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 30: Daf 7b-8a**

**Better than Prayin’ Alone**

Welcome to the summer semester of the Virtual Beit Midrash *shiur* “Ein Yaakov - The World of Talmudic Aggada.” Though we will continue with our study of the first chapter of *Masekhet Berakhot,* we will begin a new section starting at the bottom of *daf* 7b. This section deals with one of the central concerns of our chapter, the importance of communal prayer, especially in the synagogue. Our section begins with an interesting exchange between two *amoraim* (Talmudic scholars):

R. Yitzchak said to R. Nachman:

Why does the Master (R. Nachman)

not come to the synagogue to pray?

He said to him:

I am not able.

He asked him:

Let the Master gather ten people

and pray with them [in his house]?

He answered:

It is too much of a trouble for me.

[He then said]:

Let the Master ask the messenger of the congregation

to inform him of the time when the congregation prays?

He answered:

Why all this [trouble]?

He said to him:

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

What is the meaning of the verse:

‘But as for me, let my prayer be made unto Thee,

O Lord, in an acceptable time?’ (*Tehillim* 64:14).

When is the time acceptable?

When the congregation prays.

The simplest reading of this story is to see R. Yitzchak as the teacher and R. Nachman as the disciple. R. Yitzchak teaches R. Nachman and us, the readers, the importance of praying with a *minyan* (10 man quorum necessary for communal prayer) in the synagogue. If it is not possible to pray with a *minyan* in the synagogue, one should pray with a *minyan* at home. Failing that, one should at least pray at the exact time that the community is praying in the synagogue. In this reading, R. Nachman understands the importance of praying in the synagogue. However, given his various difficulties, he does not understand why R. Yitzchak makes such a big deal about it. R. Yitzchak responds to this query by citing the teaching of R. Yochanan in the name of R. Shimon b. Yochai on the importance of praying with or at least at the same time as the community. R. Nachman and we, the readers, are meant to accept the authoritative nature of this teaching.

This approach would seem to underlie some of the traditional commentaries on this passage. Rashi explains that R. Nachman says that he is not able to go to the synagogue because he is too weak to go. Similarly, R. Moshe of Coucy (13th century, France ) in his *Sefer Mitzvot Gedolot*, understands R. Nachman’s statement that “it is too much trouble” to gather a *minyan* in his home as meaning that he does not want to trouble other people in the neighborhood for his own sake. In each case, the commentators assume that R. Nachman accepted R. Yitzchak’s premise of the importance of praying with a *minyan*. R. Nachman, therefore, must have had a good reason for not doing so, even if that reason is not mentioned explicitly in the text.

An alternative reading is hinted at in the commentary of the Maharsha. He cites the Tur (*Orach Chayim* 90), who states that if a person has a regular study session at home, he should pray there, even if it means forgoing praying with a *minyan*. The Tur, in turn, cites a passage later on in our *gemara* which notes how R. Ami and R. Asi preferred to pray where they studied rather than at the synagogue. The Maharsha assumes that R. Nachman had no such regular study session in his home.

This commentary hints to an alternative reading of our passage. Perhaps R. Nachman did not accept R. Yitzchak’s insistence on the importance of prayer with a *minyan*. Rather, he felt, like R. Ami and R. Asi, that a scholar should pray where he studies. Benovitz notes a consistent geographic pattern with regard to different rabbis’ opinions about the importance of prayer in the synagogue. Rabbis from the land of Israel, like R. Yitzchak, stress the importance of communal prayer, whereas R. Nachman’s colleagues in Babylonia see it as less important.

In light of this, we might read R. Yitzchak’s conversation with R. Nachman as a debate about the importance of communal prayer, rather than as a univocal lesson on this topic. R. Nachman’s responses of “I am not able” and “It is too much of a trouble for me” are not claims of extenuating circumstances to excuse himself from communal prayer. Rather, they are polite ways for R. Nachman to signal his rejection of R. Yitzchak’s premise. R. Yitzchak may get the last word in this story, but that does not mean that R. Nachman accepted R. Yitzchak’s conclusions. This remains an open dialogue in which two great rabbis present opposing opinions.

Before proceeding to the continuation of the *gemara*, I would like to make two notes on the teaching of R. Yochanan in the name of R. Shimon b. Yochai. First, the teaching links this new section on communal prayer to the previous section, which consisted of a series of statements of R. Yochanan in the name of R. Shimon b. Yochai followed by some discussion. Second, this passage is not the first time we have seen the idea that certain times are better for praying than others. Previously, we saw that there is a moment each day in which God is angry and will answer all prayers for the destruction of one’s enemies. Similarly, we learned that the time of the *mincha* prayer is a particularly auspicious time to pray. We noted that these statements seem to reflect a somewhat mythological view of God, in which He is in some way bound by the time of day. This is quite distant from a rational notion of God as beyond temporal constraints. This teaching of R. Yochanan in the name of R. Shimon b. Yochai has a different take on *eit ratzon*, the concept that there are particularly good times to pray. *Eit ratzon* refers not to times of day, but rather to circumstances. God prefers to hear the prayers of the community over those of the individual.

The Gemara now presents several other possible biblical sources for communal prayer:

R. Yosi b. R. Chanina says:

[You learn it] from here:

‘Thus saith the Lord,

In an acceptable time have I answered thee’ (*Yishayahu* 49:8).

R. Acha son of R. Chanina says:

[You learn it] from here:

‘Behold, God despiseth not the mighty’ (*Iyov* 36:5)

And it is further written:

‘He hath redeemed my soul in peace

so that none came nigh me;

for they were many with me’ (*Tehillim* 55:19)

It has been taught also to the same effect;

R. Natan says:

How do we know that the Holy One, blessed be He,

does not despise the prayer of the congregation?

For it is said:

'Behold, God despiseth not the mighty'.

And it is further written:

'He hath redeemed my soul in peace so that none came nigh me, etc.'

from among the nations of the world.

This passage brings three verses as possible sources for the notion that God prefers communal prayer. The first verse, from *Yishayahu*, is very similar to the verse quoted by R. Shimon b. Yochai above. Both verses refer to an “acceptable time” for prayer and both understand this as referring to the time when the community gathers to pray. The final verse, from *Tehillim,* is also fairly straightforward. As the rabbis read it, this verse tells how the psalmist was saved from attack because he prayed with many others.

The verse from *Iyov,* however, is problematic. The entire verse reads in Hebrew: *hen el kabir ve-lo yimas kabir koach lev.* This is a difficult verse. A literal translation would be, “Behold, God is mighty, and He does not despise, mighty strong of heart.” We can understand how the rabbis understood this verse as referring to God answering prayers. The phrase *lo yimas,* “he does not despise,” might be understood to mean that God does not reject prayers, though no explicit reference to prayer is made here. But how do we know that this verse refers specifically to communal prayer? The central element of this interpretation remains a mystery.

The first step towards solving this conundrum is to look at a different and presumably more original version of R. Natan’s interpretation of this verse. This interpretation is preserved in the *Sifrei*, the early *midrash* on the last two books of the Torah. Though this passage appears in the *Sifrei*’s discussion of *parashat Pinchas* (paragraph #135), it actually comments on God’s rejection of Moshe’s prayers to enter the land at the beginning of *parashat Va-etchanan* (*Devarim* 3:26). R. Natan cites our verse from *Iyov*, and then gives the following interpretation,

The Holy One Blessed be He

does not despise the prayers of the many (*rabim*)

But here, “He did not listen to me”

And did not accept my (i.e. Moshe’s) prayers.

This passage is “curiouser and cursiouser.” What does God’s acceptance of communal prayers have to do with His rejection of Moshe’s prayers? In a discussion of this *Sifrei* passage, Professor Menachem Kahana suggests that the term *rabim* should be translated here not as “the many” but as “the great ones” i.e. the *tzadikim* (righteous ones) (*Mechkerei Talmud* I, Jerusalem, 1990, 5-7*.*) The *midrash* would then make sense in its context in *Sifrei,* which deals with God’s failure to answer Moshe’s prayers. God rejected Moshe’s pleas despite his general policy of answering the prayers of the righteous.

This suggestion might also explain R. Natan’s reading of the verse in *Iyov*. Elsewhere in *Iyov*, we find a verse that is nearly identical to the one cited by R. Natan, *hen el lo yimas tam*- “God does not despise the blameless” (*Iyov* 8:20). This verse differs from ours primarily because it clearly identifies whom God does not despise –the “blameless” or the righteous. R. Natan interpreted our ambiguous verse in *Iyov* as referring to the righteous in light of this more explicit verse.

How does this help us understand our *gemara,* which clearly interprets the verse as referring to God heeding the prayer of the community, not of the righteous? Once R. Natan’s *midrash* was separated from its context regarding Moshe Rabbeinu, there was no way of knowing that its use of the term *rabim* was meant to refer to “the righteous” and not the many. As a result, this tradition was understood by the Babylonian rabbis as referring to communal prayer, even though this understanding did not fit with the verse. The Gemara cited the inherited tradition as it understood it. This explanation of the *gemara* is both complex and speculative, and it posits that there are misunderstandings and even mistakes in the transmission of *Torah she-be-al peh.* I suggest this explanation with some hesitation, but it seems to be the best explanation of this difficult line in the *gemara.*

This section concludes with an anonymous paean to the value of praying with the community:

The Holy One, blessed be He, says:

If a man occupies himself

with the study of the Torah

and with works of charity

and prays with the congregation,

I account it to him as if he had redeemed

Me and My children from among the nations of the world.

This passage recalls the famous statement of R. Shimon at the beginning of *Pirkei Avot* that the world stands on three things: Torah, *avoda* (service)*,* and *gemilut chasadim* (good deeds)*.* In its original context, the term *avoda* referred to the Temple service. What keeps the world going in the absence of the Temple? Some sources suggest that the world continues on the force of Torah study and good deeds alone. Other sources suggest that prayer takes the place of sacrifices. This passage implies that communal prayer, in particular, takes the place of sacrifices. This notion is in line with the idea that a synagogue is a *mikdash me’at,* a lesser version of the Temple in Jerusalem (*Megilla* 29a). Only communal prayer takes the place of the communal sacrifices that were at the heart of the Temple service. We might thus understand God’s statement that praying in a *minyan* is equivalent to redeeming Israel from exile. Such a prayer almost makes up for the lack of the Temple and thus returns Israel to its redeemed state.

But God goes further. He says that communal prayer has the equivalent effect of redeeming God Himself,as well as Israel, from exile among the nations. The Gemara states in a well-known passage that when Israel went into exile the *Shekhina* went with them (*Megilla* 29a). I do not claim to know the exact meaning of the term *Shekhina*. However, the word appears to refer to some sort of manifestation of God that is in some way distinct from God. Our *gemara* would seem to go even further; it suggests that God Himself followed Israel into exile. While I know of no parallel to this concept, it does recall the *gemara* that we saw at the beginning of the chapter on *daf* 3a, in which God is described as suffering with His people in exile. The idea that God suffers with us adds a new dimension to our prayers. God does not simply hear our pleas or even sympathize with our problems. He quite literally feels our pain. He understands our circumstances because in some way, He too experiences them.

**Prayers in the ‘Hood**

The Gemara now presents statements from the two great *amoraim* of the land of Israel, Reish Lakish and R. Yochanan. Each one emphasizes the importance of regular prayer in the synagogue. First Reish Lakish’s statement:

Resh Lakish said:

Whosoever has a synagogue in his town

and does not go there in order to pray,

is called an evil neighbor.

For it is said:

‘Thus saith the Lord,

as for all Mine evil neighbors,

that touch the inheritance

which I have caused My people Israel to inherit’ (*Yirmiyahu* 12:14).

And more than that, he brings exile upon himself and his children.

For it is said:

‘Behold, I will pluck them up from off their land,

and will pluck up the house of Judah from among them’ (ibid).

Reish Lakish cites a verse from *Yirmiyahu* which discusses the exile of the “evil neighbors” from the land of Israel. As R. Yoshiyahu Pinto (otherwise known as the Rif,1565-1648, Damascus) explains in his commentary on the *Ein Yaakov*, R. Lakish apparently understood the term “that touch the inheritance” as referring to those that are close to a synagogue so that they “touch” it, but do not actually go in. The simple meaning of the term “my inheritance” refers to the land of Israel. Reish Lakish establishes a link between the synagogue and the land, a connection that will be picked up on in R. Yochanan’s statement that follows.

The way in which Reish Lakish transforms the verses in *Yirmiyahu* is fascinating. In their original biblical context, the “bad neighbors” are the nations that lived around the land of Israel. They will be punished and exiled, apparently for their idol worship. The severity of the nations’ punishment is likely in part because their practices influenced Israel to worship foreign gods. In its original context, this passage deals with the larger political and theological spheres, as entire nations are removed from their land because they worship false gods. Reish Lakish understands this passage in more local and communal terms. He interprets the term “bad neighbors” in a more literal sense, in terms of the proverbial “bad neighbor,” *shakhen ra* referred to in *Pirkei Avot* (1:7, 2:9). This bad neighbor is an individual whose bad character traits threaten to influence those around him. When this evil-doer is ultimately punished by God, those nearby may suffer as well. This shift from focusing on national and political to individual and communal issues is characteristic of the differing central interests of the *Tanakh* and of *Chazal.*

Why is the person who does not go to synagogue considered a “bad neighbor?” Such a person refuses to participate in the spiritual life of the community. His anti-social behavior undermines the community directly and threatens to influence others to withdraw from the community as well.

**Shocked, Shocked!**

R. Yochanan’s statement comes in the context of a dialogue with his students:

When they told R. Yochanan

that there were old men in Babylon,

he showed astonishment and said:

Why, it is written:

‘That your days may be multiplied,

and the days of your children,

*upon the land’* (*Devarim* 11:21)--

but not outside the land [of Israel]!

When they told him that

they came early to the synagogue

and left it late,

he said:

That is what helps them.

Even as R. Yehoshua b. Levi said to his children:

Come early to the synagogue

and leave it late

that you may live long.

R. Acha son of R. Chanina says:

Which verse [may be quoted in support of this]?

‘Happy is the man that hearkeneth to Me,

watching daily at My gates,

waiting at the posts of My doors’ (*Mishlei* 8:34),

after which it is written:

‘For whoso findeth me findeth life’ (ibid. v. 35).

R. Yochanan’s statements here are polemical in intent. Certainly, he knew before his students told him that not everyone in Babylonia dies young. Rather, R. Yochanan expresses shock at this revelation in order to teach a lesson to his students. He wishes to drive home the message that according to the Torah, the only people who are promised long life are those who live in the land of Israel. In making this statement, R. Yochanan implicitly criticizes the Jews of Babylonia by suggesting that all Jews belong in the land of Israel. This is hardly surprising coming from the leading “Israeli” rabbi of the day. However, R. Yochanan then turns around and pays a compliment to his brethren on the other side of the Euphrates. The fact that Babylonians do live long lives (and flourish in other ways as well) even though they remain in exile can only mean that they have some special merit in their favor. This merit is their regular attendance at synagogue. Once again, going to the synagogue is linked with living in the land; it may even be a substitute for it.

Viewed in its wider context in the *gemara*, R. Yochanan’s statement appears somewhat ironic. As we have discussed previously, the *amoraim* of the land of Israel were the ones who saw communal prayer in the synagogue as a supreme value. At least some of the Babylonian *amoraim* believed that attendance at synagogue was not necessarily a top priority for scholars. Perhaps R. Yochanan here is also criticizing those Babylonian rabbis who do not attend synagogue regularly, suggesting that those rabbis may be giving up their one chance of attaining long life while living in the Diaspora.