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 32: Daf 8a-8b**

**By the Sweat of his Brow**

In the previous passage, the Gemara presents a statement of R. Chiya bar Ami in the name of Ula. Here the Gemara presents two more such statements, which are not directly connected to the larger discussion of prayer and the synagogue. These two statements appear in a different order in the printed Gemarathan in the *Ein Yaakov*. I will follow the order found in the Gemara:

R. Chiya b. Ami further said in the name of Ula:

A man who lives from the labor [of his hands]

is greater than the one who fears heaven.

For with regard to the one who fears heaven

it is written:

“Happy is the man that feareth the Lord,” (*Tehillim* 112:1)

while with regard to the man who lives from his own work

it is written:

‘When thou eatest the labor of thy hands,

happy shalt thou be,

and it shall be well with thee’ (128:2).

'Happy shalt thou be,’

in this world,

'and it shall be well with thee,’

in the world to come.

But of the man that fears heaven it is not written:

'and it shall be well with thee.'

This is a difficult statement to understand. On an exegetical level, R. Chiya contrasts those who fear God, represented by *Tehillim* 112:1, with those who live off their own labor, represented by *Tehillim* 128:2. However, if we actually open up and read *Tehillim* 128 we will see that in fact the verses in 112 and 128 *both* refer to those who fear God. Here is the JPS translation of the first two verses of 128:

Happy are all those who fear the LORD,

Who follow His ways.

You shall enjoy the fruit of your labors;

You shall be happy and prosperous.

When read in context, it is clear that the person who is fortunate enough to eat the fruit of his own labors is precisely the one who fears God. Both verses promise happiness to those who fear God. Why does R. Chiya completely invert the meaning of this verse?

Furthermore, on an ideological level, why would R. Chiya claim that the reward of the person who earns his own bread is greater than one who fears God? Is the self-made man, even if he is a sinner, really better than a person who spends his life in acts of devotion and kindness, but relies on others for his support?

Most of those who comment on this passage focus on this ideological problem. Maharsha (1555-1631, Poland) suggests two answers. The first answer is that in both cases R. Chiya refers to a righteous person. The first person relies on Divine support and intervention in order to survive in this world. Such a person thereby mortgages his share in the next world. On the other hand, a person who gets by through his own wits and hard work does not draw on his future rewards for his deeds in this world. Hence he benefits in both this world and the next.

Alternatively, Maharsha suggests that “eating the labor of one’s hands” does not refer to manual labor, but to Torah study. Alluding to a parallel interpretation of *Tehillim* 128:2 found in *Chulin* 44b, Maharsha suggests that this phrase refers to a person who labors to become a Torah scholar. As a Torah scholar, he is able to make halakhic rulings for himself, such as ruling whether or not a particular piece of meat is kosher. In this reading, R. Chiya contrasts the relative merits of Torah study and fear of God and concludes that Torah study is greater.

Perhaps there is a simpler explanation of R. Chiya’s words. Maybe he is using what the *rishonim* (medieval commentators) call *leshon guzma,* an exaggerated style used for rhetorical purposes. R. Chiya’s whole point may be to emphasize the importance of working for one’s keep. In order to make his point, he presents an interpretation that argues that earning one’s way is even greater than fearing God. This interpretation is an overstatement both in terms of the verses cited and the ideas presented. We are supposed to understand that. But by making such radical claims, R. Chiya reinforces his point that working for a living is *really* important.

**Know When to Walk Away**

The second statement of R. Chiya bar Ami in the name of Ula is more straightforward:

R. Chiya b. Ami further said in the name of Ula:

A man should always live in the same town as his teacher.

For as long as Shimei the son of Gera was alive

Shlomo did not marry the daughter of Pharaoh.

A person who remains in proximity to his teacher will continue to benefit from his positive influence and will not stray. R. Chiya brings King Shlomo as an example. In *Melakhim I,* we read that David, on his death bed, commanded Shlomo to punish Shimei ben Gera for cursing him when he temporarily fell from power during Avshalom’s revolt. David tells Shlomo not to kill Shimei outright, but to use his wisdom to find an appropriate way to kill him (2:8-9). Shlomo places Shimei under a sort of house arrest, warning him that should he leave the Jerusalem city limits, he will be killed. Eventually, Shimei does briefly leave Jerusalem to retrieve some lost slaves, and Shlomo has him executed (2:36-46). In the very next verse, we read that Shlomo took the daughter of Pharaoh as his wife. For some reason, the Gemara assumes that Shimei ben Gera was Shlomo’s teacher. There does not seem to be any other evidence for this tradition in the Talmud and Midrash (but see *Sanhedrin* 36a). Given this assumption, we can now re-read this story as an account of a person who lived in the same city as his teacher. As soon as the teacher died, the person sinned.

This lesson would not appear to be very controversial. However, the Gemarachallenges it:

But it has been taught

that he should not live [in the same place]?

There is no contradiction.

The former [speaks of a disciple] who is submissive to him,

the other [of a disciple] who is not submissive.

The Gemara quotes a tradition that seems to forbid living in the same city as one’s teacher. There is no other evidence for such a ruling, and there does not seem to be much logic to it either. The tradition really refers to the *halakha* forbidding a rabbi from issuing rulings in close proximity to his master out of deference to him. The Gemara resolves the apparent contradiction between this tradition and R. Chiya’s statement by suggesting that living in the same city as one’s teacher is ideal, provided that one remains subservient to him and does not issue independent rulings.

Underlying this simple question and answer is a deeper lesson. The Gemara is pointing to a fundamental tension in the teacher-student relationship. On the one hand, remaining close to one’s teacher is good because one can continue to learn and be influenced by him. On the other hand, at a certain point it is important for a person to strike out on his own and gain autonomy. If a student tries to have the best of both worlds, by asserting independence while remaining in his teacher’s ambit, the result will be needless conflict between teacher and student.

**Why Put Off until Next Week What You Can Put Off until Next Year?**

The Gemara now completed its digression, and returns to its discussion of the synagogue, focusing on the communal Torah reading. As the discussion is largely halakhic in nature, the *Ein Yaakov* includes only two small excerpts from it. I shall offer some brief comments on each one.

The main focus of the Gemara’s discussion of Torah reading is the practice of reading *shetayim mikra ve-echad targum,* reviewing the *parasha* (the weekly Torah reading) twice, and then once again using the Aramaic translation of Onkelos. The Gemara emphasizes that one should do so “with the community.”

The simple meaning of this statement is that one should complete each week’s reading in synch with the communal Torah reading schedule. R. Bibi had another plan:

R. Bibi b. Abaye wanted to finish

all the *parshiyot* of the whole year

on the eve of the Day of Atonement.

R. Bibi did not keep up with the weekly Torah readings. Instead, he sought to keep up on an annual basis, by reviewing the entire Torah once a year. But why did R. Bibi choose the day before Yom Kippur of all days, to undertake this marathon reading project? Avraham Yaari in his classic book on the history of Simchat Torahentitled *Toldot Chag Simchat Torah* (Jerusalem, 1964, 18-19) cites a practice from the early Geonic period, a few centuries after the completion of the Gemara. In some Babylonian communities, the practice was to complete the annual Torah reading cycle right before Yom Kippur and begin the new cycle on Yom Kippur afternoon. R. Bibi’s community seems to have followed this practice. Hence he sought to complete his review of the Torah on Yom Kippur eve, before the new Torah reading cycle began the next day.

R. Chiya did not approve of this practice

But Chiya b. Rav of Difti

recited to him [the following Baraita]:

It is written:

‘And ye shall afflict your souls,

in the ninth day of the month at even’ (*Vayikra* 23:32).

Now, do we fast on the ninth?

Why, we fast on the tenth!

But this teaches you that

if one eats and drinks on the ninth,

Scripture accounts it to him

as if he fasted on the ninth and tenth.

R. Chiya chastises R. Bibi. The day before Yom Kippur is not a time for Torah study, but for feasting. Feasting on this day is just as important as fasting on the next. R. Bibi should have planned further in advance.

**Sacred Fragments**

The *Ein Yaakov* also cites a line from the end of this discussion which records R. Yehoshua ben Levi’s testament to his children:

…and be careful [to respect] an elder

who has forgotten his knowledge

through no fault of his own,

for it was said:

Both the whole tablets and the fragments of the tablets

were placed in the Ark.

The notion that a sage who has forgotten his knowledge still deserves respect teaches a fundamental lesson about *Chazal’s* (the Sages’) understanding of the importance of a Torah scholar. Such a scholar is not simply a receptacle for Torah. If this were the case, his importance would dissipate as soon as his Torah is forgotten and he is reduced to an empty vessel. Rather, through his learning, the scholar is transformed into an embodiment of Torah. Even if a scholar’s Torah has left him, its imprint remains. Such a person still deserves great respect and deference.

**A Little Practical Advice from Dad**

After recording R. Yehoshua ben Levi’s lessons to his progeny, the Gemara presents a similar set of teachings from Rava:

Rava said to his children:

When you are cutting meat,

do not cut it upon your hand.

Some people say [this should not be done]

on account of danger;

and some in order not to spoil the meal.

Do not sit upon the bed of an Aramean woman,

and do not pass behind a synagogue when the congregation is praying.

The exact meaning of these three pieces of advice is not entirely clear, and the Gemara will discuss their meanings. However, we can see already that this list demonstrates the range of *Chazal’s* interests and concerns. They are not simply concerned with matters of *Halakha* and spirituality. Rather, they are concerned about simple practical issues, such as the best way to cut meat.

The most difficult to understand of these three statements is, “Do not sit upon the bed of an Aramaean woman.” What is the problem with doing so? The Gemara suggests three explanations:

Some say that this means:

Do not go to bed before reciting the *Shema*;

some say it means:

Do not marry a proselyte woman;

and some say it means literally

[the bed of] an Aramaean woman.

The first explanation understands this statement as a sort of coded message. “Sitting down on the bed of an Aramean woman” actually refers to a failure to say *Shema* before bed.  It is difficult to understand why Rava would use this phrase to refer to the bedtime *Shema*. Rashi suggests that the reference to an Aramean and her bed suggests gentile bedtime practices, i.e. not saying the *Shema.* But why then does the phase specify sitting and not laying down? Also, why refer specifically to an Aramean *woman* and not any Aramean?

The second explanation is much easier to understand. The phrase could easily be understood as a metaphor for having sexual relations with an Aramean, or more broadly a gentile. But why would Rava need to warn his sons against such an activity? Are we to think that his sons were sexual adventurers? Rather, the Gemara suggests that this refers neither to promiscuity nor to intermarriage, but to marrying a convert. This is not the place to delve into the question of *Chazal’*s attitudes towards converts. Suffice it to say that the rabbis had many different approaches towards this issue. It is not shocking that we should find an opinion in the Gemara discouraging marriage with converts.

Finally the Gemara suggests that the phrase “Do not sit upon the bed of an Aramean woman,” be taken literally. The question then remains, why not sit on her bed? The Gemara explains as follows:

This rule was laid down

because of what happened to R. Papa.

For R. Papa once visited an Aramean woman.

She brought out a bed and said:

Sit down. He said to her,

I will not sit down

until you raise the cover of the bed.

She raised the cover

and they found there a dead baby.

Hence said the scholars:

It is not permitted to sit down

upon the bed of an Aramean .

The basis of this rule is an incident in which R. Papa narrowly escaped being framed for manslaughter by an Aramean woman. It seems unlikely that Rava was warning his sons against a potential recurrence of this particular plot. Rather, the ruling against sitting on the bed of an Aramean woman is really a broader warning against the cunning and malicious nature of Aramean women.

The Gemara moves on to discuss Rava’s final piece of advice:

'And do not pass behind a synagogue

when the congregation is praying;'

this supports the teaching of R. Yehoshua b. Levi.

For R. Yehoshua b. Levi said:

It is not permitted for a man to pass behind a synagogue

when the congregation is praying.

Previously, we discussed R. Chelbo’s statement on *daf* 6b that “Whosoever prays at the rear of a synagogue is called wicked.” We argued that this refers to praying right outside the door to the synagogue. Failure to pray inside the synagogue proper was seen as symbolically separating oneself from the community. So too here, R. Yehoshua ben Levi forbids passing by the rear of the synagogue while services are going on. Passing by the door of the synagogue during services and not joining the congregation in their prayers reflects a failure of solidarity with the community. This interpretation of R. Yehoshua’s ruling explains the series of exceptions to this rule put forth by Abaye:

Abaye said:

This applies only when there is no other door,

but when there is another door,

there is no objection.

Furthermore,

this applies only when there is no other synagogue,

but when there is another synagogue

there is no objection.

And furthermore,

this applies only when he does not carry a burden,

and does not run,

and does not wear *tefillin*.

But where one of these conditions is present,

there is no objection.

Abaye holds that it is only a problem to pass by the entrance to the synagogue if there are no mitigating factors that allow observers to understand that the person’s actions are not meant as an affront to the community. Hence, if it is possible that the person is passing by the door of the synagogue because he intends to enter through another door or is on his way to another synagogue, there is no problem. Furthermore, if it is clear that a person is not free to attend synagogue because he has other matters to attend to, it is also alright to pass by the rear of the synagogue. Finally, a person wearing *tefillin* would never be suspected of not valuing communal prayer, and hence he, too, is covered by R. Yehoshua’s prohibition.

**Iranian Intimacies**

Picking up on Rava’s advice regarding the proper way to carve a piece of meat, the Gemara cites the following passage:

It has been taught:

R. Akiva says:

For three things I like the Medes:

When they cut meat,

they cut it only on the table;

when they kiss,

they kiss only the hand;

and when they hold counsel,

they do so only in the field.

R. Ada b. Achva says:

Which verse [may be quoted in support of the last]?

‘And Yaakov sent and called Rachel and Leah

to the field unto his flock’ (*Bereishit* 31:4).

It has been taught:

R. Gamliel says:

For three things do I like the Persians:

They are temperate in their eating,

modest in the privy,

and chaste in another matter [i.e. marital relations].

‘I have commanded My consecrated ones” (*Yishayahu* 13:3)

R. Yosef learnt:

This refers to the Persians

who are consecrated and destined for Gehenom.

In this passage both R. Akiva and R. Gamliel offer their praises of the peoples who live in what is today Iran. This shows the rabbis’ appreciation of various non-Jewish peoples. Further, if we look at the details of what these rabbis like about the Medeans and the Persians, we see that the rabbis greatly valued what might today be called “proper manners.”

Not everyone shared these rabbis’ views. R. Yosef declared that the Persians are destined for hell. What explains this disparity in views? Shai Secunda, in his forthcoming book on the Iranian context of the Babylonian Talmud, suggests that this debate may be a factor of geography. R. Akiva and R. Gamliel lived in the Land of Israel. They likely had limited knowledge of the culture of the Persians and the Medes. More importantly, in my opinion, these peoples were the sworn enemies of the hated Romans. Hence it was easy for these rabbis to find elements of Iranian culture that they liked and to praise these people for those positive traits. R. Yosef lived in Babylonia, so he knew the Persians up close. They were the ruling power with whom the Jews of Babylonia had to deal. R. Yosef thus had a far less sanguine view of the Persians.