YESHIVAT HAR EZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Ein Yaakov - The World of Talmudic Aggada**

**By Dr. Moshe Simon-Shoshan**

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**Lecture 29: Daf 7b
Slam Evil?**

Once again, the Gemara takes up “the problem of evil.” Previously, the Gemara treated this question from the Divine perspective, asking: Why does God allow evil to exist and prosper in the world? Now, the Gemara looks at things from the human point of view, asking: Given that evil exists and even prospers, what should our response to it be? R. Yochanan cites one response in the name of R. Shimon b. Yochai. This response is then further developed by R. Dostai:

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

It is permitted to contend with the wicked in this world.

For it is said:

“They that forsake the law praise the wicked,

but such as keep the law contend with them” (*Mishlei* 28:4).

It has been taught to the same effect:

R. Dostai son of R. Matun says:

It is permitted to contend with the wicked in this world.

For it is said:

“They that forsake the law praise the wicked, etc.”

R. Shimon b. Yochai andR. Dostai make identical statements. Each one declares, “It is permitted to contend with the wicked in this world.” We must first note that the term translated as “to contend with,” *tagar,* might also be translated as “to reproach” or “to complain against.” The rabbis here are apparently talking about people publically condemning or verbally attacking evil-doers.

Further, there are two curious phrases in this statement. One is “*this* world.” In what other world might one be likely to contend with evil-doers? This term emphasizes the potential problem addressed by this statement. In the Messianic age, good will triumph over evil. However, the norm in our present condition of exile is that evil and evil-doers have the upper hand. Perhaps we should accept this situation as the Divine will and adopt a quietistic stance, making no protest against the reigning powers? These rabbis reject this position, at least partially. They state that it is *permitted* to speak out against evil-doers, but not that there is any requirement to do so. As the Maharsha notes, such activity can be quite dangerous. No one is expected to risk life or limb in order to speak up against evil. The rabbis simply come to tell us that despite the risks, such behavior is permitted to those who wish to do so, and presumably even laudable.

The rabbis’ insistence that speaking out against evil is merely permissible, but not required, becomes more striking when we look at the proof-text from *Mishlei* that they both cite in support of their position, “They that forsake the law praise the wicked, but such as keep the law contend with them.” This verse would seem to suggest that there is a moral and perhaps even halakhic obligation to contend with evil-doers. The underlying ethos appears to be that, “all that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing.” To fail to cry out against evil-doers is ultimately to abet them. The rabbis mitigate this lesson, perhaps in recognition of the social and political realities that make this demand quite dangerous in many circumstances.

Unlike R. Shimon, R. Dostai does not end his comments with this moderate comment. He goes on, taking the offensive:

Should somebody whisper to you:

But is it not written:

“Contend not with evil-doers,

neither be thou envious against them

that work unrighteousness” (*Tehillim* 37:1),

then you may tell him:

Only one whose heart knocks him says so.

In fact,

“Contend not with evil-doers,”

means, to be like them;

“neither be thou envious against them

that work unrighteousness” means,

to be like them.

And so it is said:

“Let not thy heart envy sinners,

but be in fear of the Lord all the day” (*Mishlei* 23:7).

R. Dostai is not content to simply cite the first verse of Psalm 37 as possibly suggesting that that one should not contend with evil-doers and then refute this claim by presenting his alternative reading of the verse. Rather, R. Dostai constructs a hypothetical opponent, into whose mouth the counterargument is placed. This individual is described as whispering, and is accused of being a person whose “heart knocks him.” This phrase would appear to mean that he is fearful. (See, for example, *Keritut* 23b and *Nida* 3b). In sum, R. Dostai says that those who read the verse to say that one should not confront evil-doers are not simply wrong, they are cowards! This a significantly bolder stand than was previously suggested by the ruling that it is “permitted” to challenge the sinner, but certainly not required. Now R. Dostai takes a strong stand on the moral necessity of being brave and outspoken in the face of evil.

The Gemara now juxtaposes R. Dostai’s approach to sinners with a rather different one:

But this is not so!

For R. Yitzchak said:

If you see a wicked man

upon whom the hour is smiling,

do not attack him.

R. Yitzchak’s reference to the individual “upon whom the hour is smiling” is notable. The rabbis who presented the previous statement about engaging with evil-doers referred to “this world;” they set their timeframe as the entire course of human history. Throughout this pre-messianic period, we can expect the wicked to prosper. R. Yitzchak, on the other hand, sets his timeframe in terms of “hours,” discrete, limited amounts of time. In his view, evil-doers do not prosper at all times in this world. Rather, certain evil-doers prosper for limited periods of time. R. Yitzchak apparently believed that time was an active entity that can influence outcomes for different individuals. Any given timeframe may be more or less auspicious for any given person or community. If we see that a person is consistently succeeding, we can assume that the hour is smiling upon him. It is unwise to start up with such an individual until we see that his fortunes are changing. Hence, R. Yitzchak does not advise people to confront evil-doers when the times appear to be on their side. R. Yitzchak takes more of the quietist approach to evil in the world. If an evil person is succeeding, it is best not to take him on. His success in inscribed in the very nature of the universe. Better to lay low for a while. Eventually the wheel will turn and the bad guys will fall from power. R. Yitzchak backs up his position with a quotation from *Tehillim*:

For it is said:

“His ways prosper at all times” (*Tehillim* 10:5).

And more than that,

he is victorious in the court of judgment;

for it is said:

“Thy judgments are far beyond him” (ibid.)

And still more than that,

he sees the discomfiture of his enemies;

for it is said:

“As for all his adversaries, he puffeth at them” (ibid.)

R. Yitzchak’s use of this verse is most interesting. In Psalm10, the Psalmist does indeed describe a time in which evil seems unstoppable. Yet, unlike R. Yitzchak, the Psalmist does not sit quietly, waiting for the evil one’s time to pass. Rather, he calls out to God to put an end to this unjust situation. He challenges God, demanding to know from Him, “Why O Lord, do you stand aloof, heedless in times of trouble?” Whereas R. Yitzchak appears to accept the occasional triumph of evil as part of the course of nature, the Psalmist sees every success of the wicked as challenge to the sovereignty of the just and omnipotent God of Israel. While remaining faithful to the literal meaning of the biblical text, R. Yitzchak subtly transforms the tone of the verse to produce a different theological perspective.

The Gemara now seeks to harmonize R. Yitzchak’s quietist position with R. Yochanan’s activism:

There is no contradiction.

The one [R. Yitzchak] speaks of his [private] affairs,

the other one [R. Yochanan] of matters of Heaven.

If you wish I can say:

both speak of matters of Heaven,

and still there is no contradiction.

The one [R. Yitzchak] speaks of a wicked man

upon whom the hour is smiling,

the other one speaks of a wicked man

upon whom the hour is not smiling.

Or if you wish, I can say,

both speak of a wicked man

upon whom fortune is smiling,

and still there is no contradiction.

The one [R. Yochanan] speaks of a perfectly righteous man,

the other one of a man who is not perfectly righteous.

For R. Huna said:

What is the meaning of the verse:

“Wherefore lookest Thou, when they deal treacherously,

and holdest Thy peace,

when the wicked swalloweth up the man

that is more righteous than he?” (*Chabakuk* 1:13)

Can then the wicked swallow up the righteous?

Is it not written:

“The Lord will not leave him in his hand?” (*Tehillim* 37:33)

And is it not written further:

“There shall no mischief befall the righteous?” (*Mishlei* 12:21).

[You must] therefore [say]:

He swallows up the one who is only 'more righteous than he,’

but he cannot swallow up the perfectly righteous man.

If you wish I can say:

It is different when the hour is smiling upon him.

The simplest way to reconcile these two positions is the second answer given by the Gemara. R. Yitzchak speaks only of cases in which “the hour is smiling upon” the evil-doer in question. He would agree, however, that when this is not the case, it is indeed laudable to confront the wicked. Similarly, R. Yochanan would concede that in situations where the “hour is smiling” on one’s adversary, it is not advisable to challenge him. The Gemara seems to repeat this answer in the last line of the passage. I am not sure how to explain this repetition. Perhaps it is evidence that the Gemara realizes that this is the most straightforward explanation.

The other possible solutions suggested by the Gemara shed further light on the problem of evil and the appropriate response to it. The first suggestion is to distinguish between private matters and those relating to Heaven. In this reading, the rabbis only endorse taking on the wicked when the person has the highest motivations. A person who seeks to combat evil in order to defend God and his Torah is entitled, and perhaps even obligated, to take the risks that such action involves. This may further imply that in such situations a person can rely on Divine protection. In contrast, there is no permission granted to take such risks if a person is pursuing his own personal agenda. In such cases, it is better to avoid conflict. Once again, this may be because a person cannot rely on Divine protection in such situations.

The next possibility is that we must make a distinction based on the moral and spiritual status of the individual who seeks to confront the evil-doers. Not just anyone can take up the name of Heaven and lead the charge against God’s enemies. Only a completely righteous person can do so and expect not to face his own destruction. Run-of-the-mill righteous people who have some imperfections, in contrast, face certain doom if they dare challenge the forces of evil.

We have already seen this distinction between perfectly and imperfectly righteous people on the previous page, in its discussion of the problem of evil. As we mentioned there, this approach theoretically affirms the principle that the righteous should always succeed in this world. However, it limits the applicability of this principle to a rare and perhaps non-existent case, the individual who is entirely righteous. For everyone else, including very holy and righteous people who have only minor flaws, there can be no expectations of success or happiness in this world. Any misfortunes that may occur to them can always be attributed to their sins, however minor.

This passage presents a wide range of approaches to the question of when and if to confront evil-doers. These positions range from advocating aggressive responses to evil to avoiding such conflicts at all times. The Gemara, however, rejects these more radical positions in favor of a series of possibilities that require each situation to be judged on its own merits.

**A place to pray**

The next section is absent from the printed *Ein Yaakov*. Nevertheless, we cannot pass over it. As Benovitz notes, this statement, which emphasizes the importance of praying in a set place, is probably the reason that this entire collection of statements of R. Yochanan in the name of R. Shimon b. Yochai is included in the Gemara. In the pages ahead, the importance of praying regularly in a synagogue will become a central topic of discussion:

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

If a man has a fixed place for his prayer,

his enemies succumb to him.

For it is said:

“And I will appoint a place for My people Israel,

and will plant them, that they may dwell in their own place,

and be disquieted no more;

neither shall the children of wickedness

afflict them any more as at the first” (II *Shmuel* 7:10).

In the previous passage, the Gemara suggested that a person of average deeds can have no expectation of triumphing over his enemies. Now the Gemara makes a startling claim. One need only pray regularly in a fixed place in order to merit such victory. This statement becomes even more radical when we consider the proof-text from *Shmuel* cited. This verse does not refer to prayer in a fixed place or even in the synagogue. It foretells Israel’s secure occupation of Jerusalem before the construction of the Temple there. The Gemara is implicitly suggesting that praying in a set location is equivalent to praying in the Temple itself.

It is difficult to know if these lines are meant to be taken literally, or if they are a rhetorical exaggeration meant to emphasize the importance of regular prayers in a regular location.

R. Huna now engages in a bit of textual criticism with regard to the verse just cited:

R. Huna pointed to a contradiction.

[Here] it is written:

“afflict them,”

and [elsewhere]:

“To exterminate them” (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 17:9).

[The answer is]:

First to afflict them and then to exterminate them.

As is well known, the book of *Divrei Ha-yamim* contains many passages that are parallel to those in *Shmuel* and *Melakhim*. There are frequently minor differences between these versions. R. Huna points out that our verse is one instance of such inconsistency. Whereas in *Shmuel,* the verse reads “to afflict,” *le’anoto,* in *Divrei Ha-yamim* the verse reads “to exterminate,” *le’khaloto.* A modern scholar might see this inconsistency as evidence of two different textual traditions or perhaps of a scribal error in one of the sources. R. Huna, however, takes a midrashic approach to this problem. He assumes that both texts are correct. They can be reconciled if we place them in a chronological framework. The first text, in *Shmuel,* refers to the first stage of the enemies’ threatened attack --affliction. The second text, in *Divrei Ha-yamim,* reflects the final stage – total destruction.

The only problem with R. Huna’s statement is that if we actually look up the verse in *Divrei Ha-yamim,* we will discover that the verse reads not *le’khaloto* but *le’valoto*, “to wear down.” This discrepancy points to the fact that the text of the Bible that was in the hands of the rabbis of the Mishnah and the Gemara was not entirely identical to the Masoretic text that has been accepted as authoritative by rabbinic scholars since the Middle Ages. R. Akiva Eiger (*Gilyon Hashas, Shabbat* 55b) famously presents an extensive catalogue of differences between biblical citations found in the Gemara and other rabbinic works and the received text of the Bible. As we have noted previously, the Sages were well aware of the fact that the transmission of the Biblical text has not been done with one hundred percent accuracy. God gave the Torah to mortals, not angels. Minor changes and errors are thus inevitable. This too is part of the Divine plan.

**Service-Learning**

The Gemara now takes up an apparently unrelated issue, the relationship between teacher and student:

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

The service of the Torah is greater than the study thereof.

For it is said:

“Here is Elisha the son of Shafat,

who poured water on the hands of Eliyahu” (II *Melakhim* 3:2).

It is not said, “who learned,”

but “who poured water.”

This teaches that the service of the Torah

is greater than the study thereof.

This passage presents a key rabbinic idea. It is more important to serve a sage than to study his teachings. The rabbis’ fundamental conception of the nature of Torah and its transmission underlies this idea. Torah is not ultimately a set of rules and regulations. It is a way of life, a living tradition that cannot ultimately be reduced to laws and principles. The true embodiment of the Torah is the scholar himself, who is called a “living Torah scroll.” The best way to learn from such a sage is to live in close quarters with him and observe his day to day actions.

This concludes the collection of statements by R. Yochanan in the name of R. Shimon b. Yochai. Next, the Gemara will take up an extended discussion of the importance of prayer in the synagogue.