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 #28: Daf 7b**

**Naming and Necessity**

The top of page 7b marks the beginning of a new section –a series of statements that R. Yochanan presents in the name of R. Shimon b. Yochai. The statements are often followed by the Gemara’s comments on them. Unlike the previous collection of statements that R. Yochanan presents in the name of R. Yosi, this collection is not unified by a set of common concerns. Nevertheless, as Benovitz points out, the first and third statements seem to form a single unit thematically; both statements are about names, both Divine and human. The second statement, however, is strangely out of place, breaking up the unit.

R. Yochanan said in the name of R. Shimon b. Yochai:

How do you know that

we must not try to placate a man in the time of his anger?

Because it is said:

“My face will go and I will give thee rest” (*Shemot* 33: 14).

This statement appeared previously onpage 7a, where it was presented by R. Yochanan in the name of R. Yosi. We discussed the statement there. Its reappearance here serves to link the two collections of R. Yochanan’s sayings.

The first statement that R. Yochanan presents in the name of R. Shimon b. Yochai deals with Avraham’s relationship with God:

R. Yochanan said in the name of R. Shimon b. Yochai:

From the day that the Holy One, blessed be He, created the world

there was no man that called the Holy One, blessed be He, Lord [*Adon*],

until Avraham came and called Him Lord.

For it is said:

“He said, O Lord [*Adonai*] God,

whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it?” (*Bereishit* 15:18).

The commentators offer various explanations of why Avraham was the first to address God as *Adonai.* The simplest explanation, however, is that Avraham was the first person to recognize God’s mastery of the world and the first to be chosen to commit himself to His service. He is, therefore, the first to call God “Master,” *Adonai.*

Tosafot point out a more difficult problem. The verse cited in the Gemara is not the first instance in the Torah in which Avraham calls God *Adonai.* Rather, verse 15:2, just a few verses above in the story of the *berit bein ha-betarim,* is the first instance. Tosafot present an involved argument to prove that the passage in chapter 15 is made up of two parts, 15:1-6 and *berit bein ha-betarim* proper, 15:7-21. These two parts represent two separate encounters between God and Avraham. Furthermore, the second part took place *before* the first part. Hence verse eighteen, which the Gemara cites, actually took place before verse two.

The Gemara now cites a statement of Rav which builds on this teaching about Avraham:

Rav said:

Even Daniel was heard [in his prayer] only for the sake of Avraham.

For it says:

“Now therefore, O our God, hearken unto the prayer of Thy servant,

and to his supplications,

and cause Thy face to shine upon Thy sanctuary that is desolate,

for the Lord’s [Adonai] sake” (*Daniel* 9:17).

He ought to have have said:

'For Thy sake',

but [he means]:

for the sake of Avraham, who called Thee *Adonai*.

Rav picks up on the apparent anomaly in the wording of Daniel’s prayer. Since Daniel was addressing God, it would have made more sense for Daniel to have said for “Your sake,” in the second person, rather than for “The Lord’s sake,” in the third person. There are certainly other cases in the Bible in which people address God in the third person, so from a *peshat* point of view this is not a huge problem. However from the perspective of *derash*, this anomaly gives Rav the opportunity to draw greater meaning from the text. In finding a reference to Avraham and his revolutionary relationship with God in Daniel’s prayer, Rav emphasizes the importance of Avraham’s actions. Avraham being the first to call God *Adonai* is not simply a landmark in the history of religion. Rather, this deed has enduring significance for the Jewish people. Avraham’s merit continues to protect the Jewish people and causes God to heed their prayers in times of need.

The third statement in this collection closely resembles the first:

R. Yochanan said in the name of R. Shimon b. Yochai:

From the day that the Holy One, blessed be He, created His world

there was no man that gave thanks (*hodah*) to the Holy One, blessed be He,

until Leah came and praised Him.

For it is said:

“This time will I praise [*odeh*] the Lord” (*Bereishit* 29:35).

This teaching opens with almost the exact same words as the first. This statement also tells of a certain way of relating to God that did not exist until one of our forbearers initiated it. In this case, Leah initiates the practice of giving thanks to God. This passage also picks up on the motif of naming and names; Leah is naming her son Yehuda in this verse.

The Gemara now goes on to consider the naming of another one of Leah’s son’s, Reuven:

Reuven

R. Eleazar said:

Leah said:

See the difference between my son

and the son of my father-in-law.

The son of my father-in-law voluntarily sold his birthright,

for it is written:

“And he sold his birthright unto Yaakov”(*Bereishit* 25:33).

And, nonetheless, behold, it is written of him:

“And Esav hated Yaakov” (*Bereishit* 27:41),

and it is also written:

“And he said, is not he rightly named Yaakov?

for he hath supplanted me these two times” (*Bereishit* 27:36).

My son, however,

although Yosef took his birthright from him against his will

as it is written:

“But, for as much as he defiled his father's couch,

his birthright was given unto the sons of Yosef” (*Divrei Ha-yamim* I, 5:1),

was not jealous of him.

For it is written:

“And Reuven heard it, and delivered him out of their hand” (*Bereshit* 37:21).

The Gemara ignores the explanation of the name Reuven given in the Torah itself, "For the Lord has seen (*ra’ah*) my affliction, for now my husband will love me.” Instead, the Gemara focuses on the literal meaning of the name, *reu ben*, “see, a son.” The Midrash, however, seeks greater significance in this name. It reads the syllable *ben*, son, also as *beyn,* “between,” and then reads it as *ben* once again. The result is *reu beyn ben l’ben,* “See (the difference) between (this) son and (that) son.” The Midrash uses this suggestive phrase to present a wider interpretation of the biblical text. In naming Reuven, Leah draws a literary parallel between the story of Reuven and the story of Esav. Both men lose their birthrights to their younger siblings, Esav to Yaakov and Reuven to Yosef. However, they respond to this loss very differently. Esav seeks to kill Yaakov, while Reuven steps in and saves Yosef’s life when the other brothers want to kill him. Esav serves as a literary foil to highlight Reuven’s positive traits.

One may ask, how could Leah have known all of this about her son’s later life so soon after he was born? The simple answer would probably invoke the rabbinic notion that a parent is granted a certain degree of prophecy in naming their child. One can also argue that the rabbis are interpreting the name in light of their knowledge of the wider story and not necessarily putting words in Leah’s mouth. However, in light of the next section, we can also argue, Leah’s choice of the name Reuven was precisely what allowed Reuven to take the moral high road so many years later. Names can have an impact on a person and his deeds.

Ruth.

What is the meaning of Ruth?

R. Yochanan said:

Because she was privileged to be the ancestress of David,

who saturated (*rivahu*)

the Holy One, blessed be He, with songs and hymns.

How do we know that

the name [of a person] determines his destiny ?

R. Eleazar said:

Scripture says:

“Come, behold the works of the Lord,

who hath made desolations in the earth” (*Tehillim* 46:9).

Read not *shammot*, ['desolations'], but *shemot*, [names].

The Midrash now takes on the name of Ruth. This name is never explained in the Bible, and it does not have any obvious meaning in biblical Hebrew. As in the previous case, the Gemara sees Ruth’s name as foreshadowing her future. However, for the Gemara, the most significant events related to Ruth are not those that occurred during her lifetime. Ruth’s ultimate significance lies in her being the progenitor of King David. The Gemara, therefore, relates the name Ruth to the many psalms and songs of praise to God that David wrote. Ruth’s name does not simply predict her illustrious grandson’s endeavors. Rather, the two are causally connected. As the Gemara concludes from its interpretation of the verse in *Tehillim*, names contain great Divine power; they shape the destinies of their bearers as well as their descendants.

This section on names and naming thus ends with the word “names” and with a formulation of the fundamental idea underlying the passage, that names can directly affect the destiny of those who bear them.

**A Promise is a Promise**

The printed texts of the *Ein Yaakov* now present a final section of the passage found on *daf* 7a, which records a series of statements made by R. Yochanan in the name of R. Yosi. As we noted at the time, the final section of this passage is missing from the *Ein Yaakov.* For some reason, it was placed here instead:

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

No word of blessing that issued from

the mouth of the Holy One, blessed be He,

even if based upon a condition,

was ever withdrawn by Him.

How do we know this?

From our teacher Moshe.

For it is said:

“Let me alone, that I may destroy them,

and blot out their name from under heaven;

and I will make of thee a nation mightier and greater than they”

(*Devarim* 9:14).

Though Moshe prayed

that this might be mercifully averted

and it was cancelled,

[the blessing] was nevertheless fulfilled towards his children.

For it is said:

“The sons of Moshe:

Gershom and Eliezer …

And the sons of Eliezer were Rechaviah the chief …

and the sons of Rechaviah were very many” (*Divrei Ha-yamim* I, 23:15-16).

And R. Yosef learnt:

They were more than sixty myriads.

This is to be learnt from two occurrences of the term ‘very many’.

Here it is written:

“were very many,”

and elsewhere it is written:

“And the children of Israel were

very fruitful and increased abundantly,

and became very many” (*Shemot* 1:7).

Like the other sections of this passage, this final discussion also deals with Moshe’s discussion with God following the sin of the golden calf, albeit based on the account in *Devarim* and not the one in *Shemot.* This text also picks up on the theme of God’s system of rewards in this world, which was central to the rest of the passage on 7a.

The Gemara here asserts that God’s promises are always fulfilled. This includes cases of conditional promises in which the condition was not fulfilled. God promised to make Moshe a great nation. This promise was made in the context of God’s threat to destroy Israel for the sin of the golden calf. Moshe convinced God not to destroy Israel, so one would have thought that God’s promise to Moshe was no longer in effect. Moshe, however, was rewarded with numerous descendants. To prove this point, the Gemara cites a verse from the book of *Divrei Ha-yamim*. The simple meaning of this verse is that Moshe had many descendants through his grandson Rechavia. This does not, however, yet prove that Moshe’s descendants were a “great nation” parallel to the people of Israel whom they were supposed to replace. To prove this, R. Yosef makes use of a *gezera shava,* noting that the word *rabu* appears both with respect to Moshe’s descendants and with respect to the multiplication of the children of Israel in Egypt. According to R. Yosef, this teaches us that Moshe’s descendants numbered six hundred thousand, just like Israel at the Exodus.

**Absalom, Absalom**

The Gemara now states,

R. Yochanan said in the name of R. Shimon b. Yochai:

“delinquence”  in a man's house

is worse than the war of Gog and Magog.

For it is said:

“A Psalm of David,

when he fled from Avshalom his son” (*Tehillim* 3:1),

and it is written after that:

“Lord, how many are mine adversaries become!

Many are they that rise up against me” (*Tehillim* 3:2).

But in regard to the war of Gog and Magog

it is written:

“Why are the nations in an uproar?

And why do the peoples mutter in vain?” (*Tehillim* 2:1),

but it is not written:

'How many are mine adversaries become!'

R. Yochanan makes a bold claim, that “delinquence” in a person’s household is even worse than the apocalyptic war of Gog and Magog. The word “delinquence” is my best effort to translate the term *tarbut ra’ah*. Literally, *tarbut ra’ah* may be rendered as “bad manners” or “bad breeding.” In this context, the term clearly refers to traits or behavior that lead to serious strife, if not outright violence, in the family.

R. Yochanan’s statement emerges from contrasting two consecutive psalms. *Tehillim* 2 describes the uprising of the nations against God. This uprising is understood as referring to the war of Gog and Magog, which will come in the eschatological era. *Tehillim* 3 is set during David’s flight from his son Avshalom. As described in *Shmuel* II chapter fifteen, David fled Jerusalem after his son Avshalom staged a coup and seized power. These two psalms also have very different tones. In the first psalm, there is nothing but scorn for the “bad guys.” In the second psalm, David expresses great fear of his pursuer. The obvious explanation for this is that those who rebel against God face certain defeat and need not be feared, whereas it is far from clear that Avshalom’s revolt will not be successful. David makes clear in the account in *Shmuel* that he is concerned that God is no longer on his side.

The Gemara takes a different approach, arguing that the different tones of the two psalms are evidence for its claim about the evils of family strife. The Gemara here teaches a powerful lesson. We tend to think that events that happen on the grand scale of politics and history have the most impact. A person’s family context, however, can be far more decisive. The struggles that happen in this arena can be the most painful and damaging. By extension, peace on the home front may be even more important than peace on the battlefield.

The Gemara now presents another interpretation of David’s response to his flight from Avshalom:

'A Psalm (*mizmor*) of David,

 when he fled from Avshalom his son.’

'A Psalm of David'?

He ought to have said:

'A Lamentation of David'!

R. Shimon b. Avishalom said:

A parable: To what is this to be compared?

To a man who has a bond outstanding against him;

until he pays it he worries

but after he has paid it, he rejoices.

So was it with David.

When the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him:

“Behold, I will raise up evil

against thee out of thine own house” (*Shmuel II* 12:2),

he began worrying.

He thought:

it may be a slave or a bastard who will have no pity on me.

When he saw that it was Avshalom,

he was glad,

and therefore he said: 'A Psalm.’

The Gemara works from the assumption that the term *mizmor* must always introduce a joyous psalm. If so, it is a strange word for David to use to express his feelings while fleeing for his life from Avshalom. R. Shimon responds with a parable about a person who is happy after he has finally paid back a debt. The *nimshal,* the application of this parable to the case at hand, seems clear. David is relieved now that his punishment for the Bat Sheva incident has finally come. Actually receiving the punishment is not as bad as dreading it. This idea that actually receiving a punishment may be relieving in some way is consistent with David’s previous behavior. Immediately following the account of David’s sin with Bat Sheva in *Shmuel* II, chapter 12, we read that the child of this union was struck by illness. David immediately ceases all normal activity, sits on the floor and refuses to eat. When the child ultimately dies, he promptly gets up and returns to normal life. His servants inquire as to his behavior. David replies,

While the child was still alive,

I fasted and wept

Because I thought,

‘Who knows?

The Lord may have pity upon me

And the child may live.

But now that he is dead,

Why should I fast?

Can I bring him back again?

I shall go to him,

But he will never go back to me.’

Here too, David expresses the idea that waiting for the punishment and constantly praying to avert it take a greater toll than the punishment itself.

Yet, the *nimshal* presented in the Gemara does not quite follow the *mashal* as we have understood it. According to the Gemara, David is relieved because his pursuer is his own legitimate son rather than a slave or a bastard. Even if David is to be deposed, his line will remain in power. Nothing in the parable suggests this *nimshal.* Rather, as if often the case, there is a gap between the *mashal* and the *nimshal.* The *nimshal* comes to teach us something beyond the interpretation implied in the *mashal*.

Taken as a whole, this passage is a sort of meditation on the complexity of David’s relationship with his son Avshalom. On the one hand, Avshalom’s revolt against David was the most devastating event in King David’s life. On the other hand, according to R. Shimon b. Avishalom (whose patronymic can hardly be a coincidence!), David takes a certain comfort in the fact that it is own son who seeks to kill him. This tension is paralleled in the biblical account, where David shows great ambivalence towards Avshalom and his revolt. On a more universal level, we can see this passage as dealing with the constant struggles of sons to overtake their fathers. These uprisings are simultaneously transgressive revolts against the natural order and, at the same time, necessary parts of the process of one generation replacing the other.