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 31: Daf 8a**

**Double doors**

After quoting the verse, “Happy is the man that hearkeneth to Me, watching daily at My gates, waiting at the posts of My doors” (*Mishlei* 8:34), the Gemara quotes a statement of R. Chisda commenting on this verse.

R. Chisda says:

A man should always enter two doors into the synagogue.

What is the meaning of 'two doors’?

Rather, it means:

The distance of two doors, and then pray.

R. Chisda’s statement is cryptic. Why should one go through “two doors” to enter the synagogue? Shouldn’t one be sufficient? The Gemara answers that what R. Chisda really meant was that when entering a synagogue, one should not stand in the back, but rather walk inside the distance of two doors and only then begin to pray.

The Gemara’s answer here is not that satisfying. If R. Chisda meant “the distance of two doors,” he should have said so. Furthermore, why would R. Chisda use such an unusual unit for measuring distance? Why would he not simply give the number of cubits that one should walk forward in a synagogue? As a result of these issues, interpreters of this passage have sought out alternative explanations of R. Chisda’s statement. I would like to present two such suggestions.

First, the Vilna Gaon (the “Gra”) cited in the work *Imrei* *Noam,* suggests that the “two doorways” referred to by R. Chisda “allude to two things that are needed for prayer –fear and love.” In the tradition of the medieval mystics and philosophers, the Gra offers an allegorical interpretation of this passage. Since it is not clear what two literal doors or “openings” one would need to go through in order to pray, the Gra suggests that the Gemara here refers to spiritual openings or paths.

When confronted with two doors, one generally has to choose between going through one door or the other. One cannot simultaneously pass through two different doors. So too, the Gra identifies the two key portals to prayer as love and fear of God. Normally love and fear are contradictory. Love suggests a certain closeness to an individual and fear suggests distance. For the Gra, prayer is a dialectical experience in which we must both feel a clear and present connection to God and yet also be aware of God’s majesty and otherness. Only by simultaneously passing through the gates of love and fear of God can a person achieve the highest level of prayer.

The archeologist and historian Lee I. Levine has a more down-to-earth explanation for R. Chisda’s words. He notes that archeological finds have shown that ancient synagogues in Israel did indeed have two sets of doors. The first set lead into a sort of vestibule, while the second lead into the synagogue proper. In light of this finding, Levine suggests that R. Chisda is telling people that they should not hang out in the anteroom of the synagogue, but rather go into the synagogue itself in order to pray. However, as Benovitz notes in his discussion of Levine’s suggestion, R. Chisda was from Babylonia, and there is no evidence that Babylonian synagogues also had two sets of doors. Thus this explanation remains speculative.



Floor plan of the synagogue in Beit Alpha

Photo credit: Talmoryair

**Seek and Ye Shall Find**

 After citing the verse from *Mishlei* “For whoso findeth me findeth life,” the Gemara now brings an entire discussion which includes a reference to this verse. Though this discussion constitutes a digression from the Gemara’s discussion of the synagogue, the passage still focuses on the fundamental focus of our chapter and indeed of the entire *masekhet* (tractate) --prayer.

 ‘For this let everyone that is godly

 pray unto Thee in the time of finding’ (*Tehillim* 32:6).

A R. Chanina says:

 'In the time of finding' refers to

 [the finding of] a wife.

 For it is said:

 ‘Whoso findeth a wife

 findeth a great good’ (*Mishlei* 18:22).

 In the West they used to ask a man

 who married a wife thus:

 *Matza* or *Motzei*?

 '*Matza,*' for it is written:

 Whoso findeth [*matza*] a wife

 findeth a great good.’

 *'Motzei,'* for it is written:

 ‘And I find [*motzei*] the woman

 more bitter than death’ (*Kohelet* 7:26).

B R. Natan says:

 'In the time of finding' refers to the [finding of] Torah.

 For it is said:

 ‘For whoso findeth me findeth life, etc’ (*Mishlei* 8:35).

C R. Nachman b. Yitzchak said:

 'In the time of finding' refers to the [finding of] death.

 For it is said:

 ‘…escape (*totza'ot*) from death’ (*Tehillim* 68:21).

 Similarly it has been taught:

 Nine hundred and three species of death

 were created in this world. For it is said:

 ‘…escape from death,’

 and the numerical value of *toza'ot* is so (i.e. 903).

 The worst of them is the croup,

 and the easiest of them is the kiss.

 Croup is like a thorn in a ball of wool

 pulled out backwards.

 Some people say:

 It is like [pulling] a rope through the loop-hole [of a ship].

 [Death by a] kiss is like drawing a hair out of milk.

D R. Yochanan said:

 'In the time of finding' refers to the [finding of a] grave.

 R. Chanina said:

 Which verse [may be quoted in support]?

 ‘Who rejoice unto exultation and are glad,

 when they can find the grave’ (*Iyov* 3:22).

 Rabba son of R. Shila said:

 Hence the proverb:

 A man should pray for peace

 even to the last clod of earth [thrown upon his grave].

E Mar Zutra said:

 'In the time of finding', refers to the outhouse.

 They said in the West (i.e. the land of Israel):

 This [interpretation] of Mar Zutra is the best of all.

This passage is divided into five sections, each of which consists of a different interpretation of the verse: ‘For this let everyone that is godly pray unto Thee in the time of finding (*eit metzo*).” All of these interpretations understand the phrase *eit metzo* as referring not to the time that one should pray, but to *what* one should pray for. Each rabbi uses another verse that contains some form of the verb *matza* “find” in order to identify the optimal object of one’s prayers. As a result, this passage becomes more than a simple hermeneutic exercise; it is a meditation on our priorities in prayer and our focus in life.

 The shortest and most straightforward of these interpretations is R. Natan’s reading (section B). He says that the *eit matzo* of the verse in *Tehillim* refers to Torah. One should pray for Torah, or perhaps more specifically, for time to study Torah. Given the absolute centrality of Torah study in the worldview of *Chazal*, it is hardly surprising that R. Natan thinks that it should be a central focus of one’s prayers.

 The interpretations that identify marriage and death as the main focus of our prayers (sections A and C) are also clear. Both marriage and death involve crucial events in our lives that can be either very good or very bad. The person someone marries obviously has a decisive effect on the rest of one’s life. A spouse can greatly enrich a person or have a highly negative impact.

 The flip side of marriage is, in many ways, death. Freudian psychoanalysts have described in detail the complex relationship between “Eros” (sexuality, creativity) and “Thanatos” (death, destruction) in the human psyche and culture. This connection is reflected in the *Halakha* in the many parallels between the rituals surrounding marriage and death. Death, too, can either be the culmination of a person’s life, marking a graceful transition to a higher state, or it can be excruciatingly painful and humiliating. The Gemara states that there are in fact nine hundred and three ways to die, the best being the Divine kiss, associated with the death of Moshe and other great biblical personages. The image of the kiss, which we generally associate more with a wedding, suggests a death that may even be pleasurable, or at the very least, gentle and painless like the removal of a hair. The Gemaraidentifies the worst possible death as *askara,* which is translated here as “croup.” The term might be better translated more broadly as “diphtheria.” Before the advent of effective vaccinations, the diphtheria virus was a frequent (and frequently fatal) cause of croup in small children. The disease causes a membrane to form across the respiratory system which slowly suffocates the victim. Given this vast disparity in possible endings to one’s life, it is hardly surprising that R. Nachman recommends praying for a merciful and painless death.

 The difference between praying for a good marriage or a good death might also reflect divergent attitudes towards life itself. For R. Chanina, we should be focused on our activities in this life, such as marriage and family. For R. Nachman, we should always have the moment of our death in front of us. We must be constantly aware of the fragile, fleeting nature of our existence. By praying regularly for a good death, a person can stay oriented to the eternal and not get distracted by the exigencies of daily life.

 R. Yochanan’s interpretation that one should pray for a proper burial (section D) appears to be an extension of the previous position regarding death. R. Yochanan encourages us to look beyond the moment of our passing. One’s story in this world does not come to a close until one’s body finds a final and appropriate resting place. The human body is not merely a disposable receptacle for the soul, but an integral part of a person and his identity. We therefore need to pray for our wellbeing beyond death, to the proper disposal of our remains.

 The last interpretation is the most puzzling. What does Mar Zutra mean when he talks about praying regarding the outhouse (section E)? What did the rabbis of the land of Israel see in this interpretation that caused them to favor it over all the others? It is almost tempting to suggest that these last lines are nothing more than an attempt to close the passage with a bit of scatological humor.

 Rashi’s interpretation does not help much in resolving these issues. Alluding to the *gemara* in *Shabbat* 25b, which identifies “inner peace” with “having a lavatory close to one’s table,” Rashi explains that in Babylonia, where the land is often marshy, people sometimes have to travel a significant distance in order to find a toilet. Hence Mar Zutra recommends praying that one should live in proximity to an outhouse. Again, we may ask: is this really more important than praying for time to study Torah, for a good marriage, a merciful death or a proper burial?

 Yaakov ibn Habib, the author of the *Ein Yaakov,* offers a beautiful interpretation of Mar Zutra’s words in his commentary entitled *Ha-kotev*. He takes visiting the outhouse as a metonymy for everyday occurrences to which we generally give little notice. Of course we should offer prayers regarding the major issues and events of our lives. However, our ultimate concerns need to be with the quotidian, our mundane day-to-day activities which must be conducted in the name of heaven and in accordance with *Halakha*. Our God is a God of small things and we need to orient our lives accordingly.

 I would like to offer two more possible explanations for these difficult lines. One possibility is that Mar Zutra refers to various physical conditions that can make going to the bathroom very painful. *Chazal* were acutely aware of how distressing such pain can be. The Gemara lists the “tears of the outhouse” as one of three types of “bad tears” (*Shabbat* 152a). Even more strikingly, the Gemara recounts that when Rabbi Yehuda Ha-nasi was sick with his final illness, the pain he suffered when relieving himself was what spurred his maid to take action to stop the other rabbis from praying for R. Yehuda, thus hastening his death (*Ketubot* 104a). Clearly this pain could be quite extreme. This explanation of Mar Zutra would establish a thematic link between his interpretation and that of R. Nachman. One refers to the extraordinary suffering caused by the constriction of the upper respiratory system, while the other notes the pain that results from the constriction of the lower digestive track.

 Alternatively, Mar Zutra may refer to the fact that *Chazal* viewed the outhouse as an inherently dangerous place. Towards the end of our *masekhet,* theGemara relates (*Berakhot* 60b):

 On entering an outhouse one should say:

 'Be honored,

 ye honored and holy ones

 that minister to the Most High.

 Give honor to the God of Israel.

 Wait for me till

 I enter and do my needs, and return to you.'

 Abaye said:

 A man should not speak thus,

 lest they should leave him and go.

 What he should say is:

 'Preserve me, preserve me,

 help me, help me,

 support me, support me,

 till I have entered and come forth,

 for this is the way of human beings.’

*Chazal* were concerned that the angels that normally follow a person around and protect him will not enter an outhouse. Going to the toilet was thus seen as a uniquely dangerous activity, because it leaves a person bereft of the normal level of Divine protection and exposed to all sorts of dangers. We can now see why Mar Zutra might say that one should focus one’s prayers on time spent in the outhouse.

**Some Keep It Staying at Home**

TheGemara now returns to its discussion of prayer in the synagogue. It presents an alternative position, mentioned earlier, that praying with the community in the synagogue is not always the best option. A scholar should pray at home, where he studies Torah:

Rava said to Rafram b. Papa:

Let the master please tell us

some of that you said

in the name of R. Chisda

on matters relating to the synagogue!

He replied: those fine things:

Thus said R. Chisda:

What is the meaning of the verse:

‘The Lord loveth the gates of Zion [*Tziyon*]

more than all the dwellings of Jacob’ (*Tehillim* 87:2)?’

The Lord loves the gates that are distinguished [*metzuyanim*] through *Halakha*

more than the synagogues and houses of study.

This passage opens with a bit of irony. When Rava asks Rafram bar Papa to relate to him some of “those fine things” about the synagogue, the reader, and perhaps Rava himself, expects Rafram to report something in praise of praying in the synagogue. Instead, he responds by citing an interpretation that teaches that God actually favors “gates that are distinguished through *Halakha*,” over the synagogues and houses of study. What are these gates? If we take this interpretation alone, without considering the explanation given to it later in the Gemara, it does not seem to refer to homes where scholars study. The term “gates,” *she’arim,* does not generally refer to a private home. Such structures have doors. Gates are generally mentioned with regard to much larger structures, such as the Temple or a town. In light of this understanding, I would like to suggest the following explanation for this line: More important to God than the communal rituals and activities held in the synagogue and house of study is that all the activities and inhabitants of a town conform to the *Halakha.* Service of God is not limited to specific buildings or events; rather it must inform every aspect of our lives.

The next statement cited in theGemaramight be interpreted along similar lines:

And this conforms with the following saying of R. Chiya b. Ami

in the name of Ula:

Since the day that the Temple was destroyed,

the Holy One, blessed be He,

has nothing in this world but the four cubits of *Halakha* alone.

In the times of the Temple, the central mode of Divine service was the sacrifices and other aspects of the Temple cult. Now however, we serve God only through the regular study and practice of *Halakha*, which lack the public grandeur of the Temple rite. *Halakha* is thus designated as taking up only four cubits, as opposed to the vast expanse of the Temple courtyards. This statement in and of itself does not disparage communal prayer in the synagogue. Rather, communal prayer is presumably one of the activities included in the four cubits of *Halakha.*

Abaye and the editor of this passage in the Gemara understood this statement differently.

So also said Abaye:

At first I used to study in my house and pray in the synagogue.

Since I heard the saying of R. Chiya b. Ami

in the name of Ula:

'Since the day that the Temple was destroyed,

the Holy One, blessed be He,

has nothing in His world but the four cubits of *Halakha* alone,'

I pray only in the place where I study.

Abaye understands the term “four cubits of *Halakha*” as referring to the space in which a person studies Torah regularly. Similarly, he presumably understands the reference to God preferring “gates that are distinguished through *Halakha*,” as establishing that the place where an individual studies is superior to the synagogue as a place for prayer. Unlike previous statements which we have seen, which see the Divine presence as having been transferred from the Temple to the synagogue, this opinion see the Divine presence as revealing itself only in response to individual Torah study. Hence it is preferable to pray in the place where one studies rather than in the synagogue.

This position is reinforced through a recounting of the practice of R. Ami and R. Asi.

R. Ami and R. Asi,

though they had thirteen synagogues in Tiberias,

prayed only between the pillars where they used to study.

Like Abaye, these rabbis also preferred to pray where they studied, between the pillars of the market place. This behavior cannot be explained by claiming that these rabbis were not in proximity to a synagogue. There were no less that thirteen synagogues in Tiberias. One of them must have been convenient to them.

This idea of praying where one studies picks up one of the recurring themes of our chapter, the interrelationship between prayer and Torah study. In this view, Torah study is almost a prerequisite for prayer. Only this study brings the Divine presence into our midst. Torah study thus facilitates a direct encounter with God through prayer.