

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter LVII: Kinnot (Lamentations)

Essay 7: Avoiding distraction from Torah study.¹

מדרש רבה פרשת אָמֵר רבי יוחנן הנה מטגיל, סליק מטברגה לצ'פורין, ונהה רבי חייא בר אבא מסמך ליה. מטון סד בי תקל אמר הדין בי תקל הנה דידי וזביגית תמיה פדי למזפי באורייתא וכו'. שרי רבי חייא בכי, אמר רבי יוחנן מה את בכי, אמר ליה על דלא שבקת לסיבותך פלום. אמר ליה קלה היא בעיניך מה שעשיתי שמכרתי דבר שגברא לששה ימים וקניתי דבר שניתן לארבעים יום עכ"ל.

Midrash Leviticus Rabbah, parshat Emor (Lev. 21:1–24:23) reads:

Rabbi Yochanan was traveling, he left from Tiberias [to go] to Tsipporin [Sepphoris], and Rabbi Chiya bar Abba was helping him. They reached a plot of farmland. [Rabbi Yochanan] said, “This farmland was mine, but I sold it in order to acquire Torah.” They reached a plot that was a vineyard. He said, “This vineyard was mine, but I sold it in order to acquire Torah.” They reached a plot that was an olive grove. He said, “This olive grove was mine, but I sold it in order to acquire Torah.” **Rabbi Chiya started to cry. Rabbi Yochanan said, “Why are you crying?” [Rabbi Chiya] said to him, “Because you did not leave anything for your old age.” [Rabbi Yochanan] said to him, “Is what I did inconsequential in your eyes, that I sold something created in six days and purchased something that was given over forty days?”**²

- Midrash Lev. Rabbah 30:1

יש לדקדק מה היתה סבתו של רבי חייא שהתחיל לבכות לאחר שאמר לו שמכר הפל בשביל התורה, וכי לא הנה מודה שהתורה היא יותר חשובה. ועוד שאם רבי חייא אינו מודה לו בסברא זו אם פן מה מתרץ לו רבי יוחנן קלה היא בעיניך וכו' שמכרתי דבר שגברא לששה ימים. והא אף הוא יודע זה ואף על פי כן הקשה לו דלא שבקת לסיבותך פלום? ועוד מה איכפת אם גברא לששה ימים או לארבעים יום ומה שייך ענין זה לכאן?

We should scrutinize what Rabbi Chiya was thinking that he started to cry after [Rabbi Yochanan] said to him that he had sold everything for the sake of acquiring Torah, and

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¹ The translator does not understand how this essay is relevant to Kinnot.

² The “six days” refer to the days of Creation of the physical world; the “forty days” refer to the length of time that Moses spent on Mt. Sinai when he first ascended to receive the Torah.

why he didn't acknowledge that Torah was more important than the farm, vineyard, and olive groves. Furthermore, if Rabbi Chiya didn't acknowledge this logical argument, what sort of explanation is this of Rabbi Yochanan's, "Is it inconsequential in your eyes, that I sold something created in six days?" But even he knows this, and nevertheless asked him, "You did not leave anything for your old age?" Also, what difference is there if it was created in six days or forty days, and what relevance is this matter here?

וְנִשְׁלַח לְדַבְרֵי רַבֵּי חִיָּיא הֵיךָ יוֹדֵעַ שֶׁהַתּוֹרָה יְקָרָה הִיא מְפִינִינִים וְכָל-חֲפָצִים לֹא יִשְׁוּוּ-בָהּ, אֲבָל כִּנְגֵד זֶה כְּתִיב קָרָא אֶתְרִינָא אָפֶס כִּי לֹא הִנְהִיבָהּ אֲבִיו, וְקָיִמָא לָו שְׂאִין לֹו לְאָדָם לְסִמּוּךְ עַל הַנֶּס, וּמְכַל שְׂפֹן לַעַת זְקֵנָה דְאֲמַרִּינוּ בְּמִסְכַּת גְּדָה פִּינּוּן שְׂנִיתְקוּ שִׁינָיו שְׁל אָדָם גִּיתְקוּ מְזוֹנֹתָיו. וּפִירֵשׁ רַש"י שְׂנִיתְקוּ שִׁינָיו שְׁל אָדָם מִחֲמַת זְקֵנָה גִיתְקוּ מְזוֹנֹתָיו קָשִׁים לְבָא עכ"ל. וְאִם כֵּן לָמָּה לֹא שְׂבַקְתָּ לְסִיבוֹתֶיהָ כְּלוּם.

It's worth saying that even Rabbi Chiya knew that the Torah "is more precious than pearls, and all of the goods cannot equal her,"³ i.e., that it is worth great sacrifice to attain Torah. But against this, even though Scripture writes another thing, "There will be no impoverished among you" (Deut. 15:4), we maintain that man should not rely upon the miracle.⁴ That is, even though G-d has promised us that if we obey His commandments we will not be impoverished, the rabbis tell us that we should not rely upon such a miracle. Instead, we should endeavor to earn a living and to save for the future. Thus, even though Rabbi Chiyah recognized the great value of Torah, he was still concerned that Rabbi Yochanan would become impoverished and would have to rely upon a miracle. Man should especially not rely upon a miracle "in old age" (Ps. 71:9), as it says in tractate Niddah (page 65a), "Once a person's teeth fall out [and he has difficulty eating], his food is cut off."⁵ Rashi explained that, " 'Once a person's teeth fall out' [means] 'old age,' " [and] " 'his food is cut off' [means] 'difficulties to come.' " If so, why "did you not leave anything for your old age?"

וְאִי תִימָא שְׁנִיתְרִיאַת פֶּן אִם יִשְׂאָר לָהּ שְׂדֵה אַחַת הִנֵּה גוֹרָם לָהּ לְפַעֲמִים מַעֲט טְרַדָּה בְּמַחְשְׁבָתָהּ, כְּדִכְתִּיב מְלֹךְ לְשֵׂדֵה נִעְבֵּד, וּמְחַמַּת אוֹתָהּ הַטְרַדָּה הֵייתָ מְפָסִיד לְהַבִּין אֵיזָה דְבָר בְּלִימוּד הַתּוֹרָה, הֲלֹא קָרָא כְּתִיב כִּי-יֵה: יִתֵּן חֲכָמָה? וּבְנֹדָאֵי שְׂפִינּוּן שְׂעֻשִׁיתָ כָּל מָה שְׂרָאוּי לַעֲשׂוֹת וּמְכַרְתָּ כָּל הַמּוֹתֵר מִפְּדֵי חֲיָיָה מִן הַשְּׂמִים הָיוּ מְאִירִים עֵינָיָה בַתּוֹרָה וְלֹא הֵייתָ מְאָבֵד שׁוּם דְבָר מְלִימוּדָהּ.

Rabbi Chiya was saying: "If you will say we should fear that if one field remained yours, it would sometimes cause you a bit of trouble in your mind, as is written, 'A king makes himself servant to the field' (Eccl. 5:8), and because of this same trouble you will lose understanding of some matter in learning Torah, doesn't Scripture write, 'for the Lord grants wisdom' (Prov. 2:6)? Certainly, since you have done everything that is proper to do and you

³ Derived from Prov. 3:15, "She is more precious than pearls; and all of your goods cannot equal her."

⁴ Pesachim 64b; Ritva on Yoma 36a.

⁵ Rather than "his food is cut off," our Vilna edition, as well as earlier known editions, has בתמעטו מזונותיו, that "his food is diminished."

have sold all of the surplus from your life, Heaven has enlightened your eyes in Torah, and you have not lost anything from your learning.” I.e., Rabbi Chiya was suggesting that Rabbi Yochanan could have divested most of his holdings, in order to focus more on learning Torah, but that he could still have retained one field, for his old age, and that G-d would have helped him learn Torah despite any minimal distractions from the property.

ורבי יוחנן השיב לו, הלא אפילו לדבריך הנה לי לסמוך על הנס של חסדי המקום שיאיר עיני בתורתו, וכשמכרתי הכל נמי סמכתי על חסדי המקום שיכין מזונותי, ויותר קל שיבואו לי המזונות שאינם כל כך חשובים שהרי נבראו בששה ימים בלבד, מלבטוח על הנס שיאיר עיני בתורתו שהיא יקרה הרבה שניתנה לארבעים יום.

Rabbi Yochanan answered him, “Even [according] to your words, I had to rely on the miracle of the kindness of G-d, that He would enlighten my eyes in His Torah, and when I sold everything, I also relied upon the kindness of G-d, that He would prepare my food. It’s easier for the food to come to me, which isn’t so important, as it was created in only six days, than to depend upon a miracle that He would enlighten my eyes in His Torah, which is much dearer, being that it was given after forty days.” In other words, Rabbi Yochanan felt that if he had retained his property and had to cope with the distractions that came with it, then he would have to rely upon a miracle to acquire Torah. He preferred instead to divest his properties so that he could devote his energies to learning Torah, acquiring as much Torah as possible by his own powers, and relying upon a miracle with regard to having enough food in his old age.

ומאי דאמרינן בפרק ה' דכתובות (דף ס"ב), רבי יוחנן הנה קא סליק בדרגא, והווי סמכי ליה רבי אמי ורבי אסי, איפקית דרגא תותמי, סליק ואסקינהו, אמרי ליה רבנן, וכי מאסר דהכי, למיה ליה למסמכיה? אמר להו, אם כן מה אני לעת זקנה? ופירש רש"י, אם כן, שאתיש פחי ולא יסמכוני, מה אני, פח בעצמי להשתמש בו לעת זקנה עכ"ל. דשמע מינה שאר רבי יוחנן הנה חושש להניח לעת זקנה.

Given our understanding of Rabbi Yochanan’s outlook so far, **what is it that is said in the fifth chapter of tractate Ketubot (page 62a): “Rabbi Yochanan was once going up stairs, and Rav Ami and Rav Asi were supporting him. The stair collapsed under him, but he went up and pulled both of them up with him. The Sages said to him: ‘Since it is clear that you are so strong, why do you need people to support you?’ He said to them: ‘If so, if I were to expend all my strength now, what will I leave for myself in my old age?’ ” Rashi explained that, “ ‘If so’ [means] ‘that my power will diminish [with age] and I won’t be able to rely upon it’ [and] ‘what will I leave’ [means] ‘[I should save] my strength, to use it for old age.’ ” We hear from this that even Rabbi Yochanan worried about leaving [something] for his old age.**

יש לומר דרבי יוחנן הנה מקפיד להניח פחו לעת זקנה משום שהתורה נקראת תושיה שמתפשט פחו של אדם משום הכי הנה משתדל שיתקיים בו פחו, כדי שלא להתחיל יותר מדאי לעת זקנה, שאז לא הנה יכול עוד לעסוק בתורה.

We can say that Rabbi Yochanan was strict to rest his strength for his old age, because the Torah is called *tushiya* (תושיה) (wisdom) because it weakens (*mateshet*) the strength

of a person who engages in its study (Sanhedrin 26b). **That is why he was striving that his strength would exist, in order that it shouldn't weaken more than necessary for his old age, for then** if his strength weakens, **he won't be able to engage in Torah.** But he did not feel the need to save any land, the management of which he was concerned would distract him from Torah study.

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