting a brief discussion of the importance of always praying in the same fixed place:

R. Chelbo, in the name of R. Huna, says:

Whosoever has a fixed place for his prayer

has the God of Avraham as his helper.

And when he dies, people will say of him:

Where is the pious man?!

where is the humble man?!

one of the disciples of our father Avraham!

How do we know that our father Avraham

had a fixed place [for his prayer]?

For it is written:

‘And Avraham got up early in the morning

to the place where he had stood.’ (*Bereishit* 19:27)

And 'standing' means nothing else but prayer.

For it is said:

‘Then stood up Pinchas and prayed.’ (*Tehillim* 106:30)

It is not exactly clear what R. Helbo means by a “fixed place” for prayer. Some commentaries say that he means that not only must one pray in the synagogue, one must also play in a fixed place within the synagogue. In this reading, R. Chelbo comes to further reinforce the importance of regular prayer in the synagogue. Other commentaries say that this refers to a fixed place outside of the synagogue, such as in one’s home. According to this reading, R. Chelbo may be legitimizing a different form of prayer, based not in the communal synagogue but in a private place of meditation. This would reflect a more “charismatic” approach to prayer as opposed to what we have called a “halakhic” approach.

Most of this passage is quite clear. It states that a person who prays regularly in the same location will merit aid from the God of Avraham, because Avraham too prayed in the same location all the time. The Gemara proves this claim by citing a verse from *Bereishit* which is understood to mean, when interpreted in light of a verse from *Tehillim,* that Avraham had a regular place of prayer. The only puzzling part is the line which declares that such a person will be eulogized as a pious and humble man, a follower of Avraham. Why should this be so? Just because a person followed one trait of Avraham, does that mean that he was righteous and humble like Avraham? This line can be better understood in light of a passage from *Masekhet Semachot*, one of the minor tractates, which deals with laws of mourning. It states:

When Hillel the elder died they said of him:

Where is the pious man?!

where is the humble man?!

one of the disciples of Ezra!

When Shmuel Ha-katan died they said of him:

Where is the pious man?!

where is the humble man?!

one of the disciples of our Hillel.

This passage repeats twice the exact same words we saw in the Gemara. The only difference is that each time a different great Jew is substituted for “our father Avraham.” This suggests that we are dealing with a standard formula for eulogy. The only variance to this formula is that in each case, the person is compared to a different historical figure. By citing this formula the Gemara seems to be saying that one who prays in the same place all the time will merit a eulogy formula worthy of great men, and that he will be compared to Avraham, since he has one of his important traits.