YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Talmudic Aggadot**

**By Rav Dr. Yonatan Feintuch**

**Shiur #26: R. Yossi and the Ruin – For Yom Yerushalayim**

**Introduction**

The first Mishna in *Massekhet Berakhot* deals with the proper time for reciting *Shema* in the evening. One of the opinions cited in the Mishna maintains that the time extends “until the end of the first watch.” The Gemara discusses the concept of the night watches and presents a beraita describing how, during each of the watches, God “roars like a lion”:

“It is taught: Rabbi Eliezer says: The night consists of three watches, and in each watch the Holy One, blessed be He, sits and roars like a lion, as it is written (*Yirmiyahu* 25), ‘The Lord shall roar from on high and give forth His voice from His holy habitation; He shall mightily roar because of His habitation’” (*Berakhot* 3a).

Further on, a teaching is brought in the name of Rav, describing God’s “roar” in greater detail:

“Rav Yitzchak bar Shmuel said in the name of Rav: The night consists of three watches, and in each watch the Holy One, blessed be He, sits and roars like a lion, saying: Woe to the sons whose sins caused Me to destroy My House and burn My Sanctuary and exile them among the nations of the world.”

After this description of God’s sorrow over the destruction and the exile, the *sugya* goes on to recount the following story about R. Yossi.[[1]](#footnote-1)

a. The story

I.

It is taught: Rabbi Yossi said:

Once I was walking on the road

and I entered one of the ruins of Jerusalem to pray.

Eliyahu, of blessed memory, came and guarded the entrance for me until I had completed my prayer.

After I had finished my prayer he said to me, “Peace be upon you, Rabbi!”

I said to him, “Peace be upon you, my Rabbi and teacher!”

He said to me, “My son, why did you enter this ruin?”

I told him, “To pray.”

He said, “You should have prayed on the road.”

I told him, “I was afraid that wayfarers would interrupt me.”

He said, “[Then] you should have kept your prayer brief.”

I learned three things from him in that encounter: I learned that one does not enter a ruin; I learned that one may pray on the road; and I learned that one who prays on the road keeps his prayer brief.”

II

And he said to me, “My son, what sound did you hear in this ruin?”

I told him, “I heard a Heavenly voice moaning like a dove and saying: Woe to the children whose sins caused Me to destroy My House and to burn My Sanctuary and to exile them among the nations.”

He said to me, “By your life and your head, not only now does [the voice] say that, but three times each and every day it says that. Moreover, when Jews enter synagogues and *battei midrash* and answer, ‘May His great Name be blessed…’[in response to the *Kaddish*], the Holy One, blessed be He, nods His head and says, ‘Happy is the King Whom is praised thus in His own house. What is left for a Father Who has exiled his children? And woe to the children who were exiled from their Father’s table.’”

b. Analysis of the story

First part

The story is clearly divided into two parts. The first presents a halakhic exchange between the two characters, in which the style and content are formal (for instance, the formal titles in their respective greetings). In the dialogue that develops, Eliyahu asks R. Yossi why he entered the ruin, and offers, in concise, technical terms, the alternatives that he should have preferred. R. Yossi’s answers are likewise brief and to the point, revealing nothing of his moving spiritual experience in the ruin. The ruin is treated like any other abandoned, broken place in the middle of nowhere, which should be avoided for the reasons set forth further on in the *beraita*: because of suspicion [lest a woman await him there], because of the danger of falling debris, and because of harmful spirits. Perhaps, as Frankel suggests, R. Yossi is unaware at this stage that the “Rabbi” who is talking to him is Eliyahu, and simply takes him for a sage.[[2]](#footnote-2) This impression is perhaps strengthened by the manner in which Eliyahu questions and rebukes R. Yossi. This part of the story ends in an orderly manner, as appropriate to a formal halakhic discussion, with R. Yossi’s summary of the laws that he learned from this conversation.

Second part

There is now a sharp turnaround in the story. At the beginning of the second part, Eliyahu surprises the reader - and perhaps R. Yossi too – by asking a question in a completely different realm. He addresses him affectionately, “My son,” with no official title, and asks what voice R. Yossi heard in the ruin. This is surely a question that no “regular” sage would be able to ask, because when R. Yossi entered the ruin and heard the voice, he was alone. R. Yossi apparently understands now who it is that is talking to him. He offers a full answer, describing the voice as moaning “like a dove” and expressing Divine sorrow and mourning over God’s children, whose sins have caused such terrible consequences. Eliyahu tells him that the voice that he heard was simply a “sample” of a regular phenomenon that repeats itself three times every day – as we know, in fact, from the teaching in the Gemara that precedes this story, according to which God “roars” this regret during each watch. Here, however, Eliyahu adds that when Bnei Yisrael enter their synagogues and *battei midrash* and say, “May His great Name be blessed,” God responds with a similar expression of regret. Here, the utterance combines two different feelings: on one hand God says, “Happy is the king who is praised thus in His own home,” while on the other hand He asks, “What is left for a Father Who has exiled His children, and woe to the children who have been exiled from their Father’s table.” Eliyahu’s words seem to continue what R. Yossi heard in the ruin, and to imbue R. Yossi’s experience with permanence.

The second part of the story is thus very different, in its character and atmosphere, from the first part. It arouses in the reader a mixture of sorrow and pain, in identification with the sorrow of the Divine Presence and the great suffering of Am Yisrael after the destruction and the exile. At the same time, if we try to imagine R. Yossi’s feelings when he hears the voice in the ruin, there is a profound sense of longing that includes a great sweetness. The experience itself, is a sort of revelation, and the content of the message expresses the comforting idea that even during the exile, God does not forget His children; He shares in their sorrow – “I am with him in suffering”.

These feelings are greatly strengthened by the images and symbols that appear in this part of the story. The “ruin” recalls both the reality of the destruction and paradoxically, the facilitation of a unique and intimate encounter that would not be possible in inhabited, busy places.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Attention should also be paid to the manner in which the Divine voice is heard. Here there is a clear contrast between the *beraita*, which speaks of God “roaring like a lion” during the three watches, and the story, which describes a “moaning like a dove”. The noise that a dove makes is obviously much softer; it echoes softly within the walls of the ruin, arousing a feeling of longing and sadness. In addition, a dove is known to be a creature that lives with a fixed mate. Perhaps *Chazal* allude to this quality as symbolic of the connection between Am Yisrael and God – or, in this instance, the “Spouse” Who has lost His partner and their joint home, and longs for them.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The relationship between the parts of the story

How are the two parts of the story, seemingly so different from one another, related? Frankel notes the disparity between the two sections, but also shows that they are not altogether unrelated. The first section already reveals a certain tension between the problem entailed in entering the ruin, and the uplifting experience that awaits R. Yossi there. For instance, we find already in the first part of the story that the arrival of Eliyahu comes before R. Yossi emerges from the ruin – in fact, when R. Yossi enters in order to pray, Eliyahu stands guard at the entrance. This indicates that he, too, wants R. Yossi to be able to pray in the ruin undisturbed and to hear the Divine voice.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Perhaps Eliyahu simply responds to R. Yossi’s answers. R. Yossi laconically reports that he entered the ruin in order to pray. For this he receives a halakhic rebuke; if his intention had been merely to fulfill his formal obligation while on the road, and he happened to pass a ruin, the proper course of action would have been to offer a brief prayer at the roadside, without entering. Had R. Yossi explained at the outset that his intention had been to enter one of the ruins of Jerusalem in search of some sort of encounter with the Divine Presence, perhaps the discussion would have developed in a different way. In other words, the structure of the story emphasizes the gap between different courses of religious action, prompted by different aspirations on the part of the worshipper. One who seeks merely to fulfill his formal obligation of prayer while on a journey should not enter a ruin, owing to the dangers of temptresses, avalanches, and evil spirits – as set forth in the *beraita*. These dangers point to the formal halakhic solution in such a situation: one avoids entering the ruin, and offers a brief prayer by the roadside. While a person in this situation concentrates during his short prayer to the best of his ability, this is clearly not the optimal prayer experience.

On a different level, prayer entails an aspiration like that of R. Yossi, which transcends the formal requirement and seeks a genuine encounter with the Divine Presence. We noted above that even the first part of the story hints to Eliyahu’s efforts to facilitate such an encounter. In the second part, which is centered on R. Yossi’s experience of the Divine voice, Eliyahu offers no criticism, but rather appears to echo and amplify his words. It would therefore seem that the desire to pray is more significant here. The longing for the Divine Presence among the ruins of Jerusalem and the sincere quest for an encounter with it prevail over the dangers associated with entering a ruin.

c. The relationship to the rest of the *sugya*

It seems that the respective parts of the story reflect two different religious positions that appear further on in the discussion of the first mishna. One of the subjects that arises most prominently in the continuation of the discussion is the matter of prayer in a synagogue:

“It was taught: Abba Binyanim says, ‘A person’s prayer is heard only in a synagogue, as it is written (*Melakhim* I 8), ‘to hear the song and the prayer’: in the place where there is song – there shall prayer be.” (*Berakhot* 6a)

This *beraita* is followed by a string of teachings pertaining to the status of a synagogue and the importance of prayer within it. They emphasize, *inter alia*, that God is to be found in the synagogue, and that He expects His worshippers to be there, too:

“Rabin, son of Rav Ada, said in the name of R. Yitzchak: From where do we know that the Holy One, blessed be He, is to be found in the synagogue? As it is written (*Tehillim* 82), ‘God stands in the congregation of the Almighty’. And from where do we know that when ten pray together, the Divine Presence is with them? For it is written, ‘God stands in the congregation of the Almighty’… Rabin, son of Rav Ada, said in the name of R. Yitzchak: If a man usually attends the synagogue and one day does not go, the Holy One, blessed be He asks after him… Rabbi Yochanan taught: Whenever the Holy One, blessed be He, enters a synagogue and does not find ten people there, He immediately becomes angry…” (*Berakhot* 6a-b)

On the other hand, further on we find a very different approach:

“Thus said R. Chisda: What is the meaning of the verse (*Tehillim* 87), ‘The Lord loves the gates of Tzion more than all the dwellings of Yaakov’? That the Lord loves the gates that are distinguished through halakha more than the synagogues and the houses of study. And this conforms with what R. Chiya bar Ami used to say in the name of Ulla: ‘Since the day that the Temple was destroyed, the Holy One, blessed be He, has nothing in the world but the four cubits of halakha alone.’ And Abaye also said: ‘At first I used to study at home and pray in the synagogue. But when I heard the teaching of R. Chiya bar Ami in the name of Ulla, that ‘Since the day that the Temple was destroyed, the Holy One, blessed be He, has nothing in the world but the four cubits of halakha alone’, I pray only in the place where I study.’ R. Ami and R. Assi, although they had thirteen synagogues in Tiberias, prayed only between the pillars where they used to study.” (*Berakhot* 8a)

These two approaches are related to our story. Both concern the situation during the period of the Destruction and the exile, which is described in vivid terms in the story. Jerusalem is no more; one can journey on the road and pass among its ruins. The question is how one’s religious service should now be oriented; what is the proper way to serve God? The first approach that appears further on in the chapter amplifies greatly the status of the synagogue as a sort of substitute for the Temple. God’s presence in the synagogue and His expectation that worshippers be present there serve to bridge the gap between the Temple and its substitute. Continuity is drawn between the religious service that existed in the Temple and the religious service that is now performed in the synagogue. The citations above are part of a long series of teachings in the *sugya* that mold the synagogue as a meaningful replacement for the Temple, to the degree that this is possible,

The second approach maintains that following the Destruction, religious worship is channeled into the halakhic realm, which is now the most important focus. This statement is also expressed in the description of the situation from God’s perspective, as it were: God has nothing in the world but the four cubits of halakha. This position is reflected in the first part of the story.

The first position sits well with Eliyahu’s words about the Jews who enter the synagogues, but what is R. Yossi’s place in this discussion? Which approach, if either, is reflected in his actions and in the experience that he undergoes? The answer to this question would appear to be quite complex, and we might find it easier to answer after considering another well-known story which appears further on in the same *sugya* on the first mishna.

d. The story of R. Yishmael ben Elisha

“It was taught: Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha said: Once I entered to offer incense in the Holy of Holies, and I saw Akatri-el Y-H, the Lord of Hosts, seated upon a high and exalted throne. He said to me, ‘Yishmael, My son, bless Me!’ I said to Him, ‘May it be Your will that Your mercy suppress Your anger, and Your mercy prevail over Your attributes, so that You deal with Your children according to the attribute of mercy, and stop short of the limit of strict justice, on their behalf.’ And He nodded to me with His head” (*Berakhot* 7a).

This story, like the story of R. Yossi and the ruin, appears at first glance to have found its way into the discussion through association, almost by accident. But if we compare it to the second part of the story of R. Yossi, we find some interesting connections:

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| R. Yishmael ben Elisha | R. Yossi and the ruin |
| Once  I entered  to offer incense in the Holy of Holies…  He said to me, ‘Yishmael, My son, bless Me!’  and I saw Akatri-el Y-H, the Lord of Hosts  And He nodded to me with His head. | Once I was walking on the road  and I entered  one of the ruins of Jerusalem to pray.  And he said to me, My son…  I heard a heavenly voice moaning like a dove…  When the Jews enter synagogues and *battei midrash* and answer, ‘May His great Name be blessed…,’ the Holy One, blessed be He, nods His head… |

It now becomes apparent that the second part of R. Yossi’s story may itself be divided into two parts, both of which correspond to the story of R. Yishmael:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Holy of Holies | The ruin | synagogues |
| Once I entered | Once I was walking on the road and I entered | Each and every day… when Jews enter |
| to offer incense in the Holy of Holies…  bless Me | one of the ruins of Jerusalem to pray | synagogues and study halls |
| and I saw Akatri-el Y-H, the Lord of Hosts | I heard a heavenly voice moaning like a dove | and answer, ‘May His great Name be blessed |
| He nodded to me with His head |  | He nods His head… |

The parallel between the Holy of Holies and the synagogue points to a similarity, but also highlights the contrast. In both cases someone enters (the Holy of Holies/the synagogues). In the Holy of Holies, what follows is a sort of dialogue involving reciprocity. The *Kohen Gadol* perceives the Divine Presence, as it were, and there is a dialogue between them. When he blesses God, God “nods His head” toward him. In the synagogue, the situation is different. Admittedly, here too, God is present, and man enters, such that here too there is a sort of reciprocity. There are also other teachings in the *sugya* suggesting that God prays and wears *tefillin*. Nevertheless, there is no indication here of the worshippers actually perceiving His presence. Unlike the story of R. Yishmael’s experience in the Holy of Holies, none of God’s holy Names is uttered; the congregation hereby responds, “May **His great Name** be blessed”. In addition, they bless God without Him saying “bless Me.” God responds to the blessing, but they do not perceive His response. He nods – but seemingly to Himself, in clear contrast to the testimony, “He nodded **to me** with His head.”

R. Yossi’s experience in the ruin, set forth in the middle column above, represents an intermediate situation. It does involve some sort of encounter, although it is less direct than that of the Holy of Holies. The ruin is merely the remains of what once existed. R. Yossi does not perceive the Divine Presence, but when he prays he hears a response in the form of a Heavenly voice, cooing like a dove – a sort of echo of the Divine Presence. This situation seems more similar to that of the Holy of Holies, where a prayer is answered with a response that the worshipper is able to hear. This is the magic of a ruin: a ruin is a shadow, or echo, of the ideal situation that existed in the past, where the Temple represented a venue where an encounter and communication could take place. But the ruin is merely a shadow, or reflection; it is not the “real thing.” R. Yossi’s experience is a one-time, transient phenomenon; it does not reflect the real situation prevailing in the present.

In light of the other teachings that appear in the *sugya*, our story – and particularly R. Yossi’s act in entering the ruin – may be understood differently from our interpretation above. It seems that in the first part, Eliyahu is not continuing R. Yossi’s words, but rather offering an alternative. The present reality – the situation of exile – is not a reality of encounter. God is with Israel, but they cannot communicate with Him and there is no contact between the ‘loving couple.’ Eliyahu does not object to R. Yossi’s experience in the ruin *as a one-time event*. This is an important experience, because it inspires confidence and faith in God’s presence, albeit concealed. However, a ruin cannot be used long-term as a place of worship; a ruin is a representation of and memorial to the past, rather than a venue for experiencing the present. Therefore, Eliyahu ultimately brings R. Yossi out of the ruin and sends him back to the synagogue.

**e. Synagogue as a reality and a challenge in exile**

The synagogue is the exile alternative. It demands greater efforts on the part of the Jew than what was required of him when the Temple existed, since here there is no dialogue, communication, or encounter; there is no Revelation. Therefore, it is necessary for the worshipper to construct a new religious and spiritual world. It needs to be inspired by what once existed, and built with the faith that God still responds to religious worship, even if man no longer senses the response. This is the reality of exile, and this is its challenge.

It appears that *Chazal* sought to mold and build this challenge using the teachings cited above from the *sugya* discussing the first mishna in *Massekhet* *Berakhot*, along with others which we have not addressed here. It appears to be no accident that this topic introduces the *Massekhet*, which deals with various types of “service of the heart.” Aside from the discussions about the proper time for reciting *Shema* in the evening, which is the subject of the mishna, the Gemara seeks to include within the opening *sugyot* of the *Massekhet* the broader issue of the molding of the world of the synagogue, the world of the Jew who serves God and worships Him in exile. This is the new reality, and it is the very significant spiritual challenge that arises following the destruction of the Temple.

**f. The story of R. Yossi in the ruin and the story of R. Yishmael as a memo for the future**

Another point must be emphasized. At the very outset of the *massekhet*, *Chazal* see fit to mention, along with the challenge of the present, the future situation which must remain our aspiration. By recalling the experience of R. Yishmael in the actual Temple, and the experience of R. Yossi in the ruin – a remnant in which, on rare occasions, the same essence can be felt even in a situation of exile – the *massekhet* alludes to the final goal, when God returns Israel to their land and He returns to His House, and they are reunited.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. Prof. Yona Frankel’s comments on this story, which inspire parts of the discussion below, appear in his book *Sippur ha-Aggadah – Achdut shel Tokhen ve-Tzura*, Tel Aviv 5761, p. 147 onward. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. P. 150 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For instance, see *Ketubot* 13a-b, concerning the daughter of a *Kohen* who entered a ruin together with someone. The presumption here is that entering the ruin is meant for the purposes of intimate relations, and the legal state of the woman with regard to her lineage must now be ascertained. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It is difficult to assert this with certainty, since we do not know whether the image of the dove carried the association of marital fidelity in the world of *Chazal*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Frankel offers an interpretation of the connection between the two parts of the story, and below we offer a somewhat similar explanation. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)