YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**TALMUDIC AGGADA**

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<http://vbm-torah.org/archive/aggada72/23aggada.htm>

**Shiur #23: Arrogance and the Distortion of Religious Ideals**

R. Yitzchak said: Three things cause a man's sins to be remembered [by God]: [passing under] a shaky wall,*iyyun tefilla*, and calling on heaven to punish one’s neighbor. As R. Chanan said: Whoever calls on heaven to punish his neighbor is punished first, as it says: “And Sara said to Avraham, ‘My anger is upon you. I gave my handmaid into your bosom, and when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her eyes. God should judge between me and you’” (*Bereishit* 16:5). And it says: “And Avraham came to eulogize Sara and cry for her” (*Bereishit* 23:2). (*Rosh Hashana* 16b)

The source above assumes that Sara was punished with an early death, since she passed away before her husband. The *gemara* explains that she was punished for making accusations against Avraham and calling on God to adjudicate their conflict. Many commentators question this assumption; after all, one’s spouse may die first even absent any special punishment for transgression. How does the Gemara know that Sara’s earlier demise stems from sin? (See *Pnei Yehoshua* for further analysis).

*Sefat Emet* advances a creative alternative suggestion. According to the simple reading, the *gemara* refers to the interaction between Sara and Avraham; Sara calls on God to judge between her and her husband. *Sefat Emet* posits that the *gemara* is actually speaking about the interaction between Sara and Hagar. Sara judges Hagar guilty and sends her out, calling on God to judge between them. In a classic example of *midda ke-neged midda* (quid pro quo) punishment, she passes away before her husband, who then takes back Hagar as a wife (assuming the identification of Ketura with Hagar). Sara chases out another wife to have her husband for herself; ironically, her husband eventually remains alone with her rival.

This poetic justice helps justify the Talmudic assumption that Sara’s death is a story of sin and punishment. Otherwise, notes *Sefat Emet*, the mere fact that she died earlier proves nothing. Although *Sefat Emet*’s approach is quite clever, the biblical verse cited to illustrate Sara’s calling on heaven: “God should judge between me and you,” clearly refers to Avraham, making *Sefat Emet*’s innovative reading somewhat difficult.

A *gemara* in *Bava Kama* (93a) limits the scope of R. Chanan’s comment. We fault a person who turns to heaven for judgment only when that person could have turned to a human court, and yet still calls upon Divine wrath. If there is no human recourse, it is legitimate to ask for Divine intervention. Individuals have a right to express their grievances and demand redress for the wrongs done to them; yet they should not do so in a way that is overly vindictive. Asking for Divine punishment when human intervention suffices reflects such a problematic approach.

As Tosafot point out, this limitation forces us to assume that Sara could have turned to a human authority in her dispute with Avraham; otherwise, she could not receive punishment for beseeching God to judge between them. They posit that she could have taken her case to the court of Shem. Ran (*Rosh Hashana* 3b in Rif pagination) offers an alternative answer; Sara should have asked Avraham to address her complaint before she turned to God. Even when no relevant human court exists, asking God to punish should remain the last resort. One can do so only after exhausting all other avenues of solving the problem.

What is this *iyyun tefilla* that brings about Divine judgment? Rashi explains that the phrase refers to a person so confident about the quality of his prayer that he assumes God will invariably grant his requests. Tosafot cite Rabbenu Tam that this phrase means praying without *kavana* (proper intent). They cite support for this idea from a *gemara* (Bava Batra 164b) that lists *iyyun tefilla* as a sin we commit each day. Surely, lack of proper intent plagues us on a more regular basis that an overconfidence about the efficacy of our prayers. (For further discussion of this debate, see my *Fresh Fruit and Vintage Wine: The Ethics and Wisdom of the Aggada*, pp. 140-141).

Tosafot cite a remarkable Yerushalmi to support their argument.

R. Chiyya the elder said: “In all my days I never had *kavana*. One day, I wanted to pray with intent. I said: Who comes first before the king, a dignitary or the exilarch?” [In other words, R. Chiyya was distracted from the prayers by an unrelated question.] Shmuel said: “I count the birds.” R. Bun the son of Chiyya said: “I count the rows of stones.” R. Matanya said: “I give thanks to my head because when I come to *modim*, it knows to bow on its own.” (*Yerushalmi Berakhot* 2:4)

Apparently, immense difficulty in praying in a heartfelt manner is not just a function of modernity, but a perennial religious challenge. Indeed, Rabbenu Tam has a strong argument for preferring his interpretation of *iyyun tefilla* to that of Rashi.

However, Tosafot also note that R. Yitzchak’s statement supports Rashi. If we accept Rashi, then the three sins enumerated by R. Yitzchak stem from a common core. A person who stands under a shaky wall implicitly declares his assurance that God will not let the wall fall upon him. Such a stance reflects arrogance and self-righteousness. We can say the same about a person who calls on God to punish a neighbor. Only someone quite confident about his own righteousness would ask God to enter a punishing mode. According to Rashi, *iyyun tefilla* fits right in with the other two items, since assurance of Divine favor also bespeaks excessive religious pride. In contrast, endorsing Rabbenu Tam’s approach leaves us wondering what lack of intent has to do with the other two sins.

Thus, Rabbenu Tam’s interpretation works better in *Bava Batra,* whereas Rashi fits more easily with the text in *Rosh Hashana*. Indeed, several commentators explain that this phrase has multiple meanings in the Talmud and does not mean the same thing in these two Talmudic contexts.

R. Kook finds a different common denominator in R. Yitzchak’s list (*Ein Aya Berakhot* 55a). In all three scenarios, the erring individual takes a religious institution meant to promote religious development and distorts it in such away as to subvert growth. Standing under a rickety wall highlights the place of faith in the religious worldview. Certainly, trust in God represents a central religious value. It prevents us from descending to despair in difficult times and gives us strength to withstand various temptations. On the other hand, R. Kook expresses concern about potential corruption of this trait:

The trait of faith was never instituted so that a person would become lazy, and not work and act in every possible endeavor, whether the matters of the community or of the individual. All the more so, it was not created so that a person would enter situations dangerous to his body or soul. (*Ein Aya Berakhot* Volume 2, p. 118)

Faith was meant to energize, but when distorted it can lead to laziness and complacency. R. Kook insightfully explains how the two other sins involve similar corruptions of religious values. The notion of Divine justice should promote a sense of responsibility and desire to improve oneself. An individual who calls on heaven to punish his neighbor distorts Divine justice by using it as a means of addressing personal grievances. For him, Divine justice goes together with self–assurance, rather than with desire to improve.

The same applies to prayer. Ideally, prayer encourages an individual to seriously confront his relationship with God and think deeply about moral and religious improvement. Someone guilty of *iyyun tefilla* inverts this procedure. For him, prayer becomes a moment to bask in one’s righteousness with mighty confidence that God will accede to the request of such a devout person. Self-serving people can distort religious ideals meant to foster striving and growth until they promote complacency and arrogance.

In R. Kook’s approach, R. Yitzchak reminds us of the pitfalls inherent in religious practice and ideas. The mere fact that we speak about prayer, faith in God, or Divine justice does not exempt us from serious introspection regarding how we apply these ideas in our life. Are they challenging us to develop or have we converted them into vehicles of self-aggrandizement?