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From the Chaburah
By: Adam Friedmann

What Did Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai Really Do in the Cave?

Two weeks ago, we dealt with the discussion in the Gemara (*Shabbat* 11a) about interrupting other activities in order to recite the Shema or the rest of tefillah. According to the Gemara, the Mishnah (*Shabbat* 1:2) includes two cases. The first is when someone begins regular activities such as eating, getting a haircut, or visiting a tannery. In this case, one does not need to interrupt their activities for tefillah. The second case involves someone who is learning Torah. This person doesn't need to interrupt their learning for tefillah, but does need to do so for the Shema. In the Gemara, Rabbi Yochanan qualifies that the halachah in the second case only refers to people like Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai who don't otherwise interrupt their learning for anything (*toratan umanutan*). Everyone else does need to interrupt their learning for tefillah.

We mentioned before that according to the Ba'al Hamaor (*Rif, Berachot* 3b) and other rishonim the 'interruptions' in the mishnah's two cases are different. The first case refers to interrupting activities when there will still be time to accomplish tefillah later on. One does not need to stop eating in order to pray as soon as the obligation comes into effect, but one must pray at some point later on. The second case is talking about pushing off the mitzvah of tefillah altogether. When people of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's stature are learning, they do not need to pray at all. We don't have the space here to get into the details of the arguments brought by the Ba'al Hamaor and others (see *Ran* to *Rif Berachot* 5a) to support this distinction. However, we will note that there's nothing in the text of the Gemara that forces us to draw this conclusion. It is possible to read the Gemara as talking about only the first type of interruption. According to this reading, learning is never a pretense for pushing off tefillah altogether.

The halachah follows the reading of the Ba'al Hamaor. However, there's a well-known story in the Gemara that seems to contradict it. Later on in *masechet Shabbat* (33b), we read about

the story of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son Rabbi Eliezer hiding in a cave from the Romans. According to the story, most of the time they would take off their clothes, cover themselves in sand, and learn Torah. When they would pray, they would first put on their clothes in preparation. The Maharsha (*Shabbat* 33b s.v., *be'idan tzeloyey*) explains that they put on their clothes as a preparatory act before Shemoneh Esrei (*hikon*). The story indicates that Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai would interrupt his learning for tefillah. However, according to the halachah we just learned, he wasn't supposed to do this. He should have kept learning! The story therefore seems to contradict the halachah.

Tosfot (*Shabbat* 11a s.v., *kegon anu*) is sensitive to this issue. He resolves it by arguing that the word *matzlei* ("they prayed") in the story about the cave refers only to the Shema, not tefillah. This brings the story in line with the halachah since even someone at the level of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai must interrupt their learning to recite the Shema. However, this resolution is difficult. Rabbi Akiva Eiger (*Gilyon Hashas* ibid.,) points out that in another place (*Berachot* 15a s.v., *aman*), Tosfot states that the verb *tzaley*, when used without qualification, refers to the entire prayer service including the Shema and Shemoneh Esrei. We may add that the position of Maharsha cited above also precludes Tosfot's resolution since *hikon* only applies to Shemoneh Esrei and not the Shema.

Are there any other ways to resolve this contradiction? I can think of three:

1. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was not obligated to pray while he was learning, but he was allowed to. At some points during his time in the cave he felt the need to pray. The story is referring to these moments. We should note that the Maharam (*Shabbat* 11a, to *Tosfot* s.v., *kegon anu*) explicitly rules out this explanation.
2. The story shows us that the Ba'al Hamaor's distinction between types of 'interruption' is wrong. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai did not need to interrupt his learning for tefillah as soon as the time for tefillah arrived, but even he could not push off tefillah altogether. I believe this is a reasonable reading of the Gemara, but I couldn't find anyone who suggests it. In any case, this is not the way the halachah developed.
3. The halachah shows us that the story is not historically accurate in every detail. Many aspects of the story about the cave are more obviously aggadic. Perhaps the detail about tefillah is aggadic as well. It's teaching us an important allegorical lesson but it doesn't reflect what Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai actually did.

All of these answers are somewhat radical, and this may be a case where the question is better than any answer.

Mishnah: A Philosophy of Life
By: Dovid Campbell

Berachot 4:5 — Sitting on a Donkey While Standing in the Temple

We've all been there—you're traveling by donkey, trying to get home before dark, when suddenly you realize that you haven't davened mincha yet. What do you do? Fortunately, our mishnah has you covered. And even if it's been a while since you traveled by donkey, the principles underlying this mishnah offer some fascinating insights into the nature of prayer, reverence, and imagination.

The mishnah's first recommendation is that you simply get off the donkey. Straightforward enough, but as Rambam and others note, the halachah doesn't actually follow this view. Even if you have a friend to hold the donkey for you so that it won't run away, the sages recognized that the delay of your travel is likely to ruin your concentration. Better to stay on the donkey and pray, even though this is not the most honorable or reverent way of addressing your Creator. In this case, *kavanah* trumps *kavod*.

It's worth reflecting on this. The various demonstrations of reverence that we employ during *tefillah*, from proper dress to proper posture, are external expressions and relatively easy. Proper concentration, by contrast, is an inner struggle. It's no simple matter to envision oneself standing before one's Creator, contemplating the meaning of each word in the *siddur*. Our mishnah clearly expresses the priority of these inner components of prayer.

Of course, just because you get to stay on your donkey doesn't mean you should abandon the external expressions completely. Our mishnah continues by emphasizing that one who can turn his head towards the Temple in Jerusalem should do so. This is how we always attempt to orient ourselves during prayer, and even a donkey-rider can accomplish it, at least with his head.

But what if even that small physical gesture is impossible. Say the Temple is directly behind you, for example. Now what? Our mishnah has you covered here as well. In this case, you should imagine yourself standing before the Holy of Holies in the Temple, facing the holiest site in the world. This is a powerful affirmation of the power of the imagination. Though you're currently sitting on a donkey, traveling down a lonely road as the sun is about to set (due to your poor planning... you really should have left earlier), your mind can be anywhere. So why not take it to the holiest possible place?

Today, we live in a world with few donkeys and no Temple. But a study of our mishnah reminds us that just as the experience of this donkey-rider finds parallels in our modern lives, so too does the experience of standing in the Temple, if we allow ourselves to travel there in our *tefillah*.

Eilu v'Eilu
By: Dovid Campbell

Buying a Home in a Walled City — Psychology, Sociology, and Theology

"If a man will sell a dwelling house in a walled city, its redemption shall be until the completion of the year of its selling; a full year shall be its redemption" (*Vayikra* 25:29).

The Torah lays out some fascinating ideas about property acquisition. Earlier in the *parasha*, we learned that fields cannot be sold permanently. They may be redeemed by their owners at any time (starting two years after the sale), and they automatically revert to their owners in the Yovel year. The law of the house in the walled city presents a sharp contrast to this standard, and the *mefarshim* offer fascinating explanations for why this property can be permanently acquired.

Chizkuni offers two possibilities. One interprets this law as reflecting the unique realities of homeownership. People generally want to feel "at home" in their dwellings. They want the freedom to renovate or expand the house as suits them. A renter doesn't have this freedom, and he therefore never feels entirely settled. A field, by contrast, can be used to maximum advantage by any sharecropper or tenant farmer. Their lack of ownership does not impede their work there. According to this approach, the Torah's distinction between fields and homes reflects the diverse psychological needs and expectations of their users.

Chizkuni's second explanation, also suggested by R' Yosef Bechor Shor, draws a socioeconomic distinction. The Torah wanted to ensure that no family became permanently separated from its primary means of livelihood, the land itself. The return of land effectively prevents the establishment of permanent feudal systems and serfdom. However, land occupied by houses, especially within walled cities, has little chance of becoming agriculturally productive. There is therefore no issue with allowing this property to be sold permanently.

A third explanation, offered by Rabbeinu Bachya, takes a midrashic approach. The "man" in our verse is an allusion to Hashem, and the house in the walled city is a reference to the Temple. For Rabbeinu Bachya, this halachah becomes an extended metaphor for Hashem's eventual redemption of His home in the walled city of Jerusalem.

These three explanations are not mutually exclusive, and they actually complement one another beautifully. Taken together, we see how a single law operates on psychological, sociological, and theological levels. At the same time, we find that other peshat-oriented commentators, such as Rashi and ibn Ezra, saw no need to explain the rationale underlying this distinction between fields and homes. To what extent might this indicate a fundamental disagreement in the nature of *peshat*, and how might the sorts of explanations we've discussed be seen as enhancing or distracting from the *peshat* itself?