YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Talmudic Aggadot**

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**Shiur #27: The Story of Choni Ha-me’agel in the Mishna and in Parallel Sources**

1. The story of Choni Ha-me’agel in the Mishna

The Mishna and Tosefta contain less *aggadic* material in general, and stories of the Sages in particular, than does the Talmud. Nevertheless, we do occasionally encounter stories in these sources; sometimes they present parallel accounts, and comparing these parallels can be interesting.

One example of an *aggada* in the Mishna that has a parallel in the Tosefta, as well as another parallel in a *beraita* in the Gemara, is to be found in the third chapter of Ta’anit. In this chapter, the Mishna discusses various troubles for which the community fasts and cries out (by means of a special prayer service, including the sounding of the shofar). Toward the end of the chapter, Mishna 8 opens with a concluding statement, which also comes with an exception:

“For any trouble that befalls the community, they cry out - except for an overabundance of rain.”

The Gemara (22b) explains:

“What is the reason for this? Rabbi Yochanan said: One does not pray [in supplication] on account of an overabundance of goodness.”

R. Ovadia Bartenura explains, in his commentary,[[1]](#footnote-1) that the Mishna is not talking about a situation where the rain causes actual damage to the crops – for then this would be considered a trouble like any other – but rather where the abundant rain is simply an inconvenience.[[2]](#footnote-2)

However, Maharsha (Chiddushei Aggadot, *Ta’anit* 23a), relying on a *beraita* that appears later on in the *sugya*, maintains that even if there is actual damage to the crops, there is no crying out:

“It would seem that the reason for this is that we do not pray [in supplication] on account of an abundance of goodness – even though this overabundance of rain is bad. Even in the above description of the land becoming waterlogged and failing to produce fruit, [crying out in supplication] would nevertheless represent ingratitude, since earlier one would have prayed and asked for rain, which is good for the world….”

In any event, the Mishna does not conclude with this exceptional instance, but goes on to recount the story of Choni Ha-me’agel[[3]](#footnote-3):

“It once happened that they said to Choni Ha-me’agel: ‘Pray for us, that rain may fall.’ He said to them, ‘Go out and bring in the Paschal ovens, so that they are not spoiled [by the rain].’ He prayed, but no rain fell. What did he do? He drew a circle and stood within it, and said: ‘Master of the world, Your children are looking to me as someone who is close to You. I swear by Your Great Name that I will not move from here until You have mercy on Your children.’ Rain began to drip down. He said, ‘It was not for this that I petitioned, but rather for rain [to fill] wells, cisterns and caves.’ The rain began to fall in torrents. He said, ‘It was not for this that I petitioned, but rather for mild and benevolent rain of blessing.’

[The rain] came down in the usual manner, to the point where the Jews left the city for the Temple Mount on account of the rain. They came to him and said, ‘Just as you prayed that the rain would come down, pray [now] that it will end.’ He said to them, ‘Go and see whether the ‘stone of the lost’ has been obliterated.’

Shimon ben Shetach sent to him, [saying]: ‘Were you not Choni, I would have you excommunicated. But what can I do to you, since you sin against God but He indulges your will, like a son who sins towards his father but is nevertheless indulged. Concerning you the text declares (*Mishlei* 23), ‘Your father and mother shall rejoice, and she who bore you shall be glad.’

1. Analysis of the story

The silence of the nation

The story starts with an appeal to Choni to pray for rain. No further background is offered, but this introduction leads us to conclude that there is a drought, and the appeal to Choni is an attempt to address this situation. The next sentence, in which Choni instructs the people to bring in the Pesach ovens, suggests that Pesach is approaching – meaning that the rainy season is ending. This clarifies the critical nature of the situation: if the winter is drawing to a close and rain has not yet fallen, the drought is severe indeed.

However, the story tells us nothing of what has happened up until this point: what other steps have the people taken before appealing to Choni? Have they prayed themselves? Have they fasted? This silence with regard to the people is rather conspicuous and strange, in view of the fact that the *mishnayot* in this chapter and the preceding ones have elaborated at length on the various endeavours in prayer and fasting that are to be undertaken throughout a drought year up until Pesach draws near. Perhaps the Mishna is simply focusing on the story of Choni, but it may be that the silence hints to us that the people in fact invested no spiritual efforts; their first initiative, in view of the dire situation, is to turn to Choni. This question will be discussed further below.

Choni’s special effort

Choni’s first response to the people’s appeal is to instruct them to bring in the Paschal ovens. These are clay ovens meant for roasting the Pesach sacrifice, and they are apparently kept outdoors, in the courtyard. If heavy rain falls on these ovens they will be ruined. Choni’s instruction reflects a high level of self-confidence: he is so sure that his prayer will be accepted that he warns about the ovens. The reader, too, now expects that his prayer will duly be answered and rain will fall, and indeed there are many other stories in the *sugya* describing rainfall immediately upon the supplication of righteous individuals (such as Abba Chilkiya and his wife – 24a). In view of these other stories, and certainly in view of Choni’s own confidence (which is in fact reinforced by Shimon ben Shetach’s comment later on, affirming that God does indeed fulfil all of Choni’s requests), we are most surprised to learn that despite Choni’s prayer, there is still no rain.

Choni understands that something unusual is happening, and therefore he draws a circle and declares himself closed in until there is rain. Even as he stands in his circle, things do not proceed smoothly. The rain of blessing is preceded by two “unsuccessful” showers – first just a meagre few drops, and then heavy, torrential rain, until God is finally agreeable. All this causes the reader to wonder why this time the process is so complicated, and why Choni must work so hard in order to bring rain. There seems to be further reason to suppose that God is not willing to give His blessing, and that this may be attributable to the people – those who Choni represents in his prayers. Perhaps even though Choni is worthy of having his prayer answered immediately, the behavior of the people is holding back the desired blessing.

The story’s criticism of the people

The next sentence would seem to hint to the key to this puzzle: “The rain then came down in the usual manner, until the Jews left the city for the Temple Mount on account of the rain.” The rain that falls “in the usual manner,” rain of blessing, causes the inhabitants of Jerusalem to leave the muddy, waterlogged lower parts of the city and head for the higher ground of the Temple Mount, where conditions are more comfortable. This seems to be directing ironic criticism at the people: up until this point, there has been no mention of them ascending to the Temple Mount. We would have expected them to go there in order to pray and cry out over their dire situation before turning to Choni; alternatively, we might at least expect that when the rain finally comes down, they would go up to the Temple Mount to give thanks, perhaps to offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving. Instead, the text emphasizes that they go up only “on account of the rain” (more literally, “from before the rain”). The rain of blessing is a nuisance that forces them to head for higher ground and a roof. Indeed, the Yerushalmi comments as follows:

“This tells us that the Temple Mount was covered, and thus we learn: there was a portico within a portico.” (Yerushalmi Ta’anit 3:9, 66d)

The ascent to the Temple Mount to take refuge from the rain, while ignoring its main function – to serve as a place for Am Yisrael to gather in prayer and worship – portrays the Jews of this generation in a rather critical light. We are led to imagine that throughout the dry winter, they made no attempt to plead with God through prayer or fasting; at the last moment they simply turned to Choni, relying on him to “take care of it for them.” A more explicit expression of this view of the generation is to be found in the Bavli, following its version of the story (23a):

“Our Rabbis taught: What was the message that was sent by [the Sanhedrin] from the Chamber of Hewn Stone to Choni Ha-me’agel? [It was an interpretation of the verse from *Iyov* 22,] ‘You shall decree a thing and it shall be established for you, and light shall shine upon your ways…’: ‘You shall decree a thing’ – you decree below, while the Holy One, blessed be He, fulfils your word on high. ‘And light shall shine upon your ways’ – You have illuminated with your prayer a generation that sunk low. ‘For the humble person he saves’ – You have saved by your prayer a generation that is humbled by its sin. ‘He delivers him that is not innocent’ – You have delivered by your prayer a generation that is not innocent. ‘And he shall be delivered through the cleanliness of your hands’ – Through the work of your clean hands you have delivered it.”

In view of this feeling toward the conduct of the generation, it is easier to understand why Choni, who “[even when] he sins before his Father, He nevertheless fulfils his will,” had to exert such strenuous efforts in order to achieve the desired result: rain of blessing. Since the people that Choni represents in his prayers are so lacking in merit, it is no wonder that things do not go smoothly. Choni himself understands this, although he remains determined to obtain rain for the people. The meagre dripping and the furious downpour with which he is answered at first express Divine anger toward those who have dispatched him, seemingly without undergoing any significant process of teshuva and prayer on their own part.

All of this is highlighted even more powerfully at the next stage, when the people ask Choni to pray for the rain to stop. The language that they use reflects their lack of insight into the situation: “Just as you prayed for the rain to come down, pray now for it to go away.” This is a demand, recalling their earlier request, which now turns out also to have been a demand: “Pray for us that rain may fall.” This is not a request or a supplication, but a bald demand, reflecting their view of Choni as a sort of robot who prays and then rain falls, with no relation to the spiritual state of the people. In addition, as they see it, Choni is also “at their service:” just as he prayed for the rain to fall, he is now tasked with turning himself around and praying for it to end.

At this point Choni “cracks,” giving expression to the ironic view of the people that so far has characterized only the narrator of the story: “He said to them, ‘Go out and see if the ‘stone of the lost’ has been obliterated.’” This stone on the Temple Mount, which functioned as a “lost and found” counter, appears to have been a very large, solid boulder, such that even heavy flooding – and certainly mild, pleasant rain – would not be able to break it apart. The Yerushalmi (ad loc) elaborates on the meaning behind his words:

“He said to them: Just as it is impossible for that stone to be obliterated, so it is impossible to pray for the rain to go away.”

Perhaps he is conveying another, covert message that views the hard rock as a metaphor for their hearts: even the rain that has fallen in the wake of his prayer has not succeeded, to his sorrow, in softening or eroding their own “stony hearts” and religious insensibility.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Here the story in the Mishna ends, except for a sort of epilogue recording the message that Shimon ben Shetach sends to Choni: “Were you not Choni, I would have you excommunicated. But what can I do to you, since you sin against God but He indulges your will, like a son who sins towards his father but is nevertheless indulged…”

1. The context of the story in the Mishna

The story ends, therefore, with Choni refusing to pray for the rain to end. This is an important point, since it seems to be the focus of the story in its context in the Mishna. We recall that the story is brought in the wake of the law that “for any trouble that befalls the community, they cry out - except for an overabundance of rain.” Choni’s example thus illustrates precisely this principle.

The mishna’s choice of this version of the story is interesting in view of a slightly different version that has been preserved in a *beraita* in the Gemara (23a). The *beraita* offers a similar rendering of the first part of the story, but with slight differences:

“Our Rabbis taught: It once happened that most of the month of Adar had already gone by and yet no rain had fallen. The people sent to Choni Ha-me’agel: Pray that rain might fall! He prayed by no rain fell. He drew a circle and stood inside it, as the prophet Chavakuk had done, as it is written (*Chavakuk* 2), ‘I will stand upon my watch and set me upon the tower…’. He said, ‘Master of the universe! Your children are looking to me as someone who is close to You. I swear by Your great Name that I will not move from here until You have mercy upon your children.’ Rain began to drip down. His disciples said to him, ‘Rabbi, we look to you to save us from death. It seems that the rain has come down only to release you from your vow.’ He said, ‘It was not for this that I petitioned, but rather for rain to fill cisterns, ditches and caves.’ The rain then came down with great force, each drop as big as the opening of a barrel, and the Sages estimated that there was not a single drop that was less than a ‘*log’*. His disciples said to him, ‘Rabbi, we look to you to save us from death. It seems that the rain is coming down to destroy the world.’ He said to God, ‘It was not for this that I petitioned, but rather for mild and benevolent rain of blessing.’ The rain came down as usual, to the point where all the people went up to the Temple Mount because of the rain.”

Prof. Yona Frankel notes that this story is different from the one recounted in the Mishna, and it means to convey a different message.[[5]](#footnote-5) The story in the *beraita* is far more detailed. It starts off by giving us a dateline: “Most of the month of Adar had gone by.” This fact comes in place of Choni’s self-confident instruction to the people, in the Mishna, to bring in the Pesach ovens, which offered an indirect indication of the time of the story. In other words, the *beraita* puts less emphasis on the discrepancy between Choni’s confidence in his prayer and the actual results. Further on, Choni’s actions are presented in a way that puts less emphasis on his unique personal merit: his standing in the circle recalls the precedent set by the prophet Chavakuk, who appears to serve as his inspiration. In addition, when Choni stands in the circle, he is not alone; he is joined by his disciples, who react to each stage of the Divine response to his prayer. Mention is also made of the Sages and their estimates of the size of the raindrops. Thus, there is greater involvement of the people, in contrast to the disconnect that seems to characterize the situation in the Mishna. The version in the *beraita* does not present a sort of “automatic activation” of Choni, with all the attention focused only on the results. Rather, there is partnership and cooperation in the process.

Nevertheless, the attitude toward the people is complex: here, too, we find that when the rain comes down as it should, the people ascend the Temple Mount “on account of the rain.” We also find the same demanding language at beginning of the story, when Choni is asked to pray, and the same ungrateful demand that he stop the rain: “They said to him, ‘Rabbi, just as you prayed for the rain to come down, so pray for it to go away.’”

At this point, however, we encounter a surprising reaction on Choni’s part, in contrast to the story in the Mishna:

“He said to them: ‘I have it as a tradition that we may not pray on account of an overabundance of good. Nevertheless/rather[[6]](#footnote-6), bring me a bullock for a thanksgiving offering.’ They brought him a bullock for thanksgiving. He placed his two hands upon it, and said: ‘Master of the universe! Your nation, Israel, whom You brought out of Egypt, can endure neither an excess of good nor an excess of punishment. When You were angry with them, they could not endure it; when You showered them with abundant good – they could not endure that either. May it be Your will that there be relief for the world.’ Immediately the wind began to blow, the clouds were dispersed, the sun shone, and people went out into the fields and gathered mushrooms and truffles.”

In the Mishna, Choni’s ironic dispatching of the people to look at the “stone of the lost” expresses his refusal to acquiesce to their second demand of him. In the *beraita*, however, there is no hint of this ironic statement. Choni starts off with a gentler introduction: “I have it as a tradition that we may not pray on account of an overabundance of good.” In addition, he asks for a bullock as an offering of thanksgiving. Theoretically, the bullock is meant as thanksgiving for the rain. However, in the midst of his thanks, Choni also leaves room for the latter request of the people, although he takes care not to ask explicitly that the rain cease. In his prayer he apologizes to God on the people’s behalf for their fickleness, and asks that He bring relief to the world – a request that would seem to imply fair weather. In contrast to the story in the Mishna, which concludes on a jarring note, the *beraita* concludes in a positive way, with Choni mitigating the criticism of Israel. The tranquil, pastoral description of the sun shining and the people going out to gather mushrooms and truffles casts an atmosphere of calm and reconciliation over the story as a whole.

It is easy to understand why the Mishna chooses to tell the story as it does, rather than as it appears in the beraita. The conclusion in the Mishna gives much stronger emphasis to the law that we do not pray for a cessation of rain. (A similar approach is followed by the Tosefta,[[7]](#footnote-7) which follows the law in the Mishna with a different story, which is much shorter and mentions an anonymous “*chassid*.”)

As noted, the story in the *beraita* in the Bavli does not come out explicitly against the principle that we find in the mishna: it seems that Choni – whom the *beraita* depicts in softer and more forgiving hues towards the people – prays in a way that bypasses the law in the Mishna without transgressing it, ultimately bringing about the desired result. However, his prayer possibly also conveys the covert criticism of Am Yisrael that Choni shares with God, as it were, for their inability to endure not only harsh punishment but even an overabundance of goodness.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. Cf. Rashi in his commentary ad loc. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Rambam, too (as echoed in the Shulchan Arukh) likewise rules, “But in Eretz Yisrael, one does not pray [in supplication] on account of an overabundance of rain, for it is a mountainous country where the houses are built of stone, and an abundance of rain is good for them – and one does not fast to have goodness removed.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In this context we might mention that the first story about supplication for rain – which God answered immediately – happens at the time of the wheat harvest (*Shmuel* I 12:13-19). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This recalls R. Akiva’s famous deduction – that “if something as soft as water can mold something as hard as a rock, then surely the words of Torah, which are as strong as steel, can certainly make an impact on my heart, which is flesh and blood.” (Avot de-Rabbi Natan, version 1, chapter 6) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Y. Frankel, *Sippur ha-Aggada – Achdut shel Tochen ve-Tzura*, Tel Aviv 5761, p. 52, n. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The printed edition reads, “Nevertheless,” indicated that Choni is about to act contrary to the principle that he has just laid down. Most of the manuscripts, however, omit this or read instead, “Rather, bring me…” – indicating that he is not acting in contradiction of the principle. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In the Yerushalmi (3:9, 66d) we find a slightly different and seemingly intermediate version. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)