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 #26: Daf 7a**

**Anger Management (Continued)**

In the previous shiur, the Gemara treated the concept of Divine anger. This does not mean simply that God gets angry in response to people’s misdeeds. Rather, God gets angry at a fixed time every day. If a person could identify this timeframe, they could use this knowledge to their own advantage. If a person were to curse another at a time exactly coinciding with God’s anger, this curse would be guaranteed to be effective, unleashing Divine wrath against its victim.

We saw that the Gemara seemed uncomfortable with this notion, because this notion suggests that God is not in control of His emotions and that He can be manipulated by clever humans, like a demon in the hands of a magician. The Gemara thus greatly circumscribes this concept by declaring that the time in which God gets angry is infinitesimally short and is a carefully guarded Divine secret. Furthermore, even if one did know this time, as Baalam did, God still has the capacity to withhold His anger and not respond to a curse issued at that time. Thus the problem of God’s moment of anger is reduced to a highly theoretical problem.

Now, however, the Gemara takes a different track. It cites sources that suggest that the time of God’s wrath, in fact, can be determined and used to destroy one’s enemies:

And when is He angry?

Abaye says:

In [one moment of] those first three hours of the day,

when the comb of the cock is white

and it stands on one foot.

But in each hour its comb is thus!

In each other hour it has red streaks,

but in this moment it has no red streaks at all.

Abaye claims that he knows how to determine the exact moment of God’s anger. It occurs during the first three hours of the day. This timeframe is significant to our chapter of *Berakhot* because this is the time in which it is permissible to recite the morning *Shema*. The morning may not seem to be the most obvious time for God’s anger. We would more likely have picked the middle of the night. After all, God smote the Egyptians at midnight. Perhaps, Abaye comes to this conclusion because Balaam, who in the previous passage is described as cursing the children of Israel at the moment of God’s anger, began his cursing first thing in the morning (*Bamidbar* 22:41). Later, we will suggest another possible reason for this timeframe.

Abaye also says that one can know the exact moment when God gets angry. At this time, the rooster’s comb turns white. We saw on page 3a that animals are sometimes more attuned to the goings on in heaven than humans. This may be especially true for the rooster, whose crowing is synced to the sunrise. This change from red to white may be seen as a sign of fear in the face of God’s anger, like the blood draining from a person’s face.

The Gemara’s response to Abaye’s statement is very curious. It challenges Abaye’s assumption that roosters have red combs, a fact we would not think is debatable. The Gemara strangely argues that roosters’ crests are normally white, so Abaye’s statement that they turn white momentarily makes no sense. As far as I have been able to tell, roosters’ combs are always red or reddish in color. Indeed, white appears to be a sign of infection on the comb. It seems that the Gemara must have understood the term *karbalata,* which we translated as “comb,” to refer to the crest of the chicken, the plumage atop its head, which could, of course, be white.

The Gemara now presents a story in which a rabbi actually tries to make use of Abaye’s “chicken method” to determine the exact time of God’s anger:

In the neighborhood of R. Yehoshua b. Levi

there was a *min* (“sectarian”)

who used to annoy him very much with [his interpretations of] texts.

One day the Rabbi took a cock,

placed it between the legs of his bed

and watched it.

He thought:

When this moment arrives, I shall curse him.

When the moment arrived

he was dozing.

[On waking up] he said:

We learn from this that

it is not proper to act in such a way.

It is written:

“And His tender mercies are over all His works” (*Tehillim* 145:9).

And it is further written:

“Neither is it good for the righteous to punish” (*Mishlei* 17:26).

This story can be seen as the inverse of the story of Balaam, as it was presented above. In the story of Balaam, an enemy of Israel sought to use his knowledge of the exact time of God’s anger in order to curse the Jews. Balaam fails because God decides to withhold His anger. In this story, a Jew seeks to use his knowledge of the exact time of God’s anger in order to curse an enemy of Israel. The Jew fails, presumably because of Divine intervention. The message seems to be that God prevents humans from exploiting His moment of anger, not only when the children of Israel are threatened, but in order to protect all humans, even those worthy of death.

The Gemara cites two verses, each of which suggests a different reason that God does not allow the righteous to use His moment of anger to destroy evildoers. The first verse is: “And His tender mercies are over all His works.” This verse suggests that the reason that God does not allow evildoers to be destroyed is that He has mercy on all creatures, even sinners. The second verse presents a different perspective, “Neither is it good for the righteous to punish.” According to this verse, God withholds punishment from the sinners not because He is merciful, but because the righteous should not be involved in executing Divine justice. I understand this as meaning that acts of violence, even those that are justified, such as R. Yehoshua b. Levi’s attempt to curse and kill the sectarian, are morally and spiritually disfiguring. A person in the habit of taking violent actions is likely to eventually use violence inappropriately as well. A person best leave acts of vengeance to God.

The details of this story deserve further consideration. Who is this *min* (“sectarian”) and why exactly does R. Yehoshua seek to curse him? The term *min* in the Talmud frequently refers not to heretics in general, but specifically to Christians. This understanding of *min* fits our context, because the *min* in question argues with R. Yehoshua about Scripture. Presumably, he sought to prove to R. Yehoshua that various Biblical prophecies supported Christian beliefs and undermined those of the rabbis. Previously, we suggested that the Gemara’s interpretation of Amos 5:2 on page 4b is best understood in context of such a debate with Christians.

The Christians who censored the early printed editions of the Talmud were clearly aware of the polemical nature of this story. They replaced the term *min* with the term *tzedduki*, “Sadducee,” removing the anti-Christian content and replacing it with an attack against the long gone Sadducees of the Second Temple era. This reading remains to this day in most printed editions of the Gemara, including the standard Vilna edition.

According to the translation above, the *min* used to “annoy” R. Yehoshua with his scriptural interpretations. In this reading, R. Yehoshua did not take the *min*’s interpretation too seriously; he just could not stand the man’s constant pestering. The modern equivalent would be an over-zealous missionary that one encounters on a train. The missionary, who is unlikely to be very learned, does not pose any real threat, but he can be quite irritating, and even upsetting. In reading this story, R. Yehoshua’s desire to curse the *min* may seem petty. His main reason for wanting to smite this fellow is not, after all, the *min’s* heretical beliefs, but the fact that R. Yehoshua finds him bothersome.

The phrase translated as “annoy him very much,” could also be rendered as “distressed him greatly.” Why should the arguments of a Christian cause a great rabbi such distress? Perhaps R. Yehoshua was not always able to refute the *min*’s arguments. The Gemara in *Avoda Zara* 4a relates that R. Safra was unable to refute an interpretation of a verse by the Christians and had to turn to R. Avahu, who was an expert in such polemics. Later on, in *Avoda Zara* 17a, the Gemara reports that R. Eliezer himself once confessed that a Christian interpretation appealed to him. These sources suggest that at times the rabbis found Christian interpretations of the Bible quite challenging, and even attractive. R. Yehoshua may have felt that this *min* was a spiritual threat both to him and to others. As such, he sought to have the *min* eliminated.

The Gemara finally offers one last approach to the concept of God’s daily rage:

It was taught in the name of R. Meir:

At the time when the sun rises

and all the kings of the East and West

put their crowns upon their heads

and bow down to the sun,

the Holy One, blessed be He, becomes at once angry.

Until this point, the Gemara has assumed that the time of God’s anger is either unknowable or very difficult to determine. Now, R. Meir states that this time is, in fact, easily determined. God gets angry every day precisely at sunrise.

R. Meir seems unconcerned with the possibility that this knowledge may be exploited by people to manipulate God and His wrath, because he has a very different understanding of the nature of this daily Divine anger. Until now, the Gemara suggested that God gets angry at a set interval as if He is driven by some sort of internal clock. We noted that this is problematic for the Gemara because, it seems to suggest that God is not in control of His emotions. It further suggests that God can be controlled by humans’ using secret knowledge akin to magic. In contrast, according to R. Meir, God gets angry on a regular basis, not because of some inner compulsion, but, rather, because of events that happen in the world on a regular basis. God gets angry every morning when the kings of the world wake up and worship the sun instead of Him. R. Meir’s concept of Divine anger is in line with the traditional Biblical approach in which God gets angry in response to human sins. Indeed, as Rambam notes (*Guide* 1:36),the references to Divine anger in the Bible are in response to idolatry.

Before moving on to the next passage, we should also note that the phrase, “all the kings of the East and West,” appears twice on page 4a. In these instances as well, the kings’ failure to serve God is emphasized. Phrases and themes are repeated at various points in the chapter, weaving it together into a single unit.

**Inside, Outside**

The next passage is quite brief:

R. Yochanan further said in the name of R. Yosi:

Better is one reproach in the heart of a man

than many stripes,

for it is said:

“And she shall run after her lovers …

then shall she say, I shall go and return to my first husband;

for then was it better with me than now”(*Hoshea* 2:9).

R. Shimon b. Lakish says:

It is better than a hundred stripes,

for it is said:

“A rebuke enters deeper into a man of understanding

than a hundred stripes into a fool” (*Mishlei* 17:10).

R. Yochanan presents a proverb, which is followed by two scriptural proof-texts, one supplied by R. Yochanan and the other by his student and frequent sparring partner, Reish Lakish. The simple meaning of the proverb is very straightforward. A verbal rebuke which actually penetrates a person’s conscience will have more of an impact on a person than lashes, which are only skin deep. This proverb champions the power of the spoken word to affect change in people over that of physical violence and coercion.

Of the two proof-texts offered, Reish Lakish’s more obviously illustrates this point. Though the exact translation of the verse in *Mishlei* is difficult to determine, the gist of its meaning is that a verbal rebuke of a wise person is more valuable than beating a fool. The message is thus slightly different from that of R. Yochanan’s saying, as the verse in *Mishlei* also contrasts the wise man and the fool. However, the connection between the verse and the rabbinic dictum is fairly clear.

The significance of R. Yochanan’s own proof-text from *Hoshea* is less clear. How is Israel’s decision to give up on her lovers and return to God relevant to our passage? The commentaries suggest various explanations. Rashi argues that the term *mardut,* translated above as “rebuke,” must be understood here as “self-rebuke”. In this reading, the proverb says that change in a person comes as a result, not of external rebukes and punishment, but of a person’s inner realization of the error of his or her ways. The verse from *Hoshea* now fits in well as it depicts Israel coming to the conclusion that she has erred in abandoning God for idolatry.