

Outline for “Talmud on Parasha *Vayeira*”

Dan Fendel, November 2006

INTRO: Will look at what the Talmud has to say about the parasha and use this as a brief intro to Talmud.

A. General introduction to Talmud: The ORAL LAW

1. Mishna: Compiled by Yehuda HaNasi (Judah the Prince) from Rabbi Meir’s notes, compiled c. 200 CE
2. Other Mishnaic texts – Baraitot
3. Gemara: Commentary on Mishna, compiled by Ashi and Ravina c. 50 CE
4. Talmud has two main components:
 - a. *Halachah*—law
 - b. *Agadah*, or *midrash*—stories, examples, etc.

Today, we will look at one case of halachah and one case of agadah, each growing out of our parasha, which will also illustrate the Gemara’s method of free association in getting from one idea to another.

B. Sanhedrin: Laws about the legal system

1. Make-up of courts, including the Great Sanhedrin of 71 judges, other “little sanhedrins” of 23 judges, and other local, smaller courts
2. Who can be a judge?
3. Who can be a witness?
4. What are the procedures for testimony, including penalty for *zomemim*—false witnesses?
5. Issues about death penalty:
 - a. Four types—stoning, burning, decapitation, and strangulation—with considerable discussion about the order of severity
 - b. In addition to these four forms of judicial execution (i.e., “by the hand of man”), Talmud discusses execution “by the hand of heaven”: i.e., “God will get you.”
 - c. What transgressions lead to each form of execution?

C. Chapter 10: Discusses those who are punishable by strangulation, which includes the false prophet.

The Mishna we look at today, which uses our parasha, focuses on this issue, and the Gemara cites a Baraita that summarizes the transgressions:

1. Three cases punished “by the hand of man” (namely, by strangulation):
 - a. One who prophesies what he did not hear
 - b. One who prophesies what was told to someone else
 - c. One who prophesies in the name of an idol
2. Three cases punished “by the hand of heaven” (namely, by strangulation):
 - a. One who suppresses a prophesy
 - b. One who disregards the words of a prophesy
 - c. One who transgresses his own prophesy

The Gemara gives a biblical example of each transgression, and uses our parasha to explain its reasoning in the case of “One who disregards the words of a prophesy.”

D. The Gemara text: HALACHAH

1. The example (89b1) is from Kings, in which a prophet names Michayehu tells another man, in God's name, to strike him (that is, to strike Michayehu). The man refuses, and Michayehu says to him, "Because you have not obeyed the word of God, as soon as you leave, a lion will slay you." And it happens that way. So this is death "at the hand of heaven."
<Act this out if it seems needed.>
2. The Gemara asks a question that is very reasonable, especially in the context of its focus on false prophecy:
 - a. ASK: WHAT MIGHT THAT QUESTION BE?
 - b. Then have congregation turn to the text (89b2, bottom of the first column) and have volunteers read each of the next three paragraphs, and discuss one paragraph at a time. (Tell them not to read ahead!)
 - A. **"ONE WHO DISREGARDS THE WORDS OF A PROPHET": HOW IS ONE TO KNOW THAT A PARTICULAR INDIVIDUAL IS A TRUE PROPHET, SO THAT ONE WOULD BE PUNISHED FOR DISREGARDING HIM?**
<Let people speculate on how one is to know.>
 - B. **BECAUSE THE PROPHET HAS GIVEN HIM A SIGN.**
<Let people speculate on what sort of sign this might be, and refer them to footnote 22.>
 - C. **BUT MICHAH DID NOT GIVE A SIGN, AND THE MAN WHO DISOBEYED HIM WAS PUNISHED.**
<Let people speculate on how the Talmud will deal with this problem.>
 - D. **WHERE HE IS ALREADY ESTABLISHED AS A PROPHET, IT IS DIFFERENT.**
<Comment on this as a "rabbit out of a hat" solution" that is typical of the Talmud.>
3. The Gemara now gives a proof of this new principle, thus illustrating the method of halachic reasoning.
 - a. ASK: HOW MIGHT THIS BE CONNECTED WITH OUR PARASHA? <Or then ask: Who has to be obedient here, but might otherwise question?>
 - b. <New reader>
FOR IF YOU DO NOT SAY THAT AN ESTABLISHED PROPHET DOES NOT NEED TO GIVE A SIGN, THEN WITH ABRAHAM ON MOUNT MORIAH, HOW COULD ISAAC HAVE LISTENED? SIMILARLY, WHEN ELIJAH ORDERED THE PEOPLE TO BRING A SACRIFICE ON MT. CARMEL, HOW COULD THEY HAVE RELIED ON HIM, AND DONE A SACRIFICE OUTSIDE THE TEMPLE? RATHER, YOU MUST SAY THAT FOR AN ESTABLISHED PROPHET, THE LAW IS DIFFERENT. ONE MUST LISTEN TO THE PROPHECY EVEN IF NO SIGN IS GIVEN.

E. The Gemara text: AGADAH

1. Having brought up Abraham in connection with the issue of false prophecy, the Gemara "free-associates" and takes off from there, with a digression, based on the opening words of our parasha.
<ASK: DOES ANYONE RECALL HOW THE PARASHA STARTS?>
"AND IT CAME TO PASS AFTER THESE THINGS, THAT GOD TESTED ABRAHAM."
2. ASK: WHAT IS THE NATURAL QUESTION TO ASK ABOUT THIS PHRASE, AT THE START OF THE PARASHA?
AFTER WHICH THINGS?

3. ASK: WHERE SHOULD WE LOOK TO FIND THE ANSWER? <Get to the idea that one might look in the preceding chapter.>
4. The Hebrew “Achar ha-d’varim ha’eleh” could mean “after these things” but could also mean “after these words.” One of the Rabbis of the Talmud is inspired by this ambiguity, and we have a flight of Rabbinic imagination:

<New reader>

RABBI YOCHANAN SAID IN THE NAME OF RABBI YOSE BEN ZIMRA: “IT WAS AFTER THE WORDS OF SATAN, FOR IT IS WRITTEN ‘AND THE CHILD GREW AND WAS WEANED (AND ABRAHAM MADE A GREAT FEAST).’ ”

<Clarify “Satan” if needed.>

5. ASK: WHAT’S THE ISSUE HERE? WHAT IS SATAN GOING TO SAY ABOUT ABRAHAM AND THIS FEAST?

a. <New reader>

SATAN SAID BEFORE THE HOLY ONE, BLESSED BE HE: “MASTER OF THE UNIVERSE! THIS OLD MAN YOU HAVE GRACED WITH THE FRUIT OF THE WOMB AFTER 100 YEARS, AND IN THIS ENTIRE FEAST, HE DID NOT OFFER EVEN A TURTLEDOVE AS A SACRIFICE.”

<Stop for comment. See footnote 29.>

- b. ASK: HOW DOES GOD GET OUT OF THIS CHALLENGE?

c. <New reader>

THE HOLY ONE SAID TO HIM “DID HE MAKE THE FEAST FOR ANY REASON OTHER THAN FOR THIS SON? YET, IF I WOULD TELL HIM, ‘SACRIFICE YOUR SON BEFORE ME’, HE WOULD SACRIFICE HIM IMMEDIATELY.”

- d. ASK: HOW DOES THIS TIE INTO THE ISSUE OF “AFTER THESE THINGS” THEREUPON THE VERSE SAYS “AND GOD TESTED ABRAHAM....”

F. Summary:

1. Halachah about obeying someone who claims to be a prophet
2. Agadah, by free association, on the situation of Abraham and Isaac

G. Our Talmud group:

1. Begun about 10 years ago following Kallah experience
2. How we found this *sugya* (segment of discussion)
3. Extraordinary coincidence that we happened to get to this *sugya* just this past week
4. We finished Chapter 10, and are about to start the final chapter of Sanhedrin, which deals with:
 - a. The messianic era
 - b. Resurrection of the dead
5. Then we have to decide what tractate to read next
6. Please talk to one of us if you’re interested in joining the group (Tuesday evenings).