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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Dedicated by the Wise and Etshalom families   
in memory of Rabbi Aaron M. Wise, whose yahrzeit is 21 Tamuz.   
Y'hi Zikhro Barukh.

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**Lecture 34: Daf 9b-10a**

**Counting Psalms**

The Gemara continues regarding the theme of joining *geula* (redemption) and *tefila* (prayer) by discussing the technical problem of inserting the verse “O Lord, open my lips” (*Tehillim* 51:17) between the end of the blessing of *geula* and the beginning of the *Shemone Esrei.* This insertion would ostensibly disrupt the continuity between *geula* and *tefila.* This passage is substantively similar to the one on *daf* 4b, which we have already discussed. As such, I shall not treat this passage here.

While discussing the recital of *Tehillim* 51:7 before the *Shemone Esrei*, the Gemara parenthetically mentions the practice of reciting *Tehillim* 19:15 at the conclusion of the *Shemone Esrei*:

May the words of my mouth

and the prayer of my heart

be acceptable to You, O Lord,

my rock and my redeemer,*.*

Regarding this practice the Gemara inquires:

Seeing that this verse,

'Let the words of my mouth be acceptable etc.'

is suitable for recital either at the end

or the beginning [of *Shemone Esrei*],

why did the Rabbis institute it

at the end of the eighteen benedictions?

Let it be recited at the beginning!

The Gemara clearly asks this question not because it is compelling in and of itself, but because it has an answer prepared which it wishes to present:

R. Yehuda the son of R. Shimon b. Pazi said:

Since David said it

only after eighteen chapters [of *Tehillim*],

the rabbis too enacted that

it should be said after eighteen blessings.

The placement of this verse at the end of the *Shemone Esrei* parallels its original position in the book of *Tehillim*. Just as the verse from *Tehillim* 19 concludes eighteen chapters of *Tehillim,* so too the verse concludes the eighteen blessings of the *Shemone Esrei.* The Gemara asks the obvious question with regard to this answer:

But those eighteen psalms are really nineteen?

'Happy is the man…' (*Tehillim* 1)

and

'Why are the nations in an uproar…'(*Tehillim* 2)

form one chapter.

The verse in question concludes the nineteenth chapter of *Tehillim,* not the eighteenth. The Gemara concludes that the author of this comment was using a different numbering system for the book of *Tehillim.* In this system, the first two chapters are combined into a single psalm. As a result, the number of each subsequent chapter is reduced by one. By this reckoning, the verse, ‘'Let the words of my mouth be acceptable…” appears at the end of the eighteenth chapter.

The Gemara proves the existence of such a system of counting by citing yet another discussion of the placement of a particular verse in *Tehillim:*

For R. Yehuda the son of R. Shimon b. Pazi said:

David composed a hundred and three chapters [of psalms],

and he did not say 'Halleluyah'

until he saw the downfall of the wicked,

as it says,

‘Let sinners cease out of the earth,

and let the wicked be no more.

Bless the Lord, O my soul. Halleluyah’ (*Tehillim* 104:35).

Now are these a hundred and three?

Are they not a hundred and four?

You must assume therefore that

'Happy is the man'

and

'Why are the nations in an uproar'

form one chapter.

R. Yehuda the son of R. Shimon b. Pazi also mysteriously miscalculated the number of chapters of *Tehillim* by asserting that a verse from chapter 104 occurred after only 103 chapters. R. Yehuda could simply be not including chapter 104 in his count. But the Gemara takes his assertion as evidence that he too had one less chapter in *Tehillim* and must have counted the first and second chapters as a single unit.

Given that the Gemara has evidence that some people had a different numbering of the psalms, because they combined two chapters into one, how does the Gemara know that it was the first and second chapters that were combined? Benovitz notes that in many ancient manuscripts, the ninth and tenth chapters were combined. The Gemara cites a tradition to back up its claim:

For R. Shmuel b. Nachmani said in the name of R. Yochanan:

Every chapter that was particularly dear to David

he commenced with 'Happy'

and terminated with 'Happy'.

He began with 'Happy,’

as it is written,

'Happy is the man,’

and he terminated with 'Happy,’

as it is written,

'Happy are all they that take refuge in Him' (2:12).

This statement not only establishes a source for combining the first two chapters, but it provides a literary argument for this combination. When combined, these two chapters have a sort of “envelope” structure in which the same word, *ashrei*, “happy,” appears in the first and last verse. This structure may be evidence that the two chapters represent a single literary unit. Similarly, on a thematic level, we might argue that the second chapter is a continuation of the first one. The first chapter describes the rewards of the righteous and then the punishment of the wicked. The second chapter goes on to describe how those who rebel against God will be destroyed. The chapter concludes by returning to the initial topic of the first chapter, the happiness of those who are loyal to God.

The confusion here regarding whether there are eighteen or nineteen psalms is similar to the apparent confusion regarding the prayer we call the *Shemone Esrei*, the “Eighteen,” which actually consists of nineteen blessings in our liturgy. While in our case, the Gemara argues for combining two psalms, in the case of the *Shemone Esrei,* a single blessing is divided into two. Originally, in the old liturgy of the land of Israel, the two blessings, “*Ve-Yerushalayim”* and “*Et Tzemach David,”* were a single blessing. Later, in Babylonia, this blessing was divided into two, making the *Shemone Esrei* a prayer of nineteen blessings. These two cases of nineteen which are eighteen may not be connected, but the parallel is worth noting.

**Good Prayers Make Good Neighbors**

For the first time in the Talmud, the Gemara introduces the figure of Bruria, the celebrated wife of R. Meir, who was renowned for her wisdom and Torah knowledge. We are presented with a pair of stories about her which highlight her skills as a biblical exegete. The immediate reason for placing these stories here is that the first story centers around the interpretation of *Tehillim* 104:35, which was also mentioned in the previous passage:

There were once some ruffians

in the neighborhood of R. Meir

who caused him a great deal of trouble.

R. Meir prayed that they should die.

His wife Bruria said to him:

What are you thinking?

Because it is written ‘Let *chata'im* cease?’(*Tehillim* 104:35).

Is it written *chot'im* (sinners)?

It is written *chata'im* (sins)!

Further, look at the end of the verse:

“the wicked be no more.”

Since the sins will cease,

there will be no more wicked men!

Rather pray for them that they should repent,

and there will be no more wicked men.

He did pray for them, and they repented.

This story teaches important lessons about prayer as well as about our relationship to those with whom we find ourselves in conflict. R. Meir sees those who are causing him trouble as “sinners.” Their evil deeds reflect their inherently evil nature. He therefore prays that they be destroyed. Ironically, the term used to describe R. Meir’s prayer is *ba‘ei* *rachmei,* which literally means “ask for mercy.” Yet for R. Meir, prayer is not a tool of mercy, but a weapon through which he calls down God’s wrath upon his enemies.

Bruria takes a different approach. She does not see the world as being divided between “us” and “them.” Her neighbors’ actions are just external behaviors. She does not think that these ruffians are inherently evil. Rather, they are human beings just like the rest of us and, therefore, have the capacity to repent and mend their ways. Bruria thus insists that R. Meir pray not for their destruction, but for their repentance. Bruria’s prayers are petitions for mercy, not just for herself and her family, but for all people.

Bruria bases her argument on her understanding of the word c*hata'im* in *Tehillim* 104:35 as meaning “sins.” The verse thus reads, “May sins perish from the earth, and the wicked be no more.” The wicked will disappear not because they will be killed, but because they will have repented, and their sins will have disappeared. In fact, however, while the Hebrew word in question does generally mean sins, the word c*hata'im* as it is vocalized in our Bibles (with a *patach* under the *chet* and a *dagesh* in the *tet*), means “ones who sin” not “sins.” R. Meir initially appears to have read the verse in this way, which explains his desire to see the sinners themselves destroyed. Rashi seems to be aware of this problem. He, therefore, explains that Bruria understood the word to refer to the *yetzer ha-ra*, the evil urge. In fact, however, the vocalization that we find in our Bibles was only fixed centuries after the completion of the Gemara. Bruria may well have had an alternative vocalization. Equally likely, she may not have cared much about the finer points of biblical Hebrew grammar, and simply interpreted the verse according to the common meaning of the words.

**Mothers of Israel**

The second Bruria story also presents her as a formidable interpreter of biblical texts:

A certain Christian[[1]](#footnote-1) said to Bruria:

It is written:

‘Sing, O barren, thou that didst not bear’ (*Yishayahu* 54:1).

Because she did not bear is she to sing?

She replied to him:

Look at the end of the verse,

where it is written,

‘For the children of the desolate

shall be more than the children of the married wife,

saith the Lord.’

In this first stage of the story, Bruria’s Christian interlocutor does not appear to be much of an adversary. He asks about the apparent counterintuitive nature of a line from *Yishayahu* which urges a childless woman to rejoice. Why should a woman in such a terrible situation rejoice? Bruria responds simply by pointing out that the questioner had not bothered to read the rest of the verse, which promises this woman many children in the future. Bruria’s answer is not profound; it simply demonstrates her basic knowledge of the biblical text. The Christian appears pathetic, like a missionary who goes out only with a list of biblical quotes out of context, never having actually opened a Bible. He does not represent a serious threat to the educated Jewish community. Such people can be swatted away like so many mosquitoes.

In its final lines, however, the story takes a sudden turn:

But what then is the meaning of

'a barren that did not bear?’

‘Sing, O community of Israel,’

who resembles a barren woman,

for not having born children like you for Gehena.

This final exchange does not really fit in with the rest of the story. Bruria just said that the phrase, ‘Sing, O barren, thou that didst not bear,’ needs to be read in the context of the rest of the verse. Now, Bruria interprets this phrase in marked opposition to its context. She acknowledges the legitimacy of the Christian’s original question of why a barren woman should rejoice. She responds by identifying the barren woman as the community of Israel, who are contrasted with the Christian community. Bruria argues that being barren is good, if the alternative is bearing children who are destined for hell!

This final stage of the story also differs from what precedes it in that it suggests a radically different picture of the relationship between Jews and Christians in the time of the later Tanaim (rabbis of the Mishna). Previously, Christianity did not appear as a significant threat. The Christian is represented as a questioner who lacks basic knowledge of the Bible and is easily dismissed by a learned Jew. Now, Bruria responds to the Christian with theological ferocity, telling him that contrary to Christian teachings, his community is not “saved,” but damned. Better to have never come into existence than to be a Christian! The aggressiveness of Bruria’s attack suggests that she is responding to a group that she sees as a serious threat to her own community.

Bruria’s polemical interpretation of this verse form *Yishayahu* might be better understood if placed in the context of early Christian biblical interpretation. The founders of Christianity were very aggressive in their attempts to interpret the Bible in Christian terms. This interpretation was part of their effort to prove that they, and not the Jews, were the true inheritors of God’s biblical covenant with Israel. In a famous passage in the New Testament (*Galatians* 4:21-31), Paul attacks the legitimacy of the Jewish people and their commitment to the law. He compares the people of Israel and the Church to the children of Hagar and Sara respectively. Hagar had a child quickly and easily. Yet she was only a slave, so her relationships with Avraham and God were not permanent. Ultimately, she was driven from Avraham’s house. Sara, on the other hand, was a barren woman. Ultimately, however, she gave birth to the child who was promised by God and was the true inheritor of Avraham. In the midst of this homily, Paul cites our verse. He identifies the barren woman at the beginning of the verse with Sara and the Church, and the fertile woman at the end of the verse with Hagar and Israel.

In other words, Bruria’s interpretation of *Yishayahu* 54:1 is a mirror image of the interpretation offered by Paul around a century earlier. Each one identified their own group with the rejoicing childless woman who is *Yishayahu’*s symbol of downtrodden Israel’s promise of ultimate redemption. Bruria, or any of the other Sages, were highly unlikely to have been aware of this particular passage in the Christian scriptures. However, Bruria lived in an environment in which Judaism and Christianity were engaged in a life and death struggle over the claim to be the “true Israel” of the Bible. She may well have been aware that this verse was interpreted by Christians in an anti-Jewish manner. As such, she turned the tables on her Christian opponent, using this verse in her own attack on Christianity.

The Vilna Gaon, cited in the *Imrei Noam,* suggests a further link between the fates of the Christians and the Jews in this passage. He cites a *midrash* (Bereishit Raba 42) that states that God gave Avraham a choice between going into exile under non-Jewish rule or going to hell. Avraham chose the former. Hence, when Bruria notes that the Christians, not the Jews, are destined for hell, she is actually making an argument about the current state of the Jews. The fact that Jews are in a state of exile does not prove that God has abandoned them, as the Christians claim. Rather, this fact is evidence that they will be spared final punishment directly at the hands of God, whereas the Christians, who enjoy power now, are destined for damnation. This reading does not fit the historical circumstances of Bruria’s time, when Christianity was still a persecuted religion in the Roman Empire. However, this reading certainly fits the reality several centuries later in the time of the Amoraim (rabbis of the Gemara), when the Empire was already a Christian institution.

As a final note on this pair of Bruria stories, I would like to point out that they bear a curious resemblance to the story of R. Yehoshua ben Levi, found on *daf* 7a. In that story, R. Yehoshua ben Levi also has bitter fights with a Christian about biblical interpretation. Like R. Meir, he too seeks to destroy his troublesome neighbor by kindling the wrath of God, and he too ultimately abandons this plan.

**Too Close for Comfort**

The next story also presents an exchange between a Jewish scholar and a Christian. The story picks up the discussion regarding the first chapters of *Tehillim* that preceded the Bruria stories:

A certain Christian[[2]](#footnote-2) said to R. Abahu:

It is written:

‘A Psalm of David

when he fled from Avshalom his son’ (*Tehillim* 3:1).

And it is also written,

‘A *mikhtam* of David

when he fled from Shaul in the cave’ (*Tehillim* 57:1).

Which event happened first?

Did not the event of Shaul happen first?

Then let him write it first?

He replied to him:

For you who do not derive interpretations from juxtaposition,

there is a difficulty,

but for us who do derive interpretations from juxtaposition

there is no difficulty.

For R. Yochanan said:

How do we know from the Torah

that juxtaposition [is a legitimate factor in interpretation]?

Because it says,

‘They are juxtaposed for ever and ever,

they are done in truth and uprightness’ (*Tehillim* 111: 7-8).

Why is the chapter of Avshalom

juxtaposed to the chapter of Gog and Magog?

So that if one should say to you,

is it possible that

a slave should rebel against his master?

You can reply to him:

Is it possible that a son should rebel against his father?

Yet this happened; and so this too [will happen].

There does not seem to be much theologically at stake in this conversation. The Christian wants to know why the psalm about David’s flight from Avshalom comes before the one about his flight from Shaul, when in fact they happened in the opposite order. The Christian appears to genuinely want R. Abahu’s opinion on this matter. R. Abahu answers that the psalm about Avshalom is placed immediately after the second chapter of *Tehillim*, which he understood as referring to the eschatological battle between Gog and Magog. Avshalom’s revolt against his father, in a way, foreshadows Gog and Magog’s revolt against God. The story of Avshalom thus makes the prophet’s apocalyptic predictions more feasible. There does not seem to be anything offensive to Christians in R. Abahu’s interpretation. Indeed, Christians were at least as sure as the Jews that the end was coming and would involve a spectacular Armageddon. .

Rather, the point of dispute here is hermeneutic. R. Abahu points out that he is only able to answer this question because he embraces the hermeneutic principle of “*dorshin semukhin,*” interpreting one passage in the Bible on the basis of the passage immediately preceding or following it. Christians, who reject this method, have no way of dealing with this issue in the text.

The claim that the rabbis used the principle of *semukhin* and the Christians did not is most likely not significant in and of itself. More likely, R. Abahu is responding to Christian attacks against the entire system of midrashic interpretation. R. Abahu is pointing out to his Christian interlocutor the strengths of the midrashic method as it is able to resolve problems that Christian scholars are unable to solve using their own methods.

The Gemara thus presents us with two very different types of interactions between Christians and Jewish scholars. Bruria engages in an aggressive theological debate with the Christians. R. Abahu, in contrast, engages in a more subtle exchange about the proper way to read the Bible.

1. Printed editions have the word *tzeduki,* “Sadducee,” as a result of censorship. Manuscripts read *min,* “sectarian,” which, as I have previously noted, generally refers to a Christian. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See note on the previous passage. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)