**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**midrash on the *Parasha***

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**Parashat Ki Tavo:**

**“Follow the Tracks of the Flocks and Graze Your Bodies”**

**The lass who fell from greatness**

The *Sifrei* on *Parashat Ki Tavo* deals exclusively with the exposition of the Torah's verses concerning the mitzvaof bringing firstfruits to the Temple and the mitzvaof reciting the confession of tithes. The passages regarding the building of an altar from the stones taken out of the Jordan, the covenant, the blessings and the curses — none of these things are expounded in the Midrashic literature of the Tannaim. This being the case, we will focus this week on a Tannaitic story appearing in *Sifrei Nitzavim*, which is connected to the curses mentioned in our *parasha*.

It once happened with Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai

That he was riding on a donkey, and his disciples were walking behind him.

He noticed a lass (*riva*) gleaning barleycorn from under the feet of the beasts of the Arabs.

When she saw Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai,

She covered herself with her hair and stood before him.

She said to him: My master (*rabbi*), support me.

He asked: Whose daughter are you?

She answered: I am the daughter of Nakdimon ben Gurion.

She said to him: My master, do you not remember that you signed my marriage contract (*ketuba)*?

Rabban Yochanan said to his disciples: I signed this one's marriage contract,

And I read "one million golden dinars from her father-in-law's house."

Her entire household would not enter the Temple Mount to bow down until they spread out soft sheets under their feet,

After which they entered, bowed down, and joyfully returned to their homes.

All of my days I sought [the meaning of] this verse and [now I have] found it: "If you do not know, most beautiful of women, follow the tracks of the flocks and graze your kids by the tents of the shepherds " (*Shir Ha-shirim* 1:8).

Read not *gediyotayikh*, "your kids," but *geviyotayikh*, "your bodies."

For as long as Israel does God's will, no nation or kingdom can dominate them.

But when they do not do God's will, they are delivered into the hands of a lowly nation.

And not [just] into the hands of a lowly nation, but under the feet of the beasts of a lowly nation.

(*Sifrei Nitzavim* 305)

We will begin this study with an examination of the role of this story in the context of *Sifrei Nitzavim.* The story appears between two units that deal with the death of Moshe. The first unit deals with the preparation of Yehoshua for his leadership role during Moshe's lifetime, while the second unit deals with the difficulty in starting over after Moshe's death — for the people, for the newly chosen leader and even for God Himself.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The characters in the story, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai and the daughter of Nakdimon ben Gurion, one of the richest men in Jerusalem, lived in that city when the Temple was still standing and were exiled from it at the time of its destruction. In the story, they meet in the post-Destruction period.[[2]](#footnote-2) Thus, the story too, like the framework of verses and *derashot* in which it is placed, deals with a period of emptiness and bleakness following an era of glory.

However, there is a contradiction between the story and its context: while the *derasha* in the *Sifrei* concerning the death of Moshe focuses on the difficulty of the people and of Yehoshua, the story deals with the crisis faced by one stratum of the population, namely, the aristocrats of Jerusalem. The way in which Rabban Yochanan is presented — “riding on a donkey, and his disciples were walking behind him” — indicates control over the situation and the continuity of Torah study, with the positioning of his disciples behind him.

Similarly, the daughter of Nakdimon ben Gurion in her appeal to Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, "My master, support me," recognizes him as a spiritual authority and as a man of means. In contrast to him, the young woman is a shattered personality. Economically, she fights for her survival in a more dejected and despicable manner than do beasts, after having been exceedingly rich and spoiled. Socially, she appears alone with the designation *riva*, which means "lass," despite having been the wife of a privileged man from an aristocratic family.[[3]](#footnote-3) These two planes, the economic and the social, find expression in the description of her *ketuba* and the manner in which the members of her family walked to the Temple.

The phrase "under the feet (*tachat raglei*)" that repeats itself over the course of the story expresses the dramatic upheaval that the lass undergoes:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Jerusalem before the destruction | After the destruction |
| Her entire household would not enter the Temple Mount to bow down until they spread out soft sheets **under their feet**, after which they entered, bowed down, and joyfully returned to their houses. | He noticed a lass gleaning barleycorn from **under the feet of the beasts** of the Arabs…  But when they do not do God's will, they are delivered into the hands of a lowly nation.  And not [just] into the hands of a lowly nation, but **under the feet** of the beasts of a lowly nation. |

This correspondence is given an additional meaning of proportionality in the words of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai: "For as long as Israel does God's will, no nation or kingdom can dominate them. But when they do not do God's will, they are delivered into the hands of a lowly nation." Thus, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai recognizes the reality before his eyes not only as a mirror image of a lost reality, but as an expression of the dynamics of Divine reward and punishment written in the Torah and operating in reality.

In the encounter with the lass that has fallen from her greatness, lost her wealth and is now in a desperate situation, following herds of beasts and looking for barleycorns in their droppings for her survival, the young woman's image becomes translated into a reflection of the nation of Israel, which is identified by *Chazal* with the beloved maiden of *Shir Ha-shirim*.[[4]](#footnote-4) This clarifies the meaning of the verse brought from *Shir Ha-shirim*: "If you do not know, most beautiful of women, follow the tracks of the flocks and graze your kids by the tents of the shepherds." From the wording in the story, "All of my days I sought [the meaning of] this verse and [now I have] found it," it may be concluded that Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai had difficulty with this verse in particular. Let us examine the verse in its context:

1: The song of songs, which is Shelomo's.

2: Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your love is better than wine.

3: Your ointments have a goodly fragrance; your name is as ointment poured forth; therefore do the maidens love you. 

4: Draw me, we will run after you; the king has brought me into his chambers; we will be glad and rejoice in you, we will find your love more fragrant than wine! Sincerely do they love you.

5: I am black, but comely, O you daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Shelomo.

6: Look not upon me, that I am swarthy, that the sun has tanned me; my mother's sons were incensed against me, they made me keeper of the vineyards; but my own vineyard I have not kept.

7: Tell me, O you whom my soul loves, where do you graze, where do you make to rest at noon? For why should I be as one that veils herself beside the herds of your companions?

8: If you do not know, most beautiful of women, follow the tracks of the flocks and graze your kids by the tents of the shepherds. (*Shir Ha-shirim* 1:1-8)

Verses 2-4 relate to an idyllic state of love and closeness, and the movement that takes place in them is from the outside in, into the inner space of the king. By contrast, verses 6-8 reflect searching, complications and apologizing, and the setting is on the outside.

When we transfer this to the moral of *Shir Ha-shirim* as relating to God and the people of Israel, the first set of verses describes a state of glory in the relationship between the people of Israel and their God, at the time of the Giving of Torah or during the period of the Temple, whereas the second set of verses describes a period of distancing, concealment and exile.

The appeal of the shepherd (the king?) to the woman in verse 8 constitutes an answer to her question: "Where do you graze, where do you make to rest at noon?" Still, the Tanna does not understand it until that encounter, when the difficult tableau before him supplies the meaning to the verse. Now, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai expounds the words of the verse. *Gediyotayikh* becomes *geviyotayikh.* Thus the verse relates to the action of the maiden in *Shir Ha-shirim* with respect to herself, that she is compelled to worry about her food in a most humiliating manner in order to maintain her body, so that she not die of hunger.[[5]](#footnote-5) In addition, the words “most beautiful of women” relate to that lass; and the words "If you do not know" express the Divine causality that has led to the present situation in the wake of the actions of the nation of Israel.

From this story emerges a picture of the aristocracy as a class that has lost its way in the wake of the destruction, in contrast to the Sages who have maintained their status. The lass still manifests vitality; she recognizes Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai and approaches him with a request that he take her under his wing.[[6]](#footnote-6)

However, she does not have, and cannot have, a reflective perspective on what is happening to her. The privilege of contemplating and delving into her condition is reserved for one who is not fighting for his own survival, for the rabbi, for the Torah scholar, for him who is on his mount. In the new era, the nation's leadership will pass into the hands of the Sages — Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, his disciples and the disciples of his disciples — who will guide their flock to a safe haven. Thus, the story in the *Sifrei* has a clear connection to the context in which it is placed, as described above, and the central theme under discussion is the leadership of the nation in a time of crisis.

**The version of the story in the *Mekhilta* and in the Tosefta**

This story has many parallels throughout Rabbinic literature. We will compare the version of the story as it appears here with the way it appears in two other Tannaitic sources, the Tosefta and *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael*.[[7]](#footnote-7) Let us first examine the wording of the *derasha* in *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael*:

"In the third month after the Israelites left the land of Egypt" (*Shemot* 19:1).

This teaches that we count months to the exodus from Egypt.

I know only about months. From where do I know about years?

Therefore the verse states: "In the second year after they left the land of Egypt" (*Bamidbar* 1:1).

I know only about that period of time. From where do I know about a different period of time?

Therefore the verse states: "In the fortieth year after the Israelites left the land of Egypt" (*Bamidbar* 33:38).

All these were before they entered the land. From where do I know about after they entered the land?

Therefore the verse states: "And it came to pass in the four hundred and eightieth year after the Israelites left the land of Egypt" (I *Melakhim* 6:1).

All these were before the Temple was built. From where do I know that after the Temple was built, we count to its building?

Therefore the verse states: "And it came to pass at the end of twenty years after Shelomo had built the house of the Lord" (II *Divrei Ha-yamim* 8:1).

Since they did not want to count to its building, they will count to its destruction.

As it is stated: "[In the fourteenth year] after that the city was struck" (*Yechezkel* 40:1).

Since they did not want to count for themselves, they will count for others.

As it is stated: "And in the second year of the reign of Nevukhadnetzar, Nevukhadnetzar dreamt dreams" (*Daniel* 2:1).

And it is stated: "In the sixth month, in the second year of King Darius" (*Chaggai* 1:15).

And it is stated: "If you do not know, most beautiful of women" (*Shir Ha-shirim* 1:8).

And it is stated: "Because you did not serve the Lord your God with joyfulness… therefore you shall serve your enemy" (*Devarim* 28:47-48).[[8]](#footnote-8)

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai was already going up to Maon Yehuda,

when he noticed a lass gleaning barleycorn from under horse droppings.

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai said to them: Did you see that lass, who is she?

They said to him: A Hebrew woman (*Ivrit*).

To whom does this horse belong?

They said to him: A certain Arab (*Aravi*) cavalryman.

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai said to his disciples:

All of my days I was distressed about this verse.

I would read it,

But I did not know what it meant: "If you do not know, most beautiful of women" (*Shir Ha-shirim* 1:8).

Since you did not want to subjugate yourselves to heaven,

You are now subjugated to lesser Arab nations.

Since you did not want to weigh out to Heaven a half-shekel per person,‎

You are now forced to weigh out fifteen shekel to the kingdom of your enemies.

Since you did not want to repair the roads and streets for pilgrims,

You are now forced to repair the large and the small stations for those going to the royal fortresses.

And similarly it is stated: "Because you did not serve the Lord your God" with love, "therefore you shall serve your enemy" with hatred.

"Because you did not serve the Lord your God" out of satiety, "therefore you shall serve your enemy" in hunger and in thirst.

"Because you did not serve the Lord your God" clothed, "therefore you shall serve your enemy" naked.

"Because you did not serve the Lord your God… by reason of the abundance of all things,” "therefore you shall serve your enemy" in the absence of all things.[[9]](#footnote-9)

(*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael*, *Yitro, Ba-chodesh* 1)

There are two parts to the *derasha* in the *Mekhilta,* both of which end with the verse "Because you did not serve the Lord your God with joyfulness, and with gladness of heart, by reason of the abundance of all things" in the rebuke in *Parashat Ki Tavo*. The first part relates to the date appearing at the beginning of the biblical story regarding national events, which indicates a deficiency in the manner in which the people of Israel serve God, which leads in the end to their subjugation to the nations. The second part opens with a story that parallels the story appearing in the *Sifrei*, with minor differences, while specifying the lesson learned from it: Israel fails to fulfil the Torah's *mitzvot* with a willing heart, and therefore they are punished proportionately.

The version of the story in the *Mekhilta* follows this conceptual trend. It does not identify the lass or specify her social status or lifestyle prior to the destruction; it merely notes that she is a Hebrew woman. There is no communication between her and Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai. The exposition of "Read not *gediyotayikh*, 'your kids,’ but *geviyotayikh*, 'your bodies,'" found in the *Sifrei's* version, is missing in the *Mekhilta*. Similarly, the *Mekhilta* does not emphasize the contrast between the stability of the Sages and the distress of the people (or a certain stratum thereof), as does the *Sifrei.* Each of the different versions of the story in the two Tannaitic sources is shaped in accordance with the context in which it is found and the role which it plays in that context.

Let us now examine the story appearing in the Tosefta:

It once happened with the daughter of Nakdimon ben Gurion,

That the Sages awarded her five hundred golden dinars every day for her cosmetics,

As she was [a widow] waiting for her brother-in-law [to marry or to reject her].

She even cursed them, saying: Is this what you would give your daughters?

Rabbi Elazar be-Rabbi Tzadok said:

May I not live to see the consolation if I did not see her gathering barleycorns under the hooves of horses in Akko.

I applied to her the following verse:

"If you do not know, most beautiful of women."

(Tosefta *Ketubot* 5:9-10)

This story is brought in the context of *ketubot*. Like in the *Sifrei*, the daughter of the Nakdimon ben Gurion appears in this story with her name, her pedigree and her wealth. However, the tone of the account is altogether different. From the Tosefta emerges the image of the young woman as a negative personality who lacks basic social awareness, curses the Sages and does not appreciate the abundant good bestowed upon her. The image of the narrator of the story is also different — Rabbi Elazar be-Rabbi Tzadok rather than Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai — and the place where the story takes place is Akko.

Rabbi Elazar be-Rabbi Tzadok is a Tanna of the second-third generation, the son of Rabbi Tzadok who reportedly fasted for forty years so that Jerusalem not be destroyed, and who saw the Temple standing and described some of the practices of the people of Jerusalem before the destruction. We have before us a comparable but not identical tradition preserved in Rabbinic literature alongside the version as it appears in the *Sifrei.[[10]](#footnote-10)*

In this *shiur,* we have seen three different versions of a Rabbinic tradition that is reported by the Tannaim. The words of the Torah evolve over time, assuming new forms while discarding old ones, all the time bearing the essence of life that sustains the soul of the nation, through all its evolutions and transformations.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. *Sifrei Nitzavim* 305:

   The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Yehoshua: Yehoshua, How long will you continue to mourn? Has Moshe departed only from you? Surely it was from Me that he departed, for from the day that he died, there has been great mourning before Me!

   As it is stated: “And in that day did the Lord, the God of hosts, call to weeping, and to lamentation” (*Yeshayahu* 22:12). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Regarding Nakdimon ben Gurion, see: *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, Version A, 6; ibid., 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Yerushalmi *Sota* 8:6: "'That has betrothed a wife' (*Devarim* 20:7) — I know only about a lad (*roveh*) who married a lass (*riva*)." This term is connected also to the designation *rabbi*, indicating greater authority or age. Thus, the terms *roveh* and *riva* refer to young adults, those who are past puberty and ready to begin their lives leading their own households. See *Yechezkel* 16:7: "I made you thrive (*revava*) like a sprout of the field. You thrived (*vatirbi*) and grew up… your breasts were formed, and your hair sprouted…" [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The idea of the lover and his beloved in *Shir Ha-shirim* as a metaphor for God and the people of Israel is generally attributed to Rabbi Akiva. The distribution of this story in various Tannaitic sources, together with the appearance of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, suggests that this idea is older. For the parallels to this story, see below. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In contrast to the meaning of this word in modern Hebrew as referring to a lifeless body, in Rabbinic (and medieval Jewish) literature, the word refers to the physical body of a person. See, for example, Mishna *Nega'im* 6:7: "There are twenty-four tips of limbs in the human body that do not become unclean on account of quick flesh: the tips of the fingers and the toes, the tips of the ears, the tip of the nose, the tip of the male organ (*ha-geviya*)." Similarly, we find "my spirit, my body (*geviyati*)" in the liturgical poem, *Adon Olam,* first appearing in a 13th-century prayer book. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The phrase, "she covered herself with her hair and stood before him" requires explanation. It may indicate that she was naked. The hair motif appears in different ways in various parallels of this story across Rabbinic literature. Additional parallels of the story in Rabbinic literature appear below, no. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The story appears also in *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, but we use the other two sources because of the late editing of this work. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In another *shiur,* we noted the phenomenon of ending the aggadic *derasha* in a Tannaitic work of halakhic Midrash with a series of four verses, one of which is not like the others and adds another level of meaning. Here the third verse, "If you do not know, most beautiful of women," seems to be the exceptional verse. This is because it does not directly address the issue in question in the *derasha*. It may be a transitional link to the second part of the *derasha*, which deals with the lass. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Here, too, we find the quadruple pattern characteristic of the conclusions of many aggadic *derashot* in the Tannaitic halakhic Midrashim*.* In the four *derashot*, the contrasts — between the service of God and the service of the enemy, between being satisfied and suffering hunger and thirst*,* between being clothed and being naked, between abundance and the absence of all things — are based on the wording of the verses in the Torah's rebuke:

   Because you did not serve the Lord your God with joyfulness, and with gladness of heart, by reason of the abundance of all things

   Therefore you shall serve your enemy whom the Lord shall send against you, in hunger, and in thirst, and in nakedness, and in want of all things; and he shall put a yoke of iron upon your neck, until he has destroyed you. (*Devarim* 28:47-48) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Finkelstein, in his edition of the *Sifrei*, notes the existence of two versions of this incident across the literature of *Chazal*; see his edition, notes on p. 325. The first version, in the name of Rabban Yochan ben Zakkai: *Sifrei Nitzavim* 305; *Mekhilta, Yitro, Ba-chodesh,* beginning of Chap. 1; *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, Version A, Chap. 17; BT *Ketubot* 66b. The second version, in the name of Rabbi Elazar be-Rabbi Tzadok: Tosefta *Ketubot,* Chap. 5; BT *Ketubot* 67a; Yerushalmi *Ketubot*, end of Chap. 5; *Eikha Rabba* 1, 48; and *Pesikta Rabbati* 29. Finkelstein sees the second version as being the older one. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)