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**'Iron sharpens iron, so a person sharpens the wit of their friend.'**

**Proverbs 27:17**



## Introduction

Welcome to this special chavruta text pack for Shavuot morning. As this weekend is the Queen's Platinum Jubilee, our Shavuot study has focused on kings, queens, and emperors in Jewish tradition. In this pack, we have narrowed down to a particular interpretive technique known as the *mashal*, in which God is compared to a flesh-and-body human king.

Each text in this pack is followed by questions to guide your discussion – which you are free to use or disregard as you like.

As usual, we have provided the text in both Hebrew and English translation. For those with some knowledge of Hebrew, we encourage you to attempt your own translation, but there is absolutely no expectation that you engage with the Hebrew. There is also no requirement to get to the end of the pack – we have provided more than you can get through in an hour of study, and we encourage you to focus on understanding a small amount rather than becoming confused by a greater amount.

Further resources and advice on how to get the most out of chavruta can be found in our [updated FAQs](#). We hope you continue to enjoy studying together this morning. Please speak to Rabbi Elliott ([elliott@alyth.org.uk](mailto:elliott@alyth.org.uk)) if you would like to join future series of the Chavruta Project

## Blessing for Study

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ לְעֲסוֹק בְּדַבְּרֵי  
תוֹרָה.

Blessed are You, our Living God, Sovereign of the universe, whose commandments make us holy, and who commands us to devote ourselves to the study of Torah.

*Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheynu Melech ha-olam, asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav, v'tzivanu la-asok b'divrey Torah.*

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם

בְּמִי נִמְלָךְ,

רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בְּשֵׁם רַבִּי לְוִי אָמַר, בְּמַלְאֲכַת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ נִמְלָךְ, מִשָּׁל לְמַלְךְ שֶׁהָיוּ לוֹ שְׁנֵי סַנְקְלִיטִים, וְלֹא הָיָה עוֹשֶׂה דָבָר חוּץ מִדַּעְתּוֹ.

רַבִּי שְׁמוּאֵל בַּר נַחֲמָן אָמַר בְּמַעֲשֵׂה כָּל יוֹם וַיּוֹם נִמְלָךְ, מִשָּׁל לְמַלְךְ שֶׁהָיָה לוֹ סַנְקְטִדְרוֹן, וְלֹא הָיָה עוֹשֶׂה דָבָר חוּץ מִדַּעְתּוֹ.

רַבִּי אַמִּי אָמַר בְּלָבוֹ נִמְלָךְ, מִשָּׁל לְמַלְךְ שֶׁבָּנָה פְּלִטִין עַל יְדֵי אַרְדָּכָל, רָאָה אוֹתָהּ וְלֹא עָרְבָה לוֹ, עַל מִי יֵשׁ לוֹ לְהִתְרַעַם לֹא עַל אַרְדָּכָל, אֶתְמָהָא, הָיִי וַיִּתְעַצֵּב אֶל לָבוֹ.

אָמַר רַב אֲסִי מִשָּׁל לְמַלְךְ שֶׁעָשָׂה לוֹ סְחוּרָה עַל יְדֵי סְרָסוּר וְהַפְּסִיד, עַל מִי יֵשׁ לוֹ לְהִתְרַעַם לֹא עַל הַסְּרָסוּר, אֶתְמָהָא, הָיִי וַיִּתְעַצֵּב אֶל לָבוֹ.

**And God said, ‘Let us make a human etc.’ (Genesis 1:26)**

With whom did God take counsel?

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi<sup>1</sup> said, God took counsel with the heavens and the earth. This is to be compared to a king who had two advisors [*sanklitim*], and he would not do anything without their knowledge.

<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi was one of the most influential aggadists of his generation, living in Lydda in the Land of Israel in the first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE.



Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman<sup>2</sup> said, God took counsel with the creations of each day. This is to be compared to a king who had an associate [*sankatadron*], and he would not do anything without their knowledge.

Rabbi Ammei<sup>3</sup> said, God took counsel with God's own mind. This is to be compared to a king who built a palace by the hand of an architect, but he saw that it did not please him: with whom is he to be indignant? None but the architect. Similarly, 'And it grieved God in God's heart' (Genesis 6:6).

Rabbi Assei<sup>4</sup> made a comparison with a king who did some business through an agent and suffered loss: with whom is he to be indignant? None but the agent. Similarly, 'And it grieved God in God's heart' (Genesis 6:6).

## Questions

- What do the 4 *meshalim* add to our understanding of the biblical verse?
- How does the introduction of the verse from Genesis 6:6 develop our understanding?
- If any, which of these do you find most compelling as a *masha!*?

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<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman (sometimes Nachmani) was another highly respected aggadists, living in Tiberias in the Land of Israel in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE.

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Ammei (sometimes Ammi) was another highly respected teacher in Tiberias in the Land of Israel in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE. He is often quoted alongside Rabbi Assei (below).

<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Assei (sometimes Assi, but usually Yosei) came to the Land of Israel from Babylonia in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE.

ואתה הקרב אליך אמרו בשעה שירד משה מסיני וראה ישראל באותו מעשה הביט באהרן והיה מקיש עליו בקורנס והוא לא נתכוין אלא לעכבם עד שירד משה ומשה היה סבור שהיה אהרן שותף עמהן והיה בלבו עליו

א"ל הקב"ה משה יודע אני כוונתו של אהרן היאך היתה לטובה

משל לבן מלכים שזחה דעתו עליו ונטל את הצפורן לחתור בית אביו

אמר לו פדגוגו אל תיגע עצמך תן לי ואני אחתור

הציץ המלך עליו וא"ל יודע אני היאך היתה כוונתך חייך איני משליט בריה על פלטיץ שלי אלא אתה

כך בשעה שאמרו ישראל לאהרן קום עשה לנו אלהים אמר להם פרקו נזמי הזהב אמר להם אני כהן אני אעשה אותו ומקריב לפניו והוא לא נתעסק אלא לעכבן עד שיבא משה

א"ל הקב"ה אהרן יודע אני היאך היתה כוונתך חייך אין אני משליט על קרבנותיהן של בני אלא אתה

**You shall bring close etc. (Exodus 28:1)** They say, when Moses descended from Sinai and saw Israel engaged in that act [the sin of the Golden Calf], he observed Aaron who was striking it with a smith's hammer, his intention being only to delay them until Moses descended [from the mountain]. But Moses thought that Aaron was a partner with them, and he was incensed with him.

The Holy Blessed One said to Moses, 'I know that Aaron's intention was good.'



This is to be compared to a prince whose mind became unsteady, and who took a digging tool to dig a hole under his father's house.

His tutor said to him. 'Do not tire yourself. Give it to me and I will dig.'

The king spotted him, and said to him, 'I know you had a good intention. As long as I live, only you shall rule over my palace.'

So, when Israel said to Aaron, 'Arise, make for us a god', he said to them, 'Break off the golden rings', [and] he said to them, 'I am a priest, let me make it, and I will make offerings before it.' He was concerned only to delay them until Moses returned.

The Holy Blessed One said, 'Aaron, I know what your intention was. As long as I live, only you shall rule over the sacrifices my children will bring.'

## Questions

- What does this *mashal* add to our understanding?
- Does it make a difference that this *mashal* is about the son of a king rather than the king?

אִישׁ אִישׁ מִבֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁחַט שׂוֹר אֹרְכָשֵׁב אוֹעֵז בְּמַחֲנֶה אוֹ אֲשֶׁר  
יִשְׁחַט מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה : וְאֶל־פֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד לֹא הֵבִיאוֹ לְהַקְרִיב קֶרְבָּן  
לַיהוָה לִפְנֵי מִשְׁכַּן יְהוָה דָּם יִחֹשֵׁב לְאִישׁ הַהוּא דָּם שִׁפָּךְ וְנִכְרַת הָאִישׁ  
הַהוּא מִקֶּרֶב עַמּוֹ :

ר' פינחס בש' ר' לוי לבן מלכים שנזזו לבו עליו והיה למוד לאכול בשר  
נבלות וטרפות אמ' המלך זה יהיה תדיר על שולחני ומעצמו הוא נידור  
(גדור)

והיו ישראל מקריבין קרבניהן באיסור במה ופורענות באות עליהן  
אמר הקב"ה יהיו מקריבין לפני בכל עת קרבנותיהן באהל מועד והן  
נפרשים מעבודה זרה והם ניצולים, הה"ד איש איש מבית ישראל וגו'.

Whatsoever man of Israel who slaughters an ox, or a lamb, or a goat, in  
the camp, or if he slaughtered it outside the camp, and does not bring it to  
the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, to offer it as an offering to the Eternal,  
before the Tabernacle of the Eternal, blood shall be upon the hands of that  
man; he shed blood, and that man shall be cut off from among his people  
(Leviticus 17:3-4)

Rabbi Pinchas<sup>5</sup> said in the name of Rabbi Levi:<sup>6</sup> [This is to be compared] to  
the son of a king, whose mind was unbalanced, and became accustomed  
to eating unkosher meat. The king said, 'He shall be regularly at my table  
and on his own he will be protected from himself.'

<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Pinchas (ben Chama) was a rabbi in the Land of Israel in the 4<sup>th</sup> century  
CE.

<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Levi was famous for his aggadic midrash. He lived in the Land of Israel in  
the late -3<sup>rd</sup> century CE.



And Israel used to offer offerings in forbidden high places, and punishments would come to them. The Holy Blessed One said: 'They shall offer their offerings before Me at all times in the Tent of Meeting, and they will be separated from idol worship, and they will be saved [from punishments]. Therefore it is written: 'Whatsoever man of Israel etc.'

## Questions

- How does this *mashal* develop our understanding of the text from Leviticus?
- What kind of underlying ideology might this *mashal* betray?



All of the midrashim contained in this text pack are from **Midrash Rabbah**, the large collection of classical rabbinic midrash on the Hebrew Bible. Each of them is of slightly different provenance however.

**Genesis Rabbah** was redacted around the fifth century in the Land of Israel.

**Leviticus Rabbah** is different in structure but originates at around the same time and place.

**Exodus Rabbah** is a much later work, possibly only redacted around the eleventh or twelfth century, though contains material that clearly originates from an earlier period.

As with so much in rabbinic literature, much of this is based on very small amounts of textual evidence.



## Notes