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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In loving memory of Fred Stone, Yaakov Ben Yitzchak A”H   
beloved father and grandfather,   
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**Lecture 35: Daf 10a**

**Speaking Words of Wisdom**

The Gemara repeatedly cites *Tehillim* 104:35, which concludes with the phrase, “Bless the Lord, O my soul.” This phrase occurs frequently in the course of *Tehillim* 103 and 104. In the passage that follows, the Gemara once again presents a teaching of R. Yochanan in the name of R. Shimon bar Yochai. This passage seeks to connect all of the times that “Bless the Lord, O my soul” appears in these chapters, explaining them through a single motif:

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

What is the meaning of the verse,

‘She opens her mouth with wisdom,

and the law of kindness is on her tongue?’ (*Mishlei* 31:26).

To whom was Shlomo alluding in this verse?

He was alluding only to his father David

who dwelt in five worlds

and recited praise of [God in each place].

The interpretation of this verse from *Mishlei* as referring to David is very curious. The Sages almost always interpret this verse, like the entire passage in which it is found – the famous tribute to *Eishet Chayil,* the “Woman of Valor”—as referring to a feminine entity. The Sages most often read this verse as referring to righteous women in general, or to a particular righteous woman, usually the matriarch Sara. Sometimes, the verse is understood as a metaphor for an entity which is grammatically female in gender, such as the Torah or the people of Israel. Why should R. Shimon b. Yochai interpret a verse clearly referring to a female as talking about David?

Perhaps R. Shimon b. Yochai was drawn to the phrase “opens her mouth with wisdom,” understanding it to mean “from the moment her mouth first opened, she spoke wisdom.” This perfectly fits the opening theme of this *midrash* (homily), that David always had words of praise on his mouth, even when he was in the womb:

He abode in his mother's womb,

and broke into song, as it says,

‘Bless the Lord, O my soul,

and all that is within mebless His holy name’ (*Tehillim* 103:1).

He came out into the open air

and looked upon the stars and constellations

and broke into song,

as it says,

‘Bless the Lord, ye angels of His,

ye mighty in strength that fulfill His word,

hearkening unto the voice of His word.

Bless the Lord, all ye His hosts…’ (*Tehillim* 103:20-21).

He sucked from his mother's bosom

and looked on her breasts

and broke into song,

as it says,

‘Bless the Lord, O my soul,

and forget not all His benefits’ (*Tehillim* 103:2).

What means 'all His benefits'?

R. Abahu said:

That He placed her breasts at the source of understanding.

For what reason is this?

Rav Yehuda said:

So that he should not look upon the place of shame.

R. Matna said:

So that he should not suck from a place that is foul.

He saw the downfall of the wicked

and broke into song,

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).

He looked upon the day of death

and broke into song,

as it says,

‘Bless the Lord, O my soul.

O Lord my God, Thou art very great,

Thou art clothed with glory and majesty’ (*Tehillim* 104:1).

How does this verse refer to the day of death?

Raba son of R. Shila said:

We learn it from the end of the passage,

where it is written:

‘Thou hidest Thy face, they vanish,

Thou withdrawest their breath, they perish etc.’ (*Tehillim* 104:29).

The phrase *borkhi nafshi,* generally translated as, “Bless the Lord, O my soul,” might be better translated as, “Let my entire being bless the Lord.” The phrase conjures up a notion of prayer that comes not only from the lips or even from the heart, but from every fiber of a person’s existence. Along these lines, this *midrash* presents David as being entirely committed to praising God in each “world” through which he moved, i.e. at every stage of his life. The *midrash* links each time David uses the phrase *borkhi nafshi* to a different stage of his life, from his gestation in the womb and his birth, through his Divinely aided triumphs in his life, till his confrontation with his own death. Every stage of life has its own reasons to praise God, from the exuberant wonder at God’s creation as seen by a child, through midlife, when a person senses that God accompanies him through his travails, to a person’s sober recognition of the majesty of God as he contemplates his own mortality.

If we examine this passage closely, we will notice a few irregularities. The most glaring of these is the citation of *Tehillim* 103:20-21. Not only is this the only verse cited that does not contain the phrase *borkhi nafshi,* it also comes out of order, as its citation comes between 103:1 and 103:2. Furthermore, the Gemara fails to cite one of the appearances of the phrase *borkhi nafshi* in these chapters of *Tehillim,* verse 103:22:

Bless the Lord all His works,

Throughout the length and breadth of His realm

Bless the Lord, O my soul.

This verse could easily have replaced the problematic verses 103:20-21 in portraying David’s praise upon seeing the wonders of creation at birth. Finally, the Gemara switches the order of the first and last verses of *Tehillim* 104, because the Gemara understands 104:1 as referring to the moment of death, with which it sought to end this passage.

Interestingly, in *Midrash Tehillim* (AKA *Midrash Shocher Tov*, 103:3), we find a passage quite similar to our passage here in the Gemara. However, this version lacks the “imperfections” that we identified in the Gemara’s version. There the *midrash* cites all of the verses which contain the phrase *borkhi nafshi* in these psalms, and only those verses. The *midrash* presents the verses in the order in which they appear in *Tehillim,* and each verse is interpreted as corresponding to a successive stage in David’s life, from his gestation through his death and final vision of the End of Days.

Possibly, this passage in *Midrash Tehillim* is a reworking of our *gemara* in order to “improve” it from a formal and aesthetic perspective. Clearly, however, the Gemara could have arranged all the verses in their proper order, but chose not to. Perhaps the rabbis of the Gemara felt constrained by traditions that they had received regarding how to interpret each verse, while the creator of the passage in *Midrash Tehillim* felt free to invent new interpretations to fit his needs.

**Portrait of God as an (Eternally) Young Artist**

The Gemara now continues its treatment of the biblical phrase *borkhi nafshi* with a rare rabbinic discussion of art and the creative process as it relates to God:

R. Shimi b. Ukba (others say, Mar Ukba)

was often in the company of R. Shimon b. Pazi,

who used to arrange aggadas before R. Yochanan.

He said to him:

What is the meaning of the verse,

‘Bless the Lord, O my soul,

and all that is within me bless His holy name?’

He replied:

Come and observe how the capacity of human beings

falls short of the capacity of the Holy One, blessed be He.

It is in the capacity of a human being

to draw a figure on a wall,

but he cannot invest it with breath and spirit,

bowels and intestines.

But the Holy One, blessed be He,

is not so;

He shapes one form in the midst of another,

and invests it with breath and spirit,

bowels and intestines.

And that is what Chana said:

‘There is none holy as the Lord,

for there is none beside Thee,

neither is there any *tzur* [rock] like our God’ (I *Shmuel* 2:2).

What means,

‘neither is there any *tzur* like our God?’

There is no artist [*tzayar*] like our God.

This passage presents a critique of the artist that is reminiscent of Plato’s famous attack on poets and painters in the *Republic.* In ancient times, paintings were frequently done directly on the walls of a building, on top of wet plaster, using a technique called “fresco.” At their best, frescoes could be remarkably lifelike. Yet, these painters, like other plastic artists, ultimately produce only surface representations of living beings and of reality in general. No matter how much we feel drawn into the world of a painting, no matter how real a portrait may appear to us, it is in the end only a two-dimensional illusion. The person in the painting lacks any physical interior and certainly is not in any way alive. Only God can create a true landscape, and only He can create a living, breathing person.

One can read this passage along Plantonic lines, as portraying painters and other artists as frauds and liars. However, I think the Gemara here is doing quite the opposite. When R. Yochanan points out that the artists’ skills do not measure up to those of God, this point does not shame the artist. Rather, R. Yochanan calling God an artist lends dignity to human artists, who in their own humble way are creators following in God’s footsteps.

**“I don't want to achieve immortality through my work... I want to achieve it through not dying.”[[1]](#footnote-1)**

The Gemara presents a second, even more profound contrast between the human and the Divine creative act:

What means, 'For there is none beside Thee?”

R. Yehuda b. Menasia said:

Read not, There is none *biltekha*,

but, There is none *lebalotekha* [to consume Thee].

For the nature of flesh and blood

is not like that of the Holy One, blessed be He.

It is the nature of flesh and blood

to be outlived by its works,

but the Holy One, blessed be He,

outlives His works.

Many artists create in order to be a part of something larger than themselves or in order to produce something that will outlast them, so that they can have a sense of permanence in the world. These motivations underlie most human creative endeavors, from raising a family or starting a business, to building an international empire. Human creativity is often a protest against or an attempt to transcend a person’s own mortality.

God, on the other hand, has no such motivations behind His own creative works. Nothing He creates can be as long-lasting or all-encompassing as He. God is, in this sense, a disinterested Creator. His creation is pure expression of the Divine Will.

**The Soul You have Given Me**

These two statements contrasting human and divine creativity are R. Yehoshua ben Levi’s response to R. Simi’s (or perhaps Mar Ukba’s) query regarding the meaning of the first verse of *Tehillim* 103. R. Yehoshua saw in this verse a clear emphasis on the gap between human capacities and those of God.[[2]](#footnote-2) This was not the answer that R. Simi was looking for:

He said to him:

What I meant to tell you is this:

To whom did David refer

in these five verses beginning with

'Bless the Lord, O my soul?’

R. Simi did not want to know the meaning of *Tehillim* 103:1. Rather, he was interested in the significance of the repetition of the phrase *borkhi* *nafshi* five times in *Tehillim* 103-104. R. Simi’s answer is even more different from R. Yehoshua’s statement:

He was alluding only to

the Holy One, blessed be He,

and to the soul.

Just as the Holy One, blessed be He,

fills the whole world,

so the soul fills the body.

Just as the Holy One, blessed be He,

sees, but is not seen,

so the soul sees but is not itself seen.

Just as the Holy One, blessed be He,

feeds the whole world,

so the soul feeds the whole body.

Just as the Holy One, blessed be He, is pure,

so the soul is pure.

Just as the Holy One, blessed be He,

abides in the innermost precincts,

so the soul abides in the innermost precincts.

Let that which has these five qualities

come and praise Him who has these five qualities.

Whereas R. Yehoshua emphasizes the difference between God and mortals, R. Shimi stresses their similarity. Though human beings are finite and flawed, every person has within himself a Divine soul, which maintains the body just as God maintains the world. The term *borkhi nafshi*, 'Bless the Lord, O my soul,' suggests that because the soul is most similar to God, it is precisely the part of the person most fit to praise God. Each appearance of *borkhi nafshi* is interpreted to refer to a different aspect of the parallel between the soul and God.

Taken as unit, this passage reflects the dialectal relationship between humans and God in prayer. On the one hand, a person must sense the tremendous gap between his finite self and the infinite God. On the other hand, a person needs to feel that he contains a Divine soul which is pure and infinite in its own way.

1. Woody Allen, *The Illustrated Woody Allen Reader* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It is unclear who says what in this passage. The Soncino translation assumes that it is R. Shimon ben Pazi who is speaking and not R. Yehoshua ben Levi. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)