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 #27: Daf 7a**

**The evil that men do lives on?**

The next statement in the series that R. Yochanan presents in the name of R. Yosi returns to the passage in *Shemot* 33:12-16, which we discussed earlier on this *daf* (double-sided page of Talmud). This passage contains Moshe’s pleas with God to remain with His people following the sin of the golden calf.

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

Three things did Moshe ask of the Holy One, blessed be He,

and they were granted to him.

He asked that

the Divine Presence should rest upon Israel,

and it was granted to him.

“Is it not in that Thou goest with us” (*Shemot* 33:16).

He asked that

the Divine Presence should not rest upon the idolaters,

and it was granted to him.

For it is said:

“So that we are distinguished, I and Thy people

[from all the people that are upon the face of the earth]” (ibid.).

He asked that He should show him the ways of the Holy One, blessed be He, and it was granted to him.

For it is said: “Show me now Thy ways” (ibid. 13).

In the biblical passage, Moshe asks God to “go with us”. The exact meaning and implication of this request are not entirely clear. The Gemara here rephrases this as Moshe’s request that the Divine presence should rest on Israel. The rephrasing still does not clarify exactly what Moshe wants. The phrase used here, *hasharat ha-shekhina*, is often used by the rabbis with reference to the *Mishkan* and the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. The Gemara could mean that Moshe requested that God allow the building of the *Mishkan* despite Israel’s sins. This is Cassutto’s interpretation of the *peshat* in these verses. However, in *Bava Batra* 15b, we find a passage that closely parallels our Gemara. There, the Gemara understands Moshe’s request for *hasharat ha-shekhina* as referring to the continuation of prophecy in Israel. Moshe’s second request is for there to be no prophecy among the nations. In sum, Moshe demands for the people of Israel exclusive privileges to Divine communications. Prophecy is seen as one of the distinguishing features of the Jewish people and their relationship with God. This position was adopted by R. Yehuda Ha-levi in his *Kuzari.*

Moshe’s final request is to “know God’s ways.” The Gemara explains this request as relating to theodicy, an issue that has already received considerable attention in this chapter of the Gemara:

Moshe said before Him:

Lord of the Universe,

why is it that some righteous men prosper

and others are in adversity,

some wicked men prosper

and others are in adversity?

He replied to him:

Moshe, the righteous man who prospers

is the righteous man the son of a righteous man;

the righteous man who is in adversity

is a righteous man the son of a wicked man.

The wicked man who prospers

is a wicked man son of a righteous man;

the wicked man who is in adversity

is a wicked man son of a wicked man.

This is the classic Jewish formulation of the problem of theodicy: Why do the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper? Underlying this question is an assumption about the moral autonomy of each human being. Every person is responsible for his or her actions and only those actions. Therefore, in a just world, one’s actions should be directly correlated with one’s Divinely bestowed fate. Sinful behavior should be punished, and righteous behavior should be rewarded.

God responds that this assumption is faulty. A person’s actions are an important factor in determining the fate that God assigns to each individual. However, we are not entirely autonomous actors in the eyes of God. We are inexorably tied up with the deeds of our forbearers. We may be rewarded or punished on the basis of our parents’ deeds, regardless of whether our own deeds make us worthy of such a fate. We are not just individuals, but part of a chain of descent. A person’s actions affect not only himself, but those further down the chain.

The basis for this idea in the Torah appears just a few verses after Moshe’s request to know God’s ways. In *Shemot* 34:7, at the end of the famous thirteen Divine attributes which God reveals to Moshe, we read that God “visits the iniquity of parents upon their children and children’s children, upon the third and fourth generation.” The Gemara apparently understands the revelation of the thirteen attributes as God’s response to Moshe’s request to “know God’s ways.” God answers that righteous people may suffer if their ancestors were evil-doers, and evil people may prosper if they are descendants of the righteous. This approach has the advantage of maintaining the principle that there is no suffering without sin nor reward without righteousness, while granting that we do not see such a correlation in our day-to-day lives. We cannot expect to see the righteous prosper and the evil suffer, because their fates may be driven by the actions of their long dead ancestors.

As usual, the Gemara is not satisfied with a simple rule which purports to solve the most fundamental of theological problems:

The Master said above:

'The righteous man who prospers

is a righteous man son of a righteous man;

the righteous man who is in adversity

is a righteous man son of a wicked man'.

But this is not so!

For, lo, one verse says:

“”Visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children” (*Shemot* 34:7).

and another verse says:

“Neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers” (*Devarim* 24:16).

A contradiction was pointed out between these two verses

and the answer was given that there is no contradiction.

The one verse deals with children

who continue in the same course as their fathers,

and the other verse with children

who do not continue in the course of their fathers!

The Gemara challenges the notion that individuals suffer for the deeds of their parents and the exegesis on which it is based. While the verse in *Shemot* does state that God punishes people for the sins of their ancestors, a verse in *Devarim* seems to say the exact opposite, declaring, “Parents shall not be put to death for the sake of their children, nor children for the sake of their parents. Each person shall be put to death only for his own crime.” The conflict between these verses could be resolved by arguing that the *Shemot* verse refers to Divine justice, whereas *Devarim* refers to punishments carried out by human courts. Perhaps inter-generational punishment is a prerogative that God reserves for Himself. However, the Gemara does not take this approach. The Gemara seems to see individual accountability as a fundamental moral principle which even God must adhere to.

The rabbis were likely influenced by the words of the prophet Yechezkel, who devotes chapter 18 of his book to rejecting the notion that people live or die on the basis of anything but their own actions. At the beginning of the chapter he declares:

The word of the Lord came to me:

What do you mean by quoting this proverb

upon the soil of Israel,

‘Parents eat sour grapes

And their children’s teeth are blunted’?

As I live, declares the Lord God,

This proverb will no longer be current among you in Israel.

Behold, all lives are Mine;

The life of the parent and the life of the child

Are both Mine.

The person who sins, only he shall die

(Yechezkel 18:1-3).

The Gemara reinterprets the verse in *Shemot* to bring it into line with the principle that God punishes people only for their own actions. The verse means to say that a person is only punished for the deeds of his parents if he continues in their ways. From the continuation of this passage, this seems to mean that people are not directly punished for their parent’s sins; rather, people tend to be influenced by their upbringing.

After rejecting the notion that God deals with people on the basis of their ancestors’ actions, the Gemara presents a new theory explaining why, at times, the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper:

[You must] therefore [say that] the Lord said thus to Moshe:

A righteous man who prospers

is a perfectly righteous man;

the righteous man who is in adversity

is not a perfectly righteous man.

The wicked man who prospers

is not a perfectly wicked man;

the wicked man who is in adversity

is a perfectly wicked man.

The Gemara argues that its initial premise is true –the righteous are rewarded for their deeds, while the wicked are punished. However, this principle does not explain the events which we witness on a day-to-day basis, because it works only in “laboratory conditions” which are rarely reproduced in the real world. Only the perfectly righteous and the thoroughly wicked can be expected to lead prosperous and wretched lives, respectively. But as *Kohelet* says, “There is not one righteous person on earth who does good and does not sin” (7:20) and, similarly, even the worst sinners do some good at times. Even if we accept the existence of such pure specimens, only God can distinguish them from almost perfectly good and almost perfectly bad people. People are generally a mixture of good and bad. We cannot always know the true reward and punishment for our deeds. Hence a righteous person who suffers may be being justly punished for sins he has done, while a sinner who prospers may be receiving his just desserts for some good he has done.

While this explanation may work well in theory, in practice it is not always particularly comforting. We all know individuals who have lead truly virtuous lives, who nevertheless have endured terrible suffering. We find it hard to believe that whatever wrongs that person may have done actually outweigh the good they did to such a degree that their suffering is deserved. So it is hardly surprising that the Gemara presents yet another explanation of God’s response to Moshe’s request to “know His ways,” to understand the suffering of the righteous:

Now this [saying of R. Yochanan]

is in opposition to the saying of R. Meir.

For R. Meir said:

Only two [requests] were granted to him,

and one was not granted to him.

For it is said:

“And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious,”

although he may not deserve it,

“And I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy” (*Shemot* 33:19),

although he may not deserve it.

According to R. Meir, God never answers Moshe’s question about the suffering of the righteous. R. Meir, in effect, rejects all of the Gemara’s discussions in this chapter which seek to justify God’s ways of dealing out suffering and success to humans in this world. For R. Meir, these debates are pointless. Even Moshe Rabbeinu did not know the answers to these questions.

Furthermore, the Gemara here suggests that God’s actions may not be justifiable by any rational standard. God declares that He dispenses mercy (and by implication, punishment as well) upon people *af al pi she-eino hagun.* We have translated this phrase as “although he may not deserve it.” This phrase, however, may be translated even more forcefully as, “even though [this act of mercy] is improper.” Rashi explains God as saying here that “My mercy is stirred up momentarily, even though it is not appropriate (*kedai*).” Rashi implies that God acts capriciously at times, in ways that are neither wise nor moral. If the Gemara, as interpreted by Rashi, did not seem to say these things, we would have no right to accuse God in this way. The *Ein Yaakov* was so disturbed by R. Meir’s words that he declares in his commentary,[[1]](#footnote-1)

Reason cannot tolerate the possibility that R. Meir means what the simple reading of his words imply – that there is no reason behind His will, may He be blessed, and that at times He has mercy on individuals who are not deserving at all. May the Merciful One save us from such a worthless opinion! Rashi makes a brief statement suggesting, according to the simple reading of his words, that—Heaven forefend!—God changes His will from time to time without any reason.

After rejecting the simple reading of the Gemara and Rashi as heretical, *Ein Yaakov* presents a lengthy explanation of R. Meir’s words, the gist of which is that only God can ultimately evaluate a person’s worthiness. However, we can rest assured that these Divine determinations are ultimately in accord with reason and justice.

In sum, this passage presents a series of three different explanations of why the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper. The first position is that God evaluates us, not as individuals, but as part of an intergenerational continuum. While this idea has basis in some parts of the Bible, it is resoundingly rejected in others. Next, the Gemara suggests that absolute justice exists only for those who are absolutely righteous or absolutely wicked. For the rest of us, things are more murky. Finally, R. Meir’s argues that God’s ways have not been revealed to man, with the disturbing implication that His ways may not be just by any comprehensible standard. Notably, no mention is made in this passage of the World to Come. Each position is concerned only with the individual’s fate in this world. The Gemara offers no easy answers to this most profound of questions, only a series of partial solutions, each one of which is problematic in its own way.

Hide and Seek

The Gemara continues its discussion of Moshe’s series of conversations with God following the golden calf, focusing on Moshe’s request to see God’s face:

And He said, “Thou canst not see My face” (*Shemot* 33:20)

A Tanna taught in the name of R. Yehoshua b. Korha:

The Holy One, blessed be He, spoke thus to Moshe:

When I wanted, you did not want [to see My face]

now that as a reward of three [pious acts]

you want, I do not want.

This is in opposition to [the interpretation of this verse by]

R. Shmuel b. Nachmani in the name of R. Yonatan.

For R. Shmuel b. Nachmani said in the name of R. Yonatan:

Moshe was privileged to obtain three [favours].

In reward of 'And Moshe hid his face' (*Shemot* 3:6),

he obtained the brightness of his face.

In reward of 'For he was afraid' (ibid.),

he obtained the privilege that

“They were afraid to come nigh him” (*Shemot* 34:30).

In reward of “To look upon God” (*Shemot* 3:6),

he obtained, “The similitude of the Lord doth he behold” (*Bamidbar* 12:8).

This passage in the Gemara engages two issues of interpretation involving Moshe in the book of *Shemot.*  The first issue is whether or not Moshe ever actually saw God. In His dialogue with Moshe following the sin of the golden calf, God unequivocally states, “Thou canst not see My face, for no man can see my face and live.” Yet there are numerous verses in the Torah that would seem to suggest otherwise. Just a few verses previously, in the very same chapter, we read, “The Lord would speak to Moshe face to face” (33:11). The Gemara does not seek to resolve this contradiction. Rather, it lets the contradictory positions stand in tension. R. Yehoshua ben Korha assumes that Moshe never saw God’s face, while R. Shmuel b. Nachmani assumes that Moshe did see it. The Gemara seems to respond to the contradiction in verses with, “These and these are the words of the living God.”

Notably, even R. Yehoshua ben Korha agrees that Moshe *could* have seen God. Moshe was simply denied this privilege due to his previous behavior. This directly contradicts the verse that R. Yehoshua ben Korha himself cites, which clearly states that it is *impossible* for any human to see God under any circumstances.

R. Yehoshua ben Korha argues that Moshe turning his face away from God was inappropriate. He should have eagerly greeted God’s appearance before him. Moshe’s failure to do so leads to his being punished, measure for measure, much later in the story. Moshe did not seize the opportunity early in his career to see God’s face. As a result, later, at the height of his career, Moshe was denied his request to see God’s face.

R. Shmuel b. Nachmani, on the other hand, sees Moshe’s actions at the burning bush as meritorious. Moshe was later rewarded for his actions, not only with the opportunity to see God’s face, but also with his own face taking on Divine qualities. After his descent from Mt. Sinai, Moshe’s face shone with Divine radiance, and the people feared to approach him in the same way they fear to approach God.

**Rearview Mirror**

The Gemara concludes its discussion of Moshe’s encounters with God after the sin of the golden calf by once again returning to a theme that has been raised earlier in the chapter -- God’s *tefillin*:

‘And I will take away My hand,

and thou shalt see My back’ (*Shemot* 33:23).

R. Chama b. Bizana said in the name of R. Shimon the Pious:

This teaches us that the Holy One, blessed be He,

showed Moshe the knot of the *tefillin*.

In our previous discussion of God wearing *tefillin,* I argued that there is tension between those sources which are open to a metaphorical understanding of God’s *tefillin,* and those that suggest that God literally wears *tefillin* on His head and arm. As it appears in our Gemara, this passage seems to be open to non-literal interpretation. According to this view, God does not actually wear *tefillin*. Rather, the Gemara describes God as doing so in order to teach some sort of lesson. The commentaries include many interpretations of the idea of “the knot of God’s *tefillin*.” Several of them are brought by the *Ein Yaakov* in his commentary to this passage.

However, this very same passage appears in *Menachot* 35b. There, the context is not the explication of the verses in *Shemot,* but the laws of *tefillin*. The Gemara there states that the proper way to tie the knots of *tefillin* is *Halakha Le-Moshe Mi-sinai*, transmitted to Moshe on Mt. Sinai. The Gemara there brings our passage about Moshe seeing God’s *tefillin* knot to tell us the circumstances under which God revealed these laws to Moshe. Moshe learned to make *tefillin* knots by copying the one he saw on God. Our *tefillin* are thus copies of copies which ultimately imitate God’s own *tefillin*. According to this interpretation, there can be no doubt that the Gemara means that God actually wears *tefillin* on His head that resemble the ones we wear. I discussed this difficult and problematic idea in my comments on the *sugya* of God’s *tefillin* on *daf* 6a.

This concludes our discussion of the series of statements that R. Yochanan presents in the name of R. Yosi, and the Gemara’s comments on them. (The Gemara does present one more such statement. However, for some reason it is not included in the text of the *Ein Yaakov,* so I have not commented on it. ) As we have seen, this collection is held together by several common threads. On an exegetical level, this unit presents an extended treatment of Moshe’s conversations with God in *Shemot* chapter 33. In line with the issues raised in this biblical passage, this section in the Gemara also contains a wide-ranging discussion of Divine anger and Divine justice.

1. This commentary, printed in the standard editions of *Ein Yaakov* is entitled *Ha-kotev*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)