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 37: Daf 10b**

**Home Improvements**

The Gemara now returns to the story of Elisha and the Shunamite woman in II *Melakhim* 4, which was mentioned parenthetically above. The Gemara engages in close analysis of the opening verses of the story, beginning with verse ten, which was quoted previously:

‘Let us make, I pray thee,

a little *aliyat kir’* (II *Melakhim* 4:10).

Rav and Shmuel differ.

One says:

It was an open upper chamber,

and they put a roof on it.

The other says:

It was a large verandah,

and they divided it into two.

For him who says that it was a verandah,

there is a good reason why the text says *kir* [wall].

But how does he who says that it was an upper chamber

account for the word *kir*?

[It is used] because they put a roof on it [*kiruah*].

For him who says it was an upper chamber

there is a good reason why the text uses the word *aliyat* [upper chamber].

But how does he who says it was a verandah

account for the word *aliyat*?

It was the best [*me'ula*] of the rooms.

The Gemara focuses on the difficult phrase *aliyat kir.* An *aliya* is an upper chamber and a *kir* is a wall*.* But what is a “wall - upper chamber?” The Gemara presents two opinions on the matter. One opinion says that this term refers to the closing in of a previously open roof, creating an attic. The other says that they divided a large room with a wall. Each side favors a different part of the phrase *aliyat kir.* The first opinion favors the term *aliya.* The Bible is describing an upper chamber. The other position favors *kir*. According to this view, the woman constructed a wall. Each side must, therefore, reinterpret the other term so that it fits into its theory. According to the first opinion, the word *kir* actually comes from the root *kara*, to cover with a roof. The second opinion, similarly, understands the term *aliya* to refer to the superiority of the accommodations created by the division of the room.

At first glance, the rabbis here appear to be engaged in a close reading of the biblical text. Their concern is the exact meaning of an obscure phrase. They have no larger agenda here. Rather, like the *pashtanim* (commentators who interpreted the Bible literally) of the Middle Ages, they simply seek to understand the meaning of the words.

The *Ein Yaakov* rejects this possibility *ab initio.* For him, Aggada must have some deeper meaning; “it is improper to think that they disagree simply about the meaning of the words. Rather, their dispute is rooted in a real-life issue.” According to the *Ein Yaakov,* the dispute is really about the proper relationship between the holy man and his benefactors. According to the first position, Elisha stayed in a separate attic apartment. He was close to the Shunamites, but each maintained their own space. According to the second opinion, Elisha stayed in the very same room as the Shunamite woman and her husband. They were separated by only a thin divider. Rav and Shmuel debate the appropriate balance between distance and intimacy in the relationship between the holy man and his benefactors. One side advocates as close a relationship as possible. Both sides benefit, because the people are more influenced by the holy man and the holy man is closer to the people. The other side insists that a certain distance is necessary between the two. If the benefactors become too familiar with the prophet, they will begin to take him for granted and will not listen to him. Conversely, the prophet is in danger of being unduly influenced by his patrons.

**Fish and Turtles**

This question is addressed more broadly in the next passage:

‘And let us set for him there

a bed, and a table, and a stool and a candlestick’ (II *Melakhim* 4:10).

Abaye (or as some say, R. Yitzchak) said:

If one wants to benefit from the hospitality of another,

he may benefit,

as Elisha did;

and if he does not desire to benefit,

he may refuse to do so,

as Shmuel the Ramatite did,

of whom we read,

‘And his return was to Ramah, for there was his house;’ (I *Shmuel* 7:17).

and R. Yochanan said:

[This teaches that] wherever he travelled,

his house was with him.

This passage addresses the question of whether it appropriate to take advantage of the hospitality of others and if so, to what extent. The rabbis look down on those who take from others. However, Abaye still recognizes two legitimate approaches to this issue. If one wants to take advantage of the hospitality of others, one may do so, provided that, like Elisha, one takes only basic accommodations without any luxuries. However, one may also reject all offers of accommodation and be entirely self-sufficient, and doing so is not considered haughty. This is the model of Shmuel, whose “house was with him” where ever he went. Rashi understands this phrase as meaning that, like a turtle, he carries his home with him on his back. Wherever Shmuel went, he pitched his tent and set up his home.

One can read this passage as specifically addressing Torah scholars. If this is the case, the passage deals with the issue of the religious leader’s relationship with his benefactors, just as in the *Ein Yaakov’s* reading of the previous passage. In this reading, the passage presents two models of religious leadership. One model acknowledges the need for spiritual leaders to build relationships with regular people, and allows the leader to accept gifts to cover his basic needs. This model is that of Elisha, who accepted basic lodging from the Shunamites. The other approach insists on radical independence from one’s followers. Shmuel, like a nomad, had no stake in the communities which he served. He went to great lengths to be self-sufficient, even though it meant living like a vagrant for much of the year. Each approach has its upsides and downsides. Shmuel was beyond all suspicion of corruption or self- interest. However, as a result, he was completely alienated from the people. Elisha, on the other hand, took the risk of being seen as the personal prophet of the Shunamite woman. He, however, was not detached from the people, but succeeded in establishing real relationships with individuals.

**Holy. Holy, Holy**

The Gemara now switches its focus to the previous verse:

‘And she said unto her husband:

Behold now,

I perceive that he is a holy man of God’ (Ibid v. 9).

R. Yosi b. Chanina said:

You learn from this that

a woman recognizes the character of a guest

better than a man.

'A holy man.'

How did she know this?

Rav and Shmuel gave different answers.

One said:

Because she never saw a fly pass by his table.

The other said:

She spread a sheet of linen over his bed,

and she never saw a nocturnal pollution on it.

‘He is a holy [man].’

The Gemara focuses on the Shunamite woman’s designation of Elisha as “holy.” This statement is used to gain insight into Elisha, the Shunamite, and their relationship with each other. The first comment on this statement brought by the Gemara focuses on the Shunamite woman, noting that as a woman she had superior abilities to discern the character of her guests. But the Gemara quickly turns its focus to Elisha, as it asks how the woman knew that he was holy. The Gemara suggests two answers – no flies were attracted to his food, and he never left signs of nocturnal emission on his bed sheets. The meaning of the second sign is fairly clear. Elisha lacked all impure sexual thoughts and thus did not have any emissions. The first sign is less clear. The image of exposed food not attracting flies recalls the statement in *Pirkei Avot* 5:5 that one of the daily miracles in the Temple was “no fly was ever seen in the place of the slaughter.” Elisha’s food was thus consecrated like the sacrifices in the Temple. Taken together, these two answers can be understood as meaning that Elisha’s bed and table were completely pure. He had no ulterior motives or benefits in receiving room and board from the Shunamite woman, other than the service of God.

A concern about potential impropriety in the story may underlie the Gemara’s insistence on Elisha’s sexual purity. Why does Elisha have such an extensive relationship with a married woman? This relationship appears inappropriate. The Gemara assures us that Elisha never even thought about the Shunamite woman, or any other woman, even while he slept.

The next interpretation of the word “holy” in the verse picks up on this theme:

‘He is a holy [man].’

R. Yosi son of R. Chanina said:

He is holy,

but his attendant is not holy.

For so it says:

‘And Gechazi came near to thrust her away’ (ibid. v. 27);

R. Yosi son of Chanina said:

He seized her by the breast.

R. Yosi sets up Elisha’s assistant Gechazi as a foil to him. Elisha is holy and pure, but Gechazi is a crude sexual molester. By focusing on Gechazi’s perverse attraction to the Shunamite woman, the Gemara emphasizes that Elisha was not attracted to her at all.

**A Meeting Place for Scholars**

Finally, the Gemara concludes with a contemporary lesson,

‘That pass by us continually’ (verse 9).

R. Yosi son of R. Chanina

said in the name of R. Eliezer b. Yaakov:

If a man entertains a scholar in his house

and lets him enjoy his possessions,

Scripture accounts it to him as if

he had sacrificed the daily burnt-offering.

For the first time, the Gemara clearly makes the link between contemporary Torah scholars and the ancient prophets. The Gemara also approaches the question of hospitality for holy men from a different perspective. For lay people to invite scholars into their home is unequivocally a good thing. However, as we have seen, for the religious leader to accept such largess is fraught with complications. A leader must decide if he will remain connected to his people and risk his personal integrity, or remain aloof and risk alienating his constituency.

**Preferred Prayer Positions**

Following the previous statement of R. Yosi son of Chanina in the name of R. Eliezer ben Yaakov, the next passage presents a series of statements from the same source regarding the proper stance in prayer:

R. Yosi son of Chanina further said

in the name of R. Eliezer b. Yaakov:

A man should not stand on a high place when he prays,

but he should pray in a lowly place,

as it says;

‘Out of the depths have I called Thee, O Lord’ (*Tehillim* 131:1).

It has been taught to the same effect:

A man should not stand

on a chair or on a footstool

or on a high place to pray,

but he should pray in a lowly place,

since there is no elevation before God,

and so it says,

'Out of the depths have I called Thee, O Lord,’

and it also says,

“A prayer of the afflicted, when he fainteth’ (102:1).

This first statement assumes that a person’s outer posture in prayer must reflect his optimal inner state when standing before God. According to this view, the appropriate inner state is one of humility and a sense of one’s insignificance before God. Furthermore, the verses cited suggest that prayer best comes from a state of crisis and despair. Such a person should not pray from a position that is raised up, like a bench or a platform. The Magen Avraham writes in his commentary to *Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chaim* (90:3) that based on this Gemara, synagogues were often built with a depressed area in the floor where the prayer leader stood.

However, the very next statement quoted in the Gemara suggests another mandatory prayer stance that seems to contradict the notion of praying out of fear and trembling:

R. Yosi son of R. Chanina also said

in the name of R. Eliezer b. Yaakov:

When one prays,

one should align one’s feet.

as it says,

‘And their feet were straight feet’ (*Yechezkel* 1:7).

Now we learn that one must pray with one’s feet together so as to imitate the angles in the Divine chariot. This statement reflects a totally opposite view of prayer from the one expressed in the previous statement. When one prays, one should not identify oneself with a devastated person, who lacks any ego or self-confidence. One should not see oneself “in the depths,” but, rather, on high with the angels. In order to pray before God, a person needs to feel holy and complete, like an angel who has the ability to stand before God and praise Him for all eternity. By juxtaposing these two statements, the Gemara emphasizes the dual nature of the prayer experience. Prayer should be devastating, as we confront the *mysterium tremendum* in holy terror, and, at the same time, uplifting, as we join the angels in His praise.

The final statement in this series seems to return to the initial emphasis on humility in prayer:

R. Yosi son of R. Chanina also said

in the name of R. Eliezer b. Yaakov:

What is the meaning of the verse,

‘Ye shall not eat with the blood?’ (*Vayikra* 19:26).

Do not eat before ye have prayed for your blood.

R. Yitzchak said in the name of R. Yochanan,

who had it from R. Yosi son of R. Chanina

in the name of R. Eliezer b. Yaakov:

If one eats and drinks and then says his prayers,

of him the Scripture says,

‘And hast cast Me behind thy back’ (I *Melakhim* 14:9).

Read not *gavekha* [thy back],

but *ge’ekha* [thy pride].

Says the Holy One, blessed be He:

Afterthis one has exalted himself,

he comes and accepts the kingdom of heaven!

This passage introduces the prohibition against eating before praying in the morning. The source for this ruling is the verse “ye shall not eat with the blood.” This reading of the verse appears nowhere else in rabbinic literature, and its logic is not apparent. I do not know of any other case where prayer is associated with the word “blood.” Whatever the sources of this rule, the Gemara interprets it as reflecting a need to be humble in prayer. Eating before prayer is seen as a form of arrogance since one puts one’s own physical needs before the service of God.

This rule may also be associated with the need to identify with angels in prayer. Since the angels don’t eat, a person should similarly neglect his physical aspect and pray on an empty stomach.

**The Whole Ball of Wax**

The Gemara concludes its discussion of this *mishna* by returning to the question of the latest time to say *keriat Shema*. Because this passage is halakhic in nature, the *Ein Yaakov* largely skips it. However, the *Ein Yaakov* does see fit to include one line from this discussion:

R. Mani said:

He who recites the *Shema* in its proper time

is greater than he who studies the Torah.

For since it says,

He who says later loses nothing,

Being like a man who reads in the Torah,

we may conclude that

one who recites the *Shema* at its proper time is superior.

This statement, at first, seems technical and perhaps even trivial in nature. Since a person who says the *Shema* after its proper time receives the reward for studying Torah, a person who says the *Shema* at its proper time must receive the reward for both saying *Shema* and for learning Torah, and is therefore superior. However, this passage further recalls the complex interrelationship between prayer, *Shema,* and Torah study, which is a central theme in our chapter. Ideally, all of these elements should be bound up in a single religious experience. A person who says *Shema* at its proper time and links it to the *Shemone Esrei* by joining *geula* and *tefila* achieves the optimal union of Torah, prayer and the acceptance of the yolk of Heaven.