YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Talmudic Aggadot**

**By Rav Dr. Yonatan Feintuch**

**Shiur #29: Aggadot Concerning the Commandment of Pilgrimage to the Temple, *Chagiga* 4b - 5b**

**Part I**

1. **Introduction**

In this *shiur* we will look at an *aggada* of a slightly different sort from those we have examined in recent *shiurim*, which have mostly been brief, focused stories that we analyzed in their context in the *sugya*. The *aggada* we will address this time, from the first chapter of *Massekhet Chagiga*, is actually an aggadic series: a long chain made up of short aggadic units.[[1]](#footnote-1) As we shall see, the first unit in the chain is related to the halakhic *sugya*, which deals with the commandment of “*re’iya*” (literally, “seeing”) - pilgrimage to the Temple. The units that follow are teachings that expand on biblical verses and brief stories. The common denominator to most of these units is the formula with which they are introduced: “R. so-and-so, when reaching the following verse, would weep…” –followed by the relevant verse and the reason why that Sage would weep over it.

 The aggadic collection we will be looking at is long (a total of about a *daf* and a half), and therefore we will discuss most but not all of it. Along with attention to each unit we will attempt to understand the general picture arising from the section as a whole and its place within the sugya and the massekhet.

b. The *halakhic* context of the series of stories

The *sugya* discussed in the first part of *Massekhet Chagiga* deals with those who are obligated to make a pilgrimage to the Temple and those who are exempt. A beraita (4b) enumerates some of those in the latter category:

“Our Sages taught: One who is ritually impure is exempt from the bringing the pilgrimage offering, as it is written, ‘And you shall come there… and you shall bring to there...’ Whoever is included in the ‘coming’ (pilgrimage) is also included in the ‘bringing’ (of the offering); anyone to whom the command of ‘coming’ does not apply, does not have the ‘bringing’ apply to him, either.

R. Yochanan ben Dahabai said, in the name of R. Yehuda: ‘A person who is blind in one eye is exempt from the pilgrimage [to the Temple], since it says ‘*yir’eh*’ (he shall see); ‘*yera’eh*’ (he shall be seen): just as he comes to see, so he shall be seen. Just as [God] comes to see with two eyes [as it were], so he comes to be seen with two eyes.”

Following this *beraita* we find a short description concerning Rav Huna, with which the *aggadic* section begins:

“Rav Huna, when he came to this verse – ‘*yir’e*h’ - ‘*yera’eh*’, would weep. He said: The slave whose Master expects to see him – shall he then keep himself away from Him? For it is written, ‘When you come to appear before Me, who required this at your hand – to trample My courts?’” (*Yishayahu* 1:12)

Rav Huna responds to the halakhic deduction from the verse in the Torah commanding, “Three times in the year each of your males shall appear (*yera’eh*) before the Lord God, the God of Israel” (Shemot 34:23).[[2]](#footnote-2) In the beraita, R. Yehuda explains, “As it is written, ‘*yir’eh*’ – ‘*yera’eh*’: just as he comes to see, so he shall be seen.” Rashi (*Chagiga* 2a) explains this deduction:

“’*Yir’eh*’ – *yera’eh*’: The word is written [such that it could be read] ‘*yir’eh*’ (“he shall see”), but it is read ‘*yera’eh*’ (he shall appear/be seen). ‘Each of your males ‘shall see’ the face of Lord God’ alludes to the idea that the person perceives the Divine Presence; ‘each of your males shall be seen before the Lord God’ alludes to the idea that God comes to see you. The text connects your seeing [of Him] to His seeing [of you].”

Rav Huna’s emotional reaction to this textual inference relates to the fact that in his time, the Temple was a ruin; there was no longer any possibility of going to ‘see’ the Divine Presence or to ‘be seen’ before God. Rav Huna weeps because the interpretation of the verse emphasizes God’s anticipation of the pilgrimage on the festival: ‘God comes to see you.’ He responds with the rhetorical question, ‘A slave whose Master expects to see him – shall he then keep himself away from Him?’ And he supports this image with a verse from the first chapter of Yishayahu, describing how am Yisrael have been distanced from this ‘seeing’ as a result of their sins: “When you come to appear before Me, who required this at your hand – to trample My courts?”

Thus, the aggadic series opens with the sharp contrast between the situation during the period of destruction, exile, and distance from the Divine Presence, and the situation that existed when the Temple stood. When the Temple stood, every Jewish male would travel to Jerusalem three times a year for a very close and mutual (so to speak) encounter with the Divine Presence, to ‘see’ and to ‘be seen.’

c. The weeping of the *Amoraim*

The next unit once again focuses on Rav Huna, and in a similar spirit. While not directly connected to the inference drawn from the verse in the *beraita* and the commandment of the pilgrimage, it is nevertheless introduced with the same formula, and the content, explaining his weeping, is likewise similar:

“Rav Huna, when he came to the [following] verse, would weep: (Devarim 27) ‘And you shall sacrifice peace offerings, and shall eat there’ – A slave whose Master awaits [his arrival] to eat at his table – should he then distance himself from Him? As it is written (*Yishayahu* 1), ‘To what purpose is the abundance of your sacrifices to Me, says the Lord.’”

Here, too, the description of the situation of destruction, which causes Rav Huna to weep, is taken from the same chapter in Yishayahu as in the previous unit.

The Gemara then goes on to describe other Sages and other subjects, each weeping over a certain verse, with the explanation for the weeping in each case. For example, the two units that follow deal with fear of Divine judgment in the World to Come:

“R. Elazar, when reaching the following verse, used to weep: (*Bereishit* 45), ‘And his brothers could not answer him, for they were frightened in his presence.’ If this is so concerning the rebuke of flesh and blood, then how much more so the rebuke of the Holy One, blessed be He!

R. Elazar, when reaching the following verse, used to weep: (*Shmuel* 1:28) “And Shmuel said to Shaul: Why have you disquieted me, to raise me up [from the dead]?” If the righteous Shmuel was afraid of Divine judgment, how much more so should we be!...”[[3]](#footnote-3)

The connection between these units and the preceding ones would seem to be associative, based on the similar situation of a Sage weeping over a certain verse. Rav Huna is troubled by the distance from the Divine Presence, while R. Elazar, in both of the units devoted to him, expresses fear of Divine judgment.

The Gemara then brings three similar units in which a Sage (R. Ami, R. Assi) contemplates the fact that even if a person tries his best to do good, he is still not assured of anything:

“R. Ami, when he reached the following verse, would weep: (*Eikha* 3) ‘Let him put his mouth in the dust, perhaps there may be hope.’ He said, ‘All this – and [still only] ‘perhaps?!’

R. Ami, when he reached the following verse, would weep: (*Tzefania* 2) ‘Seek righteousness, seek humility, perhaps you shall be hidden on the day of the Lord’s anger.’ He said, ‘All this – and [still only] ‘perhaps?!’

Rav Assi, when he reached the following verse, would weep: (Amos 5) ‘Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; perhaps the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious.’ [He said,] All this – and [still only] ‘perhaps?!’”

A similar description has R. Yosef troubled by the possibility of a person dying even though he never sinned and was not deserving of death:

“R. Yosef, when he reached the following verse, would weep: (*Mishlei* 13), ‘… but one can be swept away without judgment.’”

All the descriptions thus far have a Sage weeping over a particular verse. However, it seems that this is simply an outward description of a more profound phenomenon. Every person in the world carries some pain with him. Sometimes the pain is slight, sometimes it is unbearably heavy; in some instances the painful parts of a person’s existence are few and far between, while in other instances there are great spheres of pain. But everyone has some issue (or issues) that trouble him, sometimes giving him no rest. The issue in question is a very personal affair, varying from one person to the next in accordance with his character and his life’s circumstances. The descriptions we encountered above, concerning the various *Amoraim*, deal with some of the central points that cause pain to people who live a religious life of faith – and specifically to people living the religious reality of exile. They describe distance from the Divine Presence, and the frustrating sense that there is no encounter with God – as arising from Rav Huna’s words; fear of judgment in the World of Truth and the ability to face it – as arising from R. Elazar’s statement. The question of justice in the world and the feeling that people suffer inexplicable affliction that does not conform to the simple model of reward and punishment that is presented in many places in Tanakh is also evident. Along with questions about justice there is the fear aroused by man’s lack of control over his fate and the fact that there is sometimes a lack of correlation between his efforts and the results – as expressed in the questions raised by R. Ami and R. Assi: “All this – and [still only] ‘perhaps?!’”

d. ‘One can be swept away without judgment’

The *Amoraim* do not suppress these painful issues; they place them squarely on the table, showing how they are reflected in the verses they bring, and they weep. They provide no answers to their existential questions; it seems that they do not believe that any simple answers exist. Nevertheless, despite the pain that they bring in their wake, their questions do not undermine their faith in or closeness to God, as is clear from the other appearances of the same *Amoraim* throughout the Talmud. All the figures mentioned in these similar units – Rav Huna, R. Elazar, R. Ami and R. Assi, as well as R. Yochanan, who appears later on in other similar units – are central authorities in both the Bavli and the Yerushalmi, and it seems that this is no coincidence.

Nevertheless, the *sugya* itself seems to try, at least in some instances, to offer some direction for answering the questions that are raised. In the wake of R. Yosef’s weeping, the Gemara brings a story that appears to illustrate the point that he raises – the fact that there are some who are “swept away without judgment:”

“(He said:[[4]](#footnote-4)) Is there someone who passes away before his allotted time? – Yes. There is the story of R. Bibi bar Abaye, who was frequently visited by the Angel of Death. Once [the latter] said to his messenger, ‘Go and bring me Miriam, the women’s hairdresser.’ He went and brought him Miriam, the children’s nurse. He said to him, ‘I told you, Miriam the women’s hairdresser.’ [The messenger] answered, ‘If so, I will take her back.’ [The Angel of Death] replied, ‘Since you have brought her, let her be added [to those who perish this year]. But how were you able to get her [since her time had not yet come to die]?’ ‘She was holding a shovel in her hand, and was heating and raking the oven. She held it and she touched it to her foot and burned herself; thus her luck was impaired, and I brought her.’ R. Bibi ben Abaye said to him: ‘Do you have permission to act in this way?’ He answered, ‘Is it not written, ‘There are some who are swept away without judgment.’ He protested, ‘But it is written (*Kohelet* 1), ‘A generation passes away, and another generation comes!’ He replied, ‘I have charge of them until the generation is finished, and then I hand them over to Duma.’ He asked, ‘But after all, what do you do with her years [that she should have lived until her time to die]?’ He answered, ‘If there is a rabbinic scholar who forgoes his hurt, I give [the years] to him, and he lives them in her stead.’”

The situation described in the story, despite its tragedy, causes us to smile because of its inherent irony: a silly, careless mistake on the part of the messenger of the Angel of Death, as if in a comedy of errors (something akin to the mistake that led to the debacle of Kamtza and Bar-Kamtza), leads to the wrong woman losing her life. Miriam, the children’s nursemaid, is brought instead of Miriam, the women’s hairdresser. The Angel of Death, with a singular lack of concern, decides that if this woman is already dead, then she may as well be accepted (instead of the woman who was meant to die). We might be shocked by this description, viewing it as an extreme depiction of the arbitrariness of life and death. The unfairness of a life taken before its time, without justice, simply because of a ‘mistake,’ cries out for an answer.

On the other hand, the extreme nature of the description may hint to the fact that it is deliberately ironic and exaggerated, rather than a true description of the reality of the world. Perhaps this exaggerated description is merely a literary device; a way of dealing with the most difficult and frightening of subjects – death – by means of ironic amplification. After all, the description is scornful of the Angel of Death, and highlights his apathetic, irresponsible and arbitrary ‘work methods.’

Thus, the message arising from the description may be different from our original impression of it: not complete arbitrariness, but recognition of a certain element of injustice or ‘chance’ in the world. This is indeed the idea arising from the verse in *Mishlei*: “There are those who are swept away without justice,” as quoted by R. Yosef prior to the story, and in the response of the Angel of Death in the story. Moreover, the story also suggests that some system of justice does exist; an accounting is made, things are not just left completely to chance. This arises from the second part of the story, in which the Sage poses a question in the form of a different verse: “A generation passes away and another generation comes.” This suggests that there is order; matters are not left to the capricious behavior of the Angel of Death. Indeed, the Angel of Death is forced to admit that he, too, is bound by these ‘procedures’, and when someone dies before his time, he is forced to postpone his arrival in “Duma” until the proper balance is reached in the succession of the generations. Further on, he also explains that the “missing” years of those who die before their time are not lost. They are added to the lives of *tzaddikim* who are careful in their behavior - such that at least some goodness is added to the world. Thus, while tragedy exists on the personal level, there is an attempt to maintain a balance of good from a more global perspective. Aside from the ‘compensation’ to the world, this is also a statement about the nature of the ‘system:’ is it not an arbitrary system of complete chaos, but rather a system that strives for justice. The system carries out a certain level of accounting, even where there is an “unfair” loss of life. Even the Angel of Death recognizes this.

In fact, it may be that the very fact of the Gemara’s open grappling with untimely, seemingly “unjust” deaths, exposes its unwillingness to view the system as generally arbitrary or meaningless.

Proceeding from the assumption that the description in the story is indeed meant as ironic exaggeration, rather than a reflection of the way in which processes actually happen in the world, it is not entirely clear how and why exactly “unjust” deaths occur. The story suggests that all is not chaos, and there is a general aspiration for justice and goodness in the running of the world. Here we can only guess that perhaps the view underlying the story is that the instances of “unjust” death result from the complexity of the many factors active in the world as God created it. This complexity means that sometimes there are “accidents:” not a “slip-up” on God’s part, Heaven forefend, but rather the inexorable functioning of the “rules of the game” that He implanted in the world. These include, for example, the laws of physics, which always apply, and as a result of which there are accidents. Also included is the principle of absolute freedom of choice, which is good in and of itself, but also involves a necessary price: it allows for bad choices that can harm innocent people.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In summary, it would seem that the story that the Gemara brings in the wake of R. Yosef’s lament about death “without justice” offers some attempt to address this phenomenon in a way which, on one hand, recognizes its existence and does not deny it, but on the other hand, conveys the feeling that the system fundamentally aspires toward justice and goodness.

e. The verses relating to R. Yochanan

The *sugya* goes on to describe, in a similar manner, the verses that cause R. Yochanan to weep. These are interspersed with elaborations which we will address below, but first let us review, in concise form, the verses themselves:

“R. Yochanan, when he reached this verse, would weep: (*Iyov* 2) ‘And you incited Me against him, to destroy him without cause.’ [He said,] ‘A slave whose Master, when they incite Him, yields – is there any help for him?’

R. Yochanan, when he reached the following verse, would weep: (*Iyov* 15) ‘Behold, He puts no trust in His holy ones.’ [He said,] ‘If he does not put His trust in His holy ones, in whom can He trust?’

R. Yochanan, when he reached the following verse, would weep: (*Malakhi* 3) ‘And I will come near to you to judgment, and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers and against the adulterers, and against false swearers, and against those who oppress the hireling in his wages.’ [He said,] A slave whose Master brings him near to judge him, and hastens to testify against him – is there any remedy for him?

R. Yochanan, when he reached the following verse, would weep: (*Kohelet* 12) ‘For God shall bring every work into the judgment concerning every hidden thing.’ [He said,] A slave whose errors are counted by his Master as deliberate offenses – is there any remedy for him?

R. Yochanan, when he reached the following verse, would weep: (*Devarim* 31) ‘And it shall be, when many evils and troubles have come upon them…’ – [He said,] A slave whose Master brings many evils and troubles upon him – is there any remedy for him?”

It is no coincidence that the first two verses in this series are taken from *Sefer Iyov*. As we know, R. Yochanan lost ten sons, as is evident from the sentence that is repeated in his name several times in the Talmud: “This is the bone of my tenth son” (see, for example, *Berakhot* 5b, *Bava Batra* 116a). It is therefore clear why he identifies with Iyov, and we certainly understand his weeping when he reaches the verse that speaks of Iyov himself, as someone against whom the Satan “incited” God, as it were. The latter three verses also deal with the harshness of the Divine attribute of justice that is wielded against man. From between the words, we hear R. Yochanan’s personal tragedy and feel his pain with regard to Divine judgment in the world, according to which errors are counted – and punished - as though they were deliberate offenses, such that a person suffers “many evils and troubles.” The Gemara elaborates on all of this in such a way as to illustrate the harshness of this reality. For instance, concerning the errors being considered as deliberate offenses, and the deeds for which man is judged, we find *inter alia* the following examples:

“What is the meaning of [the words,] ‘every hidden thing’? Rav said: This refers to someone who kills a louse in the presence of his neighbor, causing the latter to feel disgust.[…] What is the meaning of, ‘whether it be good or whether it be evil’? The school of R. Yannai taught: This refers to someone who gives charity to a poor person in public, as was the case of R. Yannai, who once saw a man give a ‘*zuz’* to a poor person in public, and he said to him, ‘It would have been better had you not given him, than that you gave it to him in public, thereby shaming him.’ The school of R. Shila said: [It refers to] one who gives charity to a woman in secret, for he causes people to be suspicious…’.”

In some of the examples cited here, a person is judged for seemingly minor offenses; sometimes the fundamental intention behind them is positive, but there is some problem with the way in which the act is carried out (for instance, the examples of giving charity). Ultimately, according to the verse from *Kohelet*, a person is judged for the problematic aspect of his action despite his good intentions.

With regard to the “many evils and troubles,” the Gemara explains how troubles are sometimes intertwined, such that the difficulty that they cause is exponentially increased:

“’What is the meaning of [the words], ‘many evils and troubles’? Rav said: It means, ‘evils which become troubles to each other’ – such as, for instance, a wasp and a scorpion. Shmuel said: It refers to one who produces money for the poor person [only] in his hour of extreme distress. Rabba said: This is the meaning of the proverb, ‘For [purchasing] provision, a *zuz* is not to be found; for hanging – it can be found.’”

What is common to the first, third, fourth and fifth unit relating to R. Yochanan is the repeated question at the end: “Is there any remedy for him?” This question expresses R. Yochanan’s harsh experience of life in this world, which, as noted, is quite understandable in view of his personal circumstances.

The second unit, which relates to the verse, “Behold, He puts no trust in His holy ones,” relates to a different source of pain: that even “His holy ones,” the righteous *tzaddikim*, do not necessarily have a happier fate. However, the Gemara once again brings a story that addresses this issue:

“One day he was walking on the way and saw a man gathering figs; he was leaving aside those that were ripe, and taking those that were unripe. He said to him: ‘Are not those better?’ He replied, ‘I need these [the unripe figs] for a journey; these will keep, those will not.’ [R. Yochanan] said: ‘This is the meaning of the verse, ‘Behold, He puts no trust in His holy ones.’ But is this so? For behold, there was a disciple in the neighborhood of R. Alexandri who died at a young age, and [R. Alexandri] said: ‘Had [the disciple] wished, he could have lived!’ But if [indeed there are righteous people who die young in order that they will not turn bad later on] – then perhaps he [that young scholar] was one of those of whom it is said, ‘Behold, He puts no trust in His holy ones’? [Apparently not, for] he was one who had rebelled against his teachers.”

In this story R. Yochanan learns from the man who takes figs for the way, that sometimes the “good” figs, which have ripened early, are actually less desirable for a long journey, for they will spoil. The meaning of this analogy is that sometimes righteous people are taken from the world at an early age, so that they do not have to endure too many trials and tribulations that occur over a long life and that might spoil their righteousness. This is a certain way of dealing with what appears to be the Divine attribute of justice which sometimes strikes at young people who are particularly good. However, it is not entirely successful in softening the question raised by R. Yochanan.

In any event, the Gemara raises some of the painful aspects of life in this world, which cause the *Amoraim* to weep. No simple or easy explanations are offered; neither the *Amoraim* nor the Gemara itself have the answers.

A very powerful lesson is conveyed by this view of how these great *Amoraim*, who were the pillars of the Torah world in Eretz Yisrael and in Babylonia, pursued their study and the fulfillment of the mitzvot despite the aspects of this world that pained them greatly. It seems that they ultimately accept the difficulties as part of the reality in which they live. Such is the reality of exile and the ‘hiding of God’s face,’ as is clear from the first unit in the series, where Rav Huna speaks of the Temple that is no longer extant. Part of what ‘the hiding of God’s face’ means is that God’s ways of guiding the world are not understood. As a result, there are phenomena in the world that we find bewildering and painful, both practically and theologically.

In the next *shiur,* we will look at the last part of the *aggadic* series, and then discuss its general structure and the picture arising from it. We will also consider the significance of the appearance of the *aggadic* collection as a whole within the *halakhic* *sugya*.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. Thanks to two of my students, Lital Cohen and Renana Goodman, from the women’s beit midrash in Migdal Oz, who drew my attention to this fascinating *sugya*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cf. also 34:24; 23:17; *Devarim* 16:16 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Gemara then brings a sort of parenthetical explanation proving that Shmuel rose up fearing Divine judgment. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Bach, ad loc., deletes the word ‘*ve-amar*’. Indeed, the context suggests that the question is asked not by R. Yosef but rather by the Gemara itself. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Of course, there are also many other possibilities; the scope of our present discussion does not allow for an exhaustive philosophical or theological analysis. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)