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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Talmudic *Aggadot***

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Shiur #27: The Carpenter’s Apprentice

# Introduction

# The fifth chapter of Tractate *Gittin* (55b-58a) in the Babylonian Talmud contains a number of *aggadot* dealing with the destruction of the Second Temple and its aftermath. This section opens with the famous tale of Kamtza and bar Kamtza, as the first element of a triptych presented by R. Yochanan to express the tragic ends of the Jewish revolts of the first centuries of the Common Era (the Jerusalem and Tur Malka during the Great Revolt, 66-70; Beitar during the Bar Kokhva Revolt, 132-135):

# R. Yochanan said: What is illustrative of the verse (*Mishlei* 28:14), “Happy is the person who fears always, but one that hardens his heart shall fall into mischief?” The destruction of Jerusalem came through Kamtza and Bar Kamtza; the destruction of Tur Malka came through a rooster and a hen; the destruction of Beitar came through the shaft of a leather.

This collection includes many narratives about this period, with all of its attendant suffering and catastrophes. The *gemara* includes a number of moral lessons, tales of retribution for the sinful and unjustifiable behavior of the Jews of the era. This appears to be an attempt to justify the disasters that befell the Jewish people during the Roman Era.

The final narrative in the collection is this type of a morality tale, and the *gemara* even attributes the destruction itself to this occurrence. It gets its name from its main characters: a carpenter, his apprentice, and his wife.

**The Story**

R. Yehuda said in the name of Rav: What is signified by the verse (*Mikha* 2:2), “And they oppress a man and his house, even a man and his legacy?”

1. A certain man once conceived a desire for [literally: fixed his eyes upon] the wife of his master, he being a carpenter's apprentice.
2. Once his master wanted to borrow some money from him.
3. He said to him, “Send your wife to me and I will lend her the money.”
4. So he sent his wife to him,
5. And she stayed three days with him.
6. He then went to him before her.
7. “Where is my wife whom I sent to you?” he asked.
8. He replied, “I released her at once, but I heard that the young men played with her on the road.”
9. “What shall I do?” he said.
10. “If you listen to my advice,” he replied, “divorce her.”
11. “But,” he said, “she has a large marriage settlement.”
12. Said the other, “I will lend you money to give her for her *ketuba*.”
13. So he went and divorced her, and the other went and married her.
14. When the time for payment arrived and he was not able to pay him,
15. He said, “Come and work off your debt with me.”
16. So they used to sit and eat and drink while he waited on them,
17. And tears used to fall from his eyes and drop into their goblets.

From that hour the doom was sealed; some, however, say that it was for two wicks in one light (polyandry). *(Gittin* 58a)

This is a shocking, difficult story to read, and it is not surprising that the *gemara* adds the postscript, “From that hour the doom was sealed.”

Indeed, the complexity of the literary structure is extremely significant, and this contributes a great deal to the reading of the story and the evaluation of the characters within it. For the sake of convenience, we will refer to them as the master, the apprentice, and the wife, even though their relationships change over the course of the narrative.

**Character Study**

Before we present the literary analysis, we will present the dilemma of evaluating these characters.

It seems to me that anyone reading this story will have no doubt that the apprentice is an antagonist. His lust for his master’s wife apparently leads him to having adulterous sex with her, ultimately leading him to trick his master and cause the carpenter to divorce her so that the apprentice can marry her. The difficult final scene of the story presents the process as excessively cruel, illustrating the horrific downfall of the master due to his apprentice’s plot, a reversal of fortune in which the master (in both senses of the word) becomes the servant of both of them. In this state, he certainly understands what his erstwhile apprentice has wrought, and his tears express his pain about losing everything and everyone. It is now clear that the apprentice’s words, “I heard that the young men played with her on the road,” had been malicious gossip, a fabrication designed to drive the master to divorce her, something that the carpenter certainly regrets at the denouement.

So if the apprentice is the villain of the piece, how are we to evaluate the master and the wife?

Let us start with the wife. Ostensibly, it is hard to say much about her, as she is absolutely passive throughout the story. She appears to be another victim of the apprentice’s wicked plot. Indeed, there are some who go further, arguing that she is the Talmudic equivalent of the concubine of Giva in *Tanakh* (*Shoftim* 19).[[1]](#footnote-1) I find that to be a bit of a stretch, among other reasons because — although the wife is certainly negatively affected by the apprentice’s scheming — she is not the central victim of the narrative, but rather her original husband, the master. In the story of the concubine of Giva, on the other hand, the victimized woman is at the center. In any case, the relationship to her character throughout the narrative is instrumental: She never speaks, nor is she ever consulted as to what she wants. Essentially, she is an object passed from one man to another.

On the other hand, the wife may also be criticized, as she goes to get the money from the apprentice and stays in his home for three days, which is wholly inappropriate, even though the narrative does not specify what happens during those three days. Granted, it may be that her husband compelled her to go and the apprentice compelled her to stay, perhaps sexually assaulting her. However, this is not in the text, and it may be that she too has a hand in the libertine atmosphere of the apprentice’s house. Moreover, the absolute passivity of the wife in this narrative may reflect indifference and disinterest; this becomes far more severe when her husband’s welfare is at issue, as she sits quietly while he is serving her in tears.

An additional question exists concerning the husband. He may be an innocent victim, ensnared by the treachery of the apprentice, and this is what many parts of the narrative indicate. The last scene, in which he is weeping, strengthens the feeling that he is a victim and arouses feelings of empathy and compassion.

However, the story may be read differently. Acquiescing to the apprentice’s request that he send his wife to get the loan money is, at the very least, a bizarre choice for the carpenter. Moreover, his wife never returns; three days pass before he takes any action and goes to the apprentice’s house to look for her. This behavior shows, at least, a certain indifference about her fate and her fidelity to their marriage — or to the very idea of the sanctity of marriage. Granted, it is very difficult to see the husband as an accomplice in the apprentice’s scheme, especially in light of the final scene, but there is definitely a place for a reading that does not let him off the hook for his part in the disaster.

**Literary Structure**

If we consider the literary structure of the narrative, it appears that it is designed to shed some light on these questions.

Yona Fraenkel analyzes this story, claiming that the structure is chiastic. Fraenkel demonstrates this with a table setting out the location of each of the three characters throughout the story. Although we will not get into the specifics of the structure Fraenkel sets out, it is undeniable that at the beginning of the story, the three characters are in the master’s home; in its middle, some of them go to the apprentice’s home; and at its conclusion, they are all in the apprentice’s home, with the relationships reversed from their original state.

**Sending and Divorcing**

Fraenkel also point to the wordplay used in the story, foreshadowing the apprentice’s plot in the narrative’s first lines. The verb “to send” (*shin*-*gimmel*-*reish*) is used three times (lines 3, 4 and 7), indicating that it is significant. The second proposal of the apprentice, to divorce her (line 10), uses the same letters (*gimmel*-*reish*-*shin*). The similarity of the two roots reflects prominent wordplay. This indicates that even in the earlier part in the story, when the apprentice suggests that the wife be sent (*shin*-*gimmel*-*reish*) to him, his true indent is for her husband to divorce (*gimmel*-*reish*-*shin*) her. This is all because of the apprentice’s lust, as the early part of the story tells: “A certain man once conceived a desire for the wife of his master.”

This wordplay allows us to distinguish between the two options for reading the apprentice’s story. One possibility is to see him as constantly propelled by his libido. At first, he is attracted to the wife. Thus, he wants to see more of her, and so he asks the master to send his wife to him so he can hand over the money to her. Once she arrives, his desire demands that he keep her from leaving — whether he does this by coercion or consent. In the next stage, he decides to become the master, in both senses of the word, suggesting divorce to her husband.

However, the wordplay allows for another reading as well, according to which the apprentice acts not out of passionate compulsion, but with malice aforethought. He demands that the wife come to collect the money with the intent of confining her, giving rise to the nasty rumor that will be the pretext for divorcing her. Then the apprentice will be able to marry her himself. This reading may put more of the blame on the apprentice and remove some from the husband, who is the victim of a well-conceived and sophisticated plan hatched by his apprentice.

**Lending vs. Escorting**

An additional bit of wordplay may be seen in the term used by the apprentice to describe his intentions: “Send your wife to me and I will lend her the money.” Although money is implied, the Gemara uses one word here: “*ve-alvenah*,” “and I will lend her.” This is an odd formulation, as the loan is being made to her husband, not to her; she is nothing more than a courier in this transaction. However, we may suggest that this word is a double entendre, as there are no vowels in the Talmudic text, and the word could thus easily be read “*ve-alavaneh*,” “and I will escort her.” This reminds us of a verse in the Torah:

Again she conceived, and when she gave birth to a son she said, "Now **at last my husband will become attached (*yilaveh*) to me,** because I have borne him three sons." So he was named Levi. (*Bereishit* 29:34)

Reading this verse in light of the apprentice’s proposal gives the offer a different import: Ostensibly he is suggesting to lend (*le-halvot*) money with her as the intermediary, but his true aim is to accompany her (*le-lavot*) or to join her company (*le-hitlavot*) in an intimate sense, just as Leah’s statement about Ya’akov alludes to their marital relationship.

Perhaps we may suggest another meaning tied to the original meaning of the word. The apprentice refer not to lending money, but “lending” a wife, as it were — transferring her to another domain, while at this stage it is a temporary transfer, much like a financial loan. )“From that hour the doom was sealed; some, however, say that it was for two wicks in one light.”)

This contributes to the reading that sees the apprentice as treacherous and cunning from the very outset, planning every detail in a most sophisticated manner. The wordplay and double entendre add to this picture by alluding to hidden designs on the part of the apprentice.

**Eyes on Goblets**

The conclusion of the story also has a double entendre. In the last scene, we watch as the erstwhile master now serves drinks to his ex-wife and ex-employee: “So they used to sit and eat and drink while he waited on them, and tears used to fall from his eyes and drop into their goblets” (lines 16-17). The phrase “he waited on them” emphasizes the humiliation and degradation of the man who used to be master of his house and his business, after his reversal of fortune. This closes the circle, as the wheel of fortune is now 180 degrees from the opening of the story, as Fraenkel shows us in his outline of the structure.

However, there is one final element – the former master’s tears falling into the goblets of his exes. On a basic level, this expresses the pain and suffering of the erstwhile lord, who has lost his financial and marital status due to trickery. However, there is a second meaning based on the idiomatic use of goblet (*kos*) in the Talmud. Indeed, the specific phrasing of fixing one’s eye upon a goblet is something of a double entendre, as becomes clear from another source that applies this to a sexual context:

“And that you seek not after your own heart” — Based on this, Rabbi taught: One may not drink out of one goblet and fix an eye upon another goblet. (*Nedarim* 20b)[[2]](#footnote-2)

Thus, when we speak of tears falling from his eyes into the *kos*, this seems to allude to something along the lines of Rabbi’s words. Indeed, it is logical to assume that the onetime master, upon discovering that his wife has been taken from him in a short period of time by subterfuge, would still be in love with her, and thus he would fix an eye upon her goblet, as it were, as expressed by his weeping.

On the other hand, the narrator’s use of this double entendre may indicate something else. Rabbi’s teaching, “One may not drink out of one goblet and fix an eye upon another goblet,” in its simplest understanding (see the *sugya* there) is a warning against fixing one’s eyes — or lust — upon a woman who is not his wife. If we consider our narrative, it is specifically the apprentice who is guilty of just such an act. Now, ironically, at least in light of Rabbi’s statement, we find a similar statement about the erstwhile master. It may be that this connection between the onetime master at the end of the story and the apprentice’s lust at the beginning indicates that the former had, prior to this event, fixed his own eyes upon another woman, which might explain his indifference towards his own wife. At the end of the story, he fixes his eyes upon the woman who had once been his wife — but by now their marriage is over.

Of course, there is an alternative way to understand the matter. It may be that the formulation of the text is designed to contrast and highlight the differences between the feeling of the apprentice at the beginning of the story and the feeling of the onetime master at the end. The apprentice fixes his eyes on a woman with whom he has no relationship, which is a transgressive act; this sin brings about more serious and more harmful violations. As for the husband, it is true that his eyes are referenced at the end of the story, but the phrasing is more delicate; the tears fall on their own, expressing more his longing for the wife of his youth, who perhaps rightly should still be with him, rather than lust for a woman to whom he has no rightful connection.

In any case, the reference to eyes in the context of relationships between husband and wife creates a framework for the story, as it opens and closes with this image. It is part of the literary design of the narrative and closes the circle described in it.

**The Story as a Metaphor**

We cannot ignore the location of the story, closing the passage about the destruction of the Temple and its aftermath in *Gittin*. Indeed, the *gemara* does not let us ignore the context, declaring, “From that hour the doom was sealed.” This gives us an opening for a symbolic reading of the story. The narrative may be more than a personal occurrence, historical or ahistorical, concerning three specific people living at or around the time of the destruction.

Thus, we may consider each of the characters as representing some other, broader thing. We may say that the wife represents Israel and that the master represents God. This is a common theme, already found among the Later Prophets, of the relations between God and the Jewish People represented as marital or romantic relations. Particularly in the context of the destruction, we find that the Jews’ sins are compared to a betrayal of their vows to remain faithful to God alone and forsake all others. It is reasonable that the narrator (or the redactor of the aggadic narrative of the destruction) ascribes this meaning to the story. The apprentice may thus represent the other nations, who seduce Israel, persuade the Jews to abandon God, and scheme to drive a wedge between God and His nation — and sometimes succeed.

This is relevant for the period of the destruction of the Second Temple and the ensuing struggles, at least in the Land of Israel. This may be a reference to Christianity, the stepdaughter of Judaism, which at the time of the destruction and immediately afterwards held a weaker status, almost subservient, until it attained dominance upon being adopted as the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century. Since then, it has employed various sophisticated and aggressive measures to cause Jews to convert — drawing Israel away from its first love.

Such a reading brings us back to our character study. As we noted above, the apprentice is clearly a negative character. It may be that the wife is also judged for her indifference to her marriage and her lack of investment in preventing the success of the apprentice’s scheme. Israel is thus criticized for their lack of faithfulness to God and abandoning Him to find another paramour. However, we may, with some trepidation, hypothesize that there is some type of claim lodged against God as well, as we find in midrashic and liturgical sources in the context of the destruction and exile, for abandoning Israel and standing by as the nations attack the Jewish people mercilessly. The indifference of the master in the story may symbolize the feeling of the Jewish People that God had not prevented the destruction (even though the Jews had been the ones to abandon and betray Him, much as the wife abandons her husband and stays in the apprentice’s house at the beginning of the narrative).

The destruction of the Second Temple, along with the bitter exile which followed, serves as a strong argument for the Christians that God has abandoned Israel to forge a new covenant, as it were. It may be that the narrator sees the destruction, in which God chose to ignore His people, as a factor motivating some Jews to embrace Christianity.

A claim of this type – stating that God bears some responsibility for the sins of Israel or that He has failed to prevent them from sinning – appears in various Midrashic sources. For example, in a completely different context, in a *sugya* in chapter 5 of Tractate *Berakhot* in the Babylonian Talmud, the leaders of Israel raise the claim that God Himself plays a part in the Jews’ sins. One of these is Moshe, and the *gemara* follows up his accusation with the following:

R. Chiya bar Abba said: It is like the case of a man who had a son; he bathed him and anointed him and gave him plenty to eat and drink and hung a purse round his neck and set him down at the door of a bawdy house. How could the boy help sinning?

R. Acha the son of R. Huna said in the name of R. Sheshet: This bears out the popular saying, “A full stomach is a bad sort,” as it says (*Hoshea* 13:16), “When they were fed they became full, they were filled and their heart was exalted; therefore, they have forgotten Me.”

R. Nachman learned it from here (*Devarim* 8:14): “Then your heart be lifted up and you forget the Lord.”

The Rabbis, from here (ibid. 31:20): “And they shall have eaten their fill and waxen fat, and turned unto other gods.”  Or, if you prefer, I can say from here (ibid. 32:15): “But Jeshurun waxed fat and kicked.”

R. Shemuel bar Nachmani said in the name of R. Yonatan: From where do we know that the Holy One, blessed be He, in the end conceded Moshe’s point? Because it says (*Hoshea* 2:10): “And I [God] multiplied unto her silver and gold, which they used for Ba’al.” (*Berakhot* 32a)

Another famous *midrash* from the Tannaitic era, apparently tied to the period of the destruction of the Second Temple and the ensuing troubles, appears in the *Mekhilta* about a verse from the Song of the Sea:

[Another interpretation (*Shemot* 15:11): “Who is like You among the mighty (*eilim*), Lord?”] — Who is like You among the mutes (*ilemim*)? Who is like You to listen to the humiliation of Your children and remain silent? (*Mekhilta De-Rabbi Yishmael, Shira*, ch. 8)

This *midrash* forms the basis of a poem by the Ashkenazi poet R. Yitzchak bar Shalom,[[3]](#footnote-3) who writes about the Crusades, which began shortly after Passover 1096. This extremely difficult poem, customarily recited on the Shabbat after Pesach, opens as follows:

There is none like You among the mutes,

Still and silent to the anguished,

As our numerous foes arise.

This topic is quite relevant at this time of the year, as the weeks after Passover are the time when we recall the disasters that befell the Jews of Europe, from the Crusades to the Holocaust.

It is fitting that we conclude with a prayer: May God hear the supplication of His people and their entreaties as He has over the past several decades, in wondrous and miraculous ways. May He bring us the complete redemption, speedily in our days.

Translated by Yoseif Bloch

1. R. Shoshani, “The Story of the Carpenter’s Apprentice in the Babylonian Talmud *Gittin* 58a,” *Sidra* 21 (2006), pp. 87-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. We noted this in our seventh *shiur* in this series. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Grandfather of the author of *Or Zarua .* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)