YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Talmudic Aggadot**

**By Rav Dr. Yonatan Feintuch**

**Shiur #30: Aggadot on the Commandment of Pilgrimage to the Temple, *Chagiga* 4b - 5b**

**Part II**

1. **Introduction – connection to the previous *shiur***

In the previous *shiur,* we looked at the first part of the *aggadic* series found at the beginning of *Massekhet Chagiga*. The various units comprising the series begin with a standard opening formula: “R. so-and-so, when he reached the following verse, would weep….” We saw how the verses cited in relation to each of the respective *Amoraim*, and the comments of the *Amoraim* about those verse, express different painful questions. Various troubling issues are raised, ranging from the distance from the Divine Presence in a time of destruction and the ‘hiding of God’s face,’ to more individualized instances of people dying before their time, ‘without judgment,’ or fear of Divine judgment. The series concludes with five units about R. Yochanan, all focusing on the harshness of the Divine attribute of justice and its effect in the world.

In this *shiur,* we will look at the latter half of the *sugya*. Following the interpretations offered respectively by Rav and Shmuel for the phrase (*Devarim* 31:17), “… when many evils and troubles are come upon them” (as discussed in the previous *shiur*), we find discussion of other parts of the same verse: “Then My anger shall be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them, and I will hide My face from them, and they will be devoured, and many evils and troubles shall befall them…”:

“R. Bardela bar Tavyumi said, in the name of Rav: ‘Anyone to whom ‘hiding of the face’ does not apply, is not part of ‘them’ (i.e., part of Am Yisrael); anyone to whom the words ‘they will be devoured’ do not apply, is not part of them….”

This section is thematically related to the Divine attribute of justice mentioned by R. Yochanan, since the “anger” and “hiding of God’s face” that appear in the verse are manifestations of that attribute. In fact, the unit is also connected to other parts of the *aggadic* series, because the words of R. Huna right at the outset dealt with the distance from the Divine Presence and the fact that there is no longer any possibility of visiting the Temple to see and be seen by God; this, too, is a sort of ‘hiding of His face.’ The power wielded by Satan in handling affairs of this world, as discussed in the previous *shiur*, is also connected to the ‘hiding of God’s face.’ Thus, the statement of R. Bardela bar Tavyumi broadens the individual areas of anguish into an overarching depiction of the nation’s reality in exile. In exile, anyone who does not experience the ‘hiding of God’s face,’ anyone who does not feel the Divine attribute of justice, is ‘not part of them’ – because this reality is immanent to the situation of a Jew in exile.

1. **Revelation at a time of hiding**

However, from here the Gemara moves on to another statement which softens the impression of the previous one:

“’And I shall surely hide My face on that day’ – Rabba said: Although I will hide My face from them, I will speak to them in a dream. Rav Yosef said: His hand is stretched over us, as it is written (*Yishayahu* 51), ‘And I have covered you in the shadow of My hand.’”

Even in a situation of “the hiding of God’s face’” there is a certain measure of contact with Him. There is no direct “seeing’” but there is a kind of seeing that is likened to a vision in a dream. There is no absolute way of avoiding troubles, but there is a certain measure of protection: “His hand is stretched over us.” The use of this expression by the Gemara in this context is interesting, because the expression usually has a negative connotation of justice and punishment. Here, in contrast, the Gemara uses it in the positive sense of protection. Perhaps this hints to a certain duality of meaning: protection together with judgment. In other words, in exile there is a sort of interplay of connection and severance, hiding and revelation. This message – that even at a time of exile and ‘hiding of God’s face,’ He does not abandon His people - is critically important, both inwardly, as a message to Am Yisrael, and outwardly, as a message to the nations (especially Christianity) who view Am Yisrael’s exile as an absolute severance and curtailing of the covenant between the nation and God. The *sugya* continues with a story that expresses this idea:

“R. Yehoshua ben Chanania was once at the court of Caesar. A certain non-believer gestured to him: ‘A people whose God has turned His face from them.’ [R. Yehoshua] gestured in response: ‘His hand is stretched over us.’ Caesar said to R. Yehoshua: ‘What did he gesture to you?’ [He replied,] ‘A people whose God has turned His face from them’ – and I gestured in return, ‘His hand is stretched over us.’ They then said to the non-believer: ‘What did you gesture to him?’ [He replied,] ‘A people whose God has turned His face from them.’ ‘And what did he gesture in return?’ ‘I do not know.’ They said to him, ‘A man who does not understand the gestures shown to him – shall he then converse in gestures before the king?’ They led him forth and killed him.

When R. Yehoshua was about to die, the Sages asked him: ‘What will become of us at the hands of the non-believers?’ He told them, (*Yirmiyahu* 49) “Counsel has perished from the children; their wisdom has vanished.” Since ‘counsel has perished from the children [of Israel]’ – the wisdom of the nations of the world has vanished. Or, the same may be derived from the following verse: (*Bereishit* 33) ‘And he said, Let us take our journey, and let us go, and I will go over against you.’”

This story consists of two parts. In the first part, there is an exchange between the Sage and the “non-believer” (*min*) concerning the relations between God and Am Yisrael in exile. In many place in the Talmud, the term “*minim*” refers to Christians. The non-believer tries to argue that God has turned His face away from Am Yisrael. If the man is indeed a Christian, then his claim sits well with the Christian argument that God has forsaken His covenant with Am Yisrael, forging a “new covenant” with those who follow Christianity instead. R. Yehoshua responds – in the same spirit as Rav Yosef’s previous teaching – that exile is not a state of absolute severance or abandonment; “His hand is stretched over us.” It is a temporary and partial separation leading, in the future, to a reunion.

The story employs a sophisticated literary structure to convey its message. The dialogue between the Sage and the non-believer is carried out through hand gestures – a type of communication that is not direct speech but rather a discourse of hinting or allusion. This is exactly what R. Yehoshua is saying: the communication in the story is symbolic of the communication between God and Am Yisrael at a time of exile, and the existence of this communication is precisely what R. Yehoshua is asserting. He says that although there is no direct speech, there is nevertheless some indirect form of contact. The verse ‘His hand is stretched over us’ illustrates this contact through the same part of the body that is being used for gesturing in the story of R. Yehoshua: the hand. Thus, a link is created between the indirect communication maintained between R. Yehoshua and the non-believer, and the indirect – but steady – communication which is maintained, according to R. Yehoshua, between God and His people. Notably, R. Yehoshua understands the gestures of the non-believer, but the non-believer does not understand what R. Yehoshua is trying to convey to him; he is incapable of communication with him. This element of the story, too, symbolizes R. Yehoshua’s point: communication exists between God and Am Yisrael, who are able to “read the signs.” The other nations cannot understand them, despite the claim of the non-believer (symbolizing Christianity) to possessing such a connection. The non-believer, who tries to use this communication but is not actually capable of it, is executed. Someone who does not understand the language that he uses before the king is acting in an impudent manner and scorning the king’s honor. Once again, this is an analogy, alluding to the attempt by non-believers to claim a connection of their own to God – an attempt that is doomed to failure. The non-believers do not “understand” the right language, and their use of this language “before the king” ultimately leads to their downfall.

The second part of the story contains a reassuring message for Am Yisrael – that even when they lack leaders or representatives as sharp and caustic as R. Yehoshua ben Chanania, they need not fear struggles with the other nations. Here, too, the Gemara brings a verse full of symbolism: “And he said, Let us take our journey, and let us go, and I will go over against you.” The context of the verse is the encounter between Yaakov and Esav when Yaakov returns from his stay with Lavan. As we know, in rabbinic literature, Esav is a symbol of Rome, and later of Christianity. The verse, in which Esav proposes to journey “over against” Yaakov, promises Am Yisrael that Esav (or the nations represented by him) will not be able to defeat them even in exile. This promise is not dependent on the existence of any particular Sage that is able to defeat the non-believers in verbal debates.

1. **The weeping of the Holy One, blessed be He**

The Gemara then reaches an important and surprising climax. Thus far, we have seen the *Amoraim* weeping over verses that hint to difficult aspects of the world in general, and of exile in particular. Now, in a sharp turnaround, the Gemara speaks of the weeping of God Himself, as it were:

“’But if you will not hear it, My soul shall weep in secret for the pride’: R. Shmuel bar Inia said in the name of Rav: The Holy One, blessed be He, has a place, and its name is ‘Secret.’ What is the meaning of [the expression,] ‘for the pride’? R. Shmuel bar Yitzchak said: ‘For the pride [glory] of Israel that was taken from them and given to the gentiles.’ R. Shmuel bar Nachmani said: ‘For the pride [glory] of the Kingdom of Heaven.’

But is there any weeping in the presence of the Holy One, blessed be He? For as Rav Papa said: ‘There is no grief before the Holy One, blessed be He, as it is written (*Divrei Ha-yamim* I 16), ‘Honor and majesty are before Him; strength and beauty are in His sanctuary.’ But there is no contradiction involved: the former [verse, speaking of God weeping] refers to the inner chambers; the latter refers to the outer chambers. But it is written, ‘And on that day the Lord God of Hosts called for weeping and lamentation, and baldness and girding with sackcloth’ (*Yishayahu* 22)! [The solution to this seeming contradiction is that] the destruction of the Temple is different, for even the angels of peace wept [over it], as it is written (*Yishayahu* 33), ‘Behold for their altar they cried outside; the angels of peace wept bitterly.”

(*Yirmiyahu* 13) “…And my eye shall tear with tears, and shall run down with tears, because the Lord’s flock is carried into captivity’: R. Elazar said: Why the thrice-repeated mention of ‘tears’? Once – concerning the First Temple; once – concerning the Second Temple; and once – for Israel, who were exiled from their place….”

God is presented here as weeping over some of the very same issues that were raised previously in the weeping of the *Amoraim*: He weeps over the destruction of the Temples, over Israel’s exile, and over the severance between Himself and them. Among the themes that are mentioned here we find “the pride [glory] of Israel that was given over to the gentiles.” This is the same ‘hiding of God’s face’ that placed the gentiles in a position of superiority in relation to Israel. In fact, this unit in the Gemara describes two different modes and contexts of God’s “weeping:” one is at the time of the destruction itself, which is weeping that is open and witnessed by all. Later on, throughout the exile, God weeps “in secret” over the distance between Him and Am Yisrael, and over the state of His children. This appears to be a play on words concerning the “hiding of His face” that was mentioned previously. God hides His face, as it were, because He wants to weep privately over His children, but this goes against the outer “image” of the Divine Presence in the world: “Honor and majesty are before Him (*lefanav*); strength and beauty are in His place.” This verse, too, alludes to God’s face (*panav*) which, when not hidden, projects ‘honor and majesty; strength and beauty.’

This unit is of tremendous importance in the Gemara. The description of God “weeping”, against the background of the weeping of the Sages, offers additional, indirect expression of the mutual relations between God and His people, even in exile. While it is true that there is no direct communication, there is still no break. The reason is that there is full identification and an identical response – weeping – even if each party weeps separately.

1. **“Seeing the face”**

When we took a broader look at the *aggadic* series we saw that the links between its constituent units are not merely external and associative. The units comprising the series appear at first to be unrelated, but ultimately they create an entire picture. This picture comes into increasingly clear focus as we progress through the series.

The collection deals with exile and destruction – the antithesis of the situation discussed in the mishna, in which the Temple is standing and Am Yisrael make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to meet with the Divine Presence. The situation in exile comprises two sides, which are a sort of mirror image completing one another. The Sages, who experience various aspects of the reality of exile and the hiding of God’s face, weep over the existence of such troubles in the world, over the Divine attribute of justice, and over the distance from the Divine Presence. At the same time, it turns out that the Divine Presence weeps, too, in secret. Knowing that God weeps actually brings a certain measure of comfort, since it shows that there is no complete severance; it testifies to the mutuality between Israel and God which is a sort of connection. Thus it becomes clear that even when there is no direct contact, such as that which exists during the Temple period, there is still a measure of communication, albeit indirect, between God and His people. There is no complete break and no complete hiding of His face; even the Angel of Death, who possesses a frightening degree of freedom, is contained within certain limitations of order that prevent degeneration into total chaos and injustice.

We might have expected that the *sugya* would conclude on this note, describing God’s weeping, and thereby closing the cycle that began with the weeping of the *Amoraim*. However, there are still another two units. One is a story about Rabbi and R. Chiya:

“Rabbi and R. Chiya were talking as they walked on the way, when they came upon a certain place and said: ‘If there is a learned Sage here, we shall go and greet him.’ They were told, ‘There is a Sage here, and he is blind.’ R. Chiya said to Rabbi: ‘You stay here so that your princely dignity is not compromised; I will go and visit him.’ But [Rabbi] took hold of him and went with him. When they were taking leave from him, he said to them: ‘You have visited someone who is seen but does not see; may you be granted to visit Him Who sees but is not seen.’ [Rabbi] said [to R. Chiya]: ‘You almost deprived me of this blessing.’ They said to him, ‘From whom did you hear this?’ [He replied,] ‘I heard it from a teaching of R. Yaakov’ – for R. Yaakov of Kfar Chitya used to visit his teacher every day. When he became old, the latter said to him, ‘Let my master not trouble himself, since he is unable.’ He replied, ‘Is it a small thing that is written concerning the Sages, ‘That he might still live forever, and not see the pit; When he sees that wise men die…’ (*Tehillim* 49:10-11). If someone who sees wise men die, will live, then [one who sees them] alive – all the more so!’”

How does this story fit into the *sugya*? At first glance, it seems unrelated to the subjects that have been addressed thus far. However, upon closer inspection it turns out that this is an important unit in the *sugya*. Up to this point, the *sugya* has progressed in linear fashion, with each unit connected to the preceding one. Thus, we move from the weeping of R. Huna, which relates back to the original *halakhic* discussion in the *sugya* about the commandment of pilgrimage to the Temple, to the weeping of other Sages over various painful issues, to God’s own “weeping.” Now, the story about Rabbi and R. Chiya comes back to the principle subject of the *sugya* – the commandment of pilgrimage (literally, “*re’iya*” – seeing). These two Sages, who take the trouble to go and pay their respects to the blind Sage (although he cannot see them), receive a great blessing: “You have visited someone who is seen but cannot see; may you be granted to visit He Who sees but is not seen” – in other words, he blesses them that they should merit to fulfill the commandment of “seeing” the Divine Presence at the Temple, which is the subject of the *sugya*.

However, the story also includes another important element. The story presents the “greeting” or “paying of respects” to a Torah sage as an important value. This hints to the idea that in exile, in the absence of any possibility of “greeting” the Divine presence, the paying of respects to Torah Sages represents a sort of substitute. The encounter with the Divine Presence in exile takes place via the encounter with the Torah, instead of the direct encounter at the Temple. The final story in the series is also connected to this subject:

“R. Idi, the father R. Yaakov ben Idi, used to spend three months journeying and one day at the house of his teacher, so the rabbis called him a ‘one-day scholar.’ He became disheartened and applied to himself the verse (Iyov 12), ‘I am like one who has become a laughing stock to his friend….’ But R. Yochanan said to him: ‘I beg of you, do not bring down punishment upon the rabbis.’ R. Yochanan went off to the *beit midrash* and taught: ‘Yet they seek Me by day and seek to know My ways’ (*Yishayahu* 58) – do they then seek Him by day, but not seek Him by night? [Surely not,] it therefore comes to teach you that anyone who engages in Torah, even for just one day in the year, is regarded as though he engaged [in it] throughout the year….’”

R. Idi’s three-month long journey to his rabbi, just so that he could spend one day with him, is reminiscent of the pilgrimage to the Temple: Jews would sometimes have to travel a considerable distance for the purpose of spending just one day (at least in the case of Pesach and Shavuot) at the Temple. In fact, for those who lived far from Jerusalem (or outside of Eretz Yisrael), the journey could last several weeks. Perhaps for some it took months.[[1]](#footnote-1) If we consider the period between Sukkot and Pesach, we might well imagine someone who lived very far from Jerusalem traveling home for three months, and then having to leave again immediately in order to be back in Jerusalem in time for Pesach. He would only be able to spend a single day at the Temple on each visit.

**e. Torah and worship**

The comparison between paying respects to a Torah sage and the pilgrimage to Jerusalem conveys an important point. The *aggada* compares – or, we might even say, ‘translates’ – the pilgrimage to the Temple and the sacrificial service into a different realm: Torah study. A student makes a ‘pilgrimage’ in order to spend a single day with his teacher. His teacher explains the significance of this act: “Anyone who engages in Torah even for just one day in the year, is regarded as though he engaged [in it] throughout the year.” This represents a radical transition from the world of the Temple and the sacrifices to the world of Torah study. Such a transition is found elsewhere in rabbinic sources – as noted, for example, in a previous shiur that discussed a *sugya* in the seventh chapter of *Massekhet Yoma*, about the *Kohen Gadol* after he emerges from the Temple (71a):

“When the man who was to lead [the he-goat] away came back and met the *Kohen Gadol* in the street, he would say to him, ‘Sir *Kohen Gadol*, we have fulfilled the mission you entrusted us with.’ If he met him in his house, he would say to him, ‘We have fulfilled the mission of Him Who grants life to all who live.’

Rabba said: When rabbis in Pumbedita would take leave of each other, they would say, ‘May He Who grants life to all who live, grant you a long, happy and upright life… And R. Berakhia said, ‘If a person wishes to offer a libation offering upon the altar, let him fill the throat of Torah sages with wine, as it is written, ‘Unto you, o men [*ishim*] I call….’”

The unit here opens with the greeting of the man who led the he-goat to Azazel, to the *Kohen Gadol*, after the service of Yom Kippur is over. This is followed by a transition to the words with which the Torah sages would bid farewell to each other after completing their study together. Especially notable in our context is R. Berakhia’s statement that filling the throats of Torah sages with wine may replace the libation offering of wine on the altar.

In fact, this transition, or transposition, is stated explicitly in the Yerushalmi, in the context of the pilgrimage (*Sanhedrin* 11:4):

“One who greets (or ‘pays respects to’) his teacher, is considered as though he greeted the Divine Presence.”

**f. Summary**

The aggadic series that we have examined over two *shiurim* has an interesting and carefully planned structure. The first stage presents R. Huna weeping of the loss of the commandment of ‘*re’iya*,’ with the weeping relating to the subject treated in the mishna. Then, following what appears at first glance to be an associative chain, the Gemara describes the weeping of other Sages, unrelated to the commandment of ‘*re’iya*.’ Then we find the weeping of God Himself, over the severance from His people and their exile. This serves to close one cycle, with the series having returned to the subject of the halakha in the *beraita*. As in the *beraita*, which defines the mutuality of the “seeing” at the Temple (a person comes ‘to see’ and ‘to be seen’), there is a mutuality of weeping in exile over the absence of ‘seeing.’ Finally, in the last part of the series, the Gemara comes back to explicit treatment of the subject of ‘*re’iya’* and its significance in the context of exile. Thus, the ‘greeting’ of a teacher is treated in terms reminiscent of the greeting of the Divine Presence. Those who go to greet the sage are blessed with the wish that they might merit the original ‘seeing’ or ‘greeting’ mentioned in the *sugya* – the encounter with the Divine Presence at the Temple.

The structure as a whole conveys several messages. The first is expressed in the frank willingness of the *Amoraim* to grapple with extremely painful questions pertaining to the reality of the world and man’s relations with God, although they are unable to offer answers and ultimately can only weep. We see these important sages, who devoted their lives to Torah, expressing the pain of unbearably difficult questions and challenges for which they have no clear solutions, but which nevertheless in no way impair their commitment to Torah or observance of the commandments, which they pursue with all their might.

Another message arising specifically from the structure of this *aggadic* series is the idea of a sort of substitute, in exile, for the encounter with the Divine Presence. Aside from the partial connection that exists with the Divine Presence even in exile (“His hand is stretched over us”), there is another way of connecting – via study of the Torah and Torah sages. The encounter with Torah scholars is a sort of substitute for the encounter with the Divine Presence. Likewise, the Divine Presence itself may be encountered via Torah study. In other words, Torah study is itself an encounter which, in exile, may serve as a substitute for the pilgrimage to the Temple. Obviously, the more vital and profound the study experience, the more meaningful the encounter that it creates with God.

Following the destruction of the Temple, the halakhic discussion of the commandment of ‘*re’iya’* becomes wholly theoretical. Therefore, the structuring of the *sugya* would seem to suggest a deliberate extension of the discussion to include an existential dimension with powerful significance for life in exile, with no “physical” possibility of an encounter with the Divine Presence via the commandment of ‘*re’iya*.’ The *sugya* offers living, relevant content to fill the void in the lives of all Jews living a religious life in exile – a void that is experienced most powerfully and poignantly when studying *mishnayot* and discussions dealing with the commandment of ‘*re’iya*.’ The *sugya* thus attempts to address this pain and offer some partial way of filling the void.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

Tags: seeing, Temple, crying, weeping, re’iya, hiding, revelation, exile, galut, Torah study

Summary: This article continues to analyze the aggadic sugyot surrounding the commandment of Pilgrimage to the Beit Hamikdash.

1. It is clear, though, that in most cases, even those who were the furthest removed from the Temple journeyed for only a few weeks, at most. The Mishna in *Ta’anit* (1:3) states that the last of the pilgrims from Babylon would return from home after spending Sukkot in Jerusalem by the 7th of Cheshvan. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)