

Zera Shimshon

by Rabbi Shimshon Chaim Nachmani zt"l

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Chapter LVII: Kinnot (Lamentations)

Essay 4: Why is menstrual impurity used as a metaphor?

פסוק חטא חטאה ירושלם על-כן לנידה היתה. קשה מהו על-כן לנידה וכו' דמה ענין נדה לכאן. ועוד קשה דמנה הפסוק נראה שיהיו חטאים קלים דקאמר חטא חטאה, ומפסוק אחר נראה שאדרבא היו לה פשעים הרבה ושהם תמורים כדכתיב על רב-פשעיה.

A verse reads, “**Jerusalem has committed a misstep, therefore she has become menstrually impure**; all that honored her despise her, because they have seen her nakedness, she can only sigh and turn back.” (Lam. 1:8). **A difficulty is what is this phrase, “therefore she has become menstrually impure”—what is the relevance of menstrual impurity here? Another difficulty is that from this verse, it appears that there were only minor missteps, as it says, “she committed a misstep,” while in another verse it appears that, to the contrary, she committed many rebellious acts, as it is written, “for her many rebellious acts”** (Lam. 1:5). That is, the Torah lists three categories of transgressions that are often equally translated as “sin,” but they are not intended to be synonyms. A *chet* (חטא) is an unintentional act. An *avon* (עון) is an intentional act that arises out of person’s inability to control his desires. The most severe is a *pesha* (פשע), an intentional rebellious act.¹ So why is a minor misstep being highlighted here, when there were also more serious rebellious acts?

ועוד צריך עיון על המדרש פיה' הוגה יכול על מגן, תלמוד לומר על רב פשעיה עכ"ל, דאיך תיסק אדעתין שישלח הפרענות לירושלים על מגן דהיניו בהינם.

Also needed is investigation of the Midrash Lam. Rabbah 1:32, which says regarding the verse, “ ‘Because the L-rd has afflicted her (הוגה) (hoga) for her many rebellious acts’ (Lam. 1:5), **that it is not for nothing that it teaches ‘for her many rebellious acts.’ ”** This requires investigation, **for how would it enter your mind that He would send the calamities to Jerusalem for nothing, that is, for no reason?** I.e., couldn’t Jeremiah simply have said that G-d

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¹ The rabbis derive this in Yoma 36b, based upon the following verses. Lev. 4:2: “Speak to the Israelite people thus: When a person unwittingly incurs guilt (*chet*) in regard to any of the L-rd’s commandments about things not to be done, and does one of them.” Num. 15:31: “Because he has spurned the word of the L-rd and violated His commandment, that soul shall be cut off—he bears his iniquity (*avon*).” II Kings 3:7: “The king of Moab has rebelled (*pesha*) against me.”

afflicted Jerusalem? Why did he need to add that which seems obvious, that the affliction was punishment for our sins?

וַיִּשָׂא לֵאמֹר דְּאִיתָא בְּמִדְרַשׁ עַל פְּסוּק אֲשֶׁר הוֹגֵה ה' בְּיוֹם חֲרוֹן אַפּוֹ, אָמַר רַב אַחָא יוֹם אֶחָד הָיָה חֲרוֹן אַפּוֹ שֶׁל הַקַּב"ה, אֵילוּ עָשׂוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל תְּשׁוּבָה הָיוּ נִתְקַנְיָם עַכ"ל. וּבְזֶה יְתוּרֵץ הַמִּדְרַשׁ הַנַּ"ל, לְפִי שֶׁהַפְּתוּב אֹמֵר הָיוּ צָרִיךְ לְרֹאשׁ אִיבִיבָה שְׁלוֹ כִּי־הָיָה הוֹגֵה. וְקוֹשֵׁי לִיָּה לְבַעַל הַמִּדְרַשׁ דְּמָה טַעַם הוּא זֶה שֶׁל כִּי־הָיָה הוֹגֵה, עַל מֵאִי? דְּקָאָמַר אִיבִיבָה שְׁלוֹ, דִּהִינְנוּ שְׂאוּיִבִיבָה מִחֲמַת כֵּן יִשְׁבּוּ בִּשְׁלֹנָה. וְהָא מָה שֶׁהָיָה לֹא הָיָה אֶלָּא יוֹם אֶחָד לְבַד, וְלֹא שִׁינְיָד לְאוֹיְבִים פֶּלַךְ שֶׁלֹּנָה בְּשִׁבִיל גְּזוּר דִּין שֶׁל יוֹם אֶחָד לְבַדוֹ. אֶלָּא אִם יִהְיֶה גְזוּר דִּין שֶׁל זְמַן אַרְוָה, אֶלָּא נִדְאִי מִדְּחִינְנוּ שְׂאוּיִבִיבָה שְׁלוֹ מִחֲמַת כִּי־הָיָה הוֹגֵה צָרִיךְ לֹמַר כִּי הוֹגֵה לְזְמַן אַרְוָה, וְקוֹשֵׁה וְלָמָּה כִּךָ נִהְלֵא מִחֲמַת הַעֲבִירוֹת לֹא הָיָה לוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶלָּא יוֹם אֶחָד לְבַד כַּנֶּרְאָה מִהַמִּדְרַשׁ הַנַּ"ל. וּמִשׁוּם הַכִּי בְּעֵי יָכוֹל עַל מַגֵּן דִּהִינְנוּ שְׁלֵא הָיוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל רְאוּיִים לְכָל כִּךָ עוֹנֵשׁ, מִשׁוּם הַכִּי הוֹסִיף עַל רַב פְּשָׁעֵיהָ.

It's worth noting that it's brought in the Midrash Lam. Rabbah 1:40 on the verse, "When the L-rd afflicted (הוֹגֵה) (*hoga*) me on His day of wrath" (Lam. 1:12), "Rav Acha says that the wrath of the Holy One, Blessed be He, [lasted only] one day; if Israel had repented, they would have been restored." In this way the Midrash Lam. Rabbah 1:32 above—that "it is not for nothing that it teaches [that the L-rd has afflicted her] 'for her many rebellious acts' "—will be explained. For Scripture says, "Her foes are now the masters, her enemies are at ease, because the L-rd has afflicted her" (Lam. 1:5). The question raised by the writer of the Midrash Lam. Rabbah 1:32 is to understand the reason of Lam. 1:5 stating that "the L-rd has afflicted her for her many rebellious acts"; for what reason did Jeremiah need to add that the affliction was due to many rebellious acts? Because it is written "her enemies are at ease," which is to say that her enemies, because of this fact that the L-rd has afflicted Israel, were at ease. But according to Rav Acha in Lam. Rabbah 1:40, G-d's affliction of Israel was only one day, and it's not appropriate for the enemies to have been at ease for a decree of judgment of only one day. To the contrary, if the decree of judgment had been for a long time, then certainly we could see that her enemies would have been at ease; because of this, to make sense of the phrase "her enemies are at ease, because "the L-rd afflicted Israel," one needs to say [it means], "because He afflicted Israel for a long time." It is difficult to understand why this is so, for isn't it true that because of the sins mentioned in Lam. 1:12, He had to act in affliction for one day only, as it appears from the Midrash Lam. Rabbah 1:40 above? I.e., the word "affliction" (הוֹגֵה) (*hoga*) is used both in Lam. 1:12 ["When the L-rd afflicted me on His day of wrath"], which we understand from Rav Acha means one day of affliction, for instances of unintentional missteps (*chet*) (חַטָּא), and also in Lam. 1:5 ("Her foes are at ease, because the L-rd has afflicted her for her many rebellious acts"). Due to that understanding, the term "not for nothing" is required in Lam. Rabbah 1:32, which is that it was not appropriate for Israel to receive so much punishment if one were to view the affliction of Lam. 1:5 and 1:12 as the same affliction, or to view the cause of the affliction mentioned in each verse to be the same. Because of this, the prophet added "for her many rebellious acts," to clarify that the affliction of Lam. 1:5 is different from the affliction of Lam. 1:12, as they have different causes, with the affliction of Lam. 1:5 being due to a much more serious cause, viz, rebellious acts.

ומעתה קנשה כנ"ל ל למה קראם פשעים והיא כתיב חטא חטאה וירושלם דמשמע חטאים קלים. אלא נדאי צריך לומר שאין הכי נמי שהיו פשעים אלא שאם היו עושים תשובה הנה חושב אותם לקלים, לפי שגדולה תשובה שגדולות נעשות לו כשגגות. ועכשו שלא עשו תשובה הם חמורים כמו שהיו.

Now the difficulty, as above, is why they are called rebellious in Lam. 1:5 and here in Lam. 1:8 it's written "Jerusalem has committed a misstep," which means light missteps. It certainly needs to be said that it is indeed so that there were rebellious acts, but if they had repented they would have been considered as light [offenses], for as Reish Lakish said, "Great is repentance, as the penitent's intentional sins are counted for him as unwitting transgressions" (Yoma 86b). But now that they didn't repent, [the intentional sins] are [counted for them] as serious as they actually were.

ודניק שפיר קרא לומר על-כן לנידה היתה, משום דאמרינו בפירק ג' דמענית היתה ירושלים לנדה ביניהם. מה נדה יש לה היתר אף ירושלים יש לה היתר. וכשם שדם הנדה נע[פ]ר ונעשה חלב להניק את הבן, כך הם בתשובתם היו יכולים להפוך את הרע לטוב.

It's especially nice of Scripture to say, "therefore she has become menstrually impure," because as it says in the third chapter of Taanit (page 20a), on the verse Lam. 1:17, "Jerusalem among them was a like a menstrually impure woman,' Rav Yehuda said that Rav said: [The simple meaning of the verse is a curse, but it could alternatively be understood] as a blessing. She was like a menstrually impure woman: I.e., just as a menstrually impure woman becomes permitted [to her husband after the conclusion of her days of ritual impurity], so too, Jerusalem will be permitted [for Jews in the future, to dwell within her walls and to conduct the Temple service there].² "Just as menstrual blood spoils and becomes milk"³ for nursing a child, so too in their repentance they are able to reverse the bad that they have done to good.

וזהו הטעם שאמר הכתוב חטא חטאה דהיינו חטאים קלים, וזהו הטעם נמי דביחזקאל אמר הכתוב כטמאת הנדה היתה דרכם לפני. וסמיה ליה ונחללו את-שם קדשי באמר להם עם-ה' אלה ומאצו יצאו. הנה הקב"ה קראם נדה כדי שיבקשו לטהר עצמם כמו שמיטהרת הנדה מטומאתה כדי לחזור עם בעלה, והם לא עשו כן.

This is the reason that Scripture says "she has committed a misstep," meaning minor missteps, and this is the reason also that in Ezekiel (36:17), Scripture says, "their ways were before Me like the impurity of a menstrually impure woman." Adjacent to this verse, it says in Ezek. 36:20, "They desecrated My holy name; in that men said of them: 'These are the

² Our modern Vilna edition (1886) has a different reading, "כנדה מה נדה יש לה היתר אף ירושלים יש לה תקנה" ("Just as a menstrually impure woman becomes permitted, so too, Jerusalem will be repaired"), which also appears in the earlier Venice (c. 1520) and Pizzaro (c. 1509) editions. The Zera Shimshon follows the text of the Guadalajara, Spain printing (c. 1488), which agrees with earlier manuscripts.

³ Niddah 9a: "According to the statement of Rabbi Meir, menstrual blood spoils and becomes milk [for nursing]." Also Bechorot 6b: "The Master said [that the reason a nursing woman does not experience menstruation is because] the blood is spoiled and becomes milk."

people of the L-rd, yet they had to leave His land.’ ” Here the Holy One, Blessed be He, called them a menstrually impure woman. He did so in order that they would want to purify themselves, as a menstrually impure woman purifies herself from her impurity in order to return to her husband. As Rav said, equating Israel to a menstrually impure woman could be considered a curse, but it could alternatively be taken as a blessing, that Israel could have chosen to purify themselves, to return to G-d, as a wife returns to her husband after immersion. **But they didn’t do this.**

וְזֶהוּ הַחִילּוּל הַבְּאֵמֶר לָהֶם עִם־ה' אֱלֹהֵי, שְׁלֵפִיכֶם קְרָאִים נִגְדָה שְׁאַחַר שְׁתַּטְּבֹּל הִיא יוֹתֵר חֲבִיבָה עַל בְּעֻלָּה פְּדֹאֲמֵרֵינוּ בְּפָרָק ג' דְּנִגְדָה. וְהֵם רָצוּ לִישָׁב כֶּךָ בְּטוּמְאָתָם כְּמוֹ גְּלִמְוִדָה שְׁגִמְוִלָה דָּא מִבְּעֻלָּה, וְכֵן הוּא הַדִּין שְׁאֵם הַנִּגְדָה אֵינָה רוֹצָה לְטְבֹּל מִטוּמְאָתָה כְּדִי לְצַעַר אֶת בְּעֻלָּה, בְּעֻלָּה מִגְרָשָׁה, וְזֶהוּ וּמֵאַרְצוֹ יֵצֵאוּ.

This is the desecration of the Name of G-d, “in that men said of them: ‘These are the people of the L-rd.’ ” Therefore he referred to them as “a menstrually impure woman,” for after [such a woman] immerses, she is more “dear to her husband,” as it is said in the third chapter of Niddah.⁴ But they wanted to remain thus in their impurity as a menstrually impure woman who is separated from her husband.⁵ They arguably had a blessing that they could repent, that they could return to G-d just as a wife returns to her husband after immersion. In choosing not to repent, they desecrated the Name of G-d. **Furthermore, it is the law that if a menstrually impure woman does not want to immerse herself from her impurity, in order to distress her husband, her husband divorces her, and this is why Ezek. 36:20 says, “they had to leave His land.”**

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⁴ Niddah 31b: It is taught in a *baraita* that Rabbi Meir would say: Why does the Torah say a menstrually impure woman [is prohibited from engaging in intercourse with her husband] for seven [days]? Because [otherwise, her husband would be too] accustomed to her, and [would eventually be] repulsed by her. [Therefore,] the Torah says [that a menstrually impure woman] shall be ritually impure for seven days, so that [when she becomes pure again] she will be dear to her husband as at the time when she entered the wedding canopy.”

⁵ Sotah 42a: “In the cities by the sea they call a menstrually impure woman *galmuda* (גְּלִמְוִדָה). What is the meaning of the word *galmuda* (גְּלִמְוִדָה)? It means separated (*gemula*) (גְּמֻלָה) from her husband.”