

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter LIX: Kohelet (Ecclesiastes)

Essay 14. Every penny of charity counts

“Now, I find woman more bitter than death; she is all traps, her hands are fetters and her heart is snares; he who is pleasing to G-d escapes her, and he who is displeasing is caught by her. See, this is what I found, said Koheleth, [adding] one to another, to find a sum.” – Eccl. 7:26–27

”רָאָה” זֶה מְצָאתִי אֲמָרָה קִהְלֵת אַחַת לְאַחַת לְמִצָּא הַשְּׁבוּן. צָרִיךְ עֵינֵינוּ מֵהוּ הַלְשׁוֹן שֶׁל “אַחַת לְאַחַת”, וּמֵהוּ “לְמִצָּא הַשְּׁבוּן”, וּמֵהוּ זֶה הַשְּׁבוּן.

“See, this is what I found, said Koheleth, [adding] one to another, to find a sum.” It requires investigation what is the meaning of the language of “one to another,” and what is the meaning of “to find a sum,” and what is this sum?

וְיִשׂ לֵאמֹר דְּאִיתָא בְּפִרְקָא קַמָּא דְּבַתְרָא אָמַר רַב מִשְׁמִיָּה דְּרַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר מֵאֵי דְּכַתִּיב “וַיִּלְבַּשׁ צְדָקָה כַּשֵּׁרֶט” מֵה “שֵׁרֶט” זֶה כָּל קַלִּיפָה וְקַלִּיפָה מִצְטָרְפֵת לְהַשְׁבוּן גְּדוּל, כִּד הַצְדָּקָה כָּל פְּרוּטָה וּפְרוּטָה מִצְטָרְפֵת לְהַשְׁבוּן גְּדוּל. ר' חֲנִינָא אָמַר מֵהֵכָא “וַיִּכְבְּדוּ עַדִּים” וְכֹי, מֵה כְּבֹד זֶה כָּל נִימָא וְנִימָא מִצְטָרְפֵת לְבְּגַד גְּדוּל אִף הַצְדָּקָה כָּל פְּרוּטָה וְכֹי.

It can be said that it is brought in the first chapter of Bava Batra:

Rav¹ said . . . in the name of Rabbi Elazar: What is [the meaning of that] which is written: “And He donned charity like a coat of mail” (Isaiah 59:17)? To tell you that just as [with regard to] this coat of mail, each and every link [of which it is fashioned] combines to [form] one large coat of mail, so too for charity, each and every *peruta* [given] combines into a large sum.

Rabbi Chanina says: The same idea is derived from here, as it is stated: “And all our charity is as a polluted garment” (Isaiah 64:5). **Just as** with regard to **this garment, each and every thread** in it **combines to form one large garment. So too** with regard to **charity, each and every *peruta*** combines into a large sum.

- Bava Batra 9a–9b

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¹ According to <https://bavli.genizah.org>, every known printing and manuscript of the Talmud shows “Rava.” However, the *Zera Shimshon* will quote the Rif’s commentary on *Ein Yaakov*, below, which has the reading “Rav.” Thus, the translator has not corrected to “Rava.”

וּפְרִשׁ הָרִי"ף דְּרַב סְבִירָא לִיה שְׂאָם הָעֲנִי הוּא רַעַב וְרוּצָה לְקַנּוֹת כִּכְרָא אֶחָד שֶׁל לֶחֶם לְאָכּוֹל וּמִקְבָּץ פְּרוּטָה מִזֶּה וּמִזֶּה, הַשְּׂכָר יוֹתֵר גְּדוֹל הוּא מִמֵּי שְׂבוּתָן לֹא הַפְּרוּטָה הָאֶחָדוּנָה, שְׂמַעְעֵלִים עָלָיו כְּאִילוּ נָתַן הוּא כֹּל הַכֶּכֶר, וְזֶהוּ מִצְטַרְפֵּת לְחֻשְׁבוֹן גְּדוֹל, כְּמוֹ כֹּל הַשְּׂאָר שֶׁקְבָּץ מְאַחֲרִים. וְר' חֲנִינְיָא לֹא רָצָה לְלַמּוֹד מִכָּאן, דְּאִם כֵּן נִרְאָה שְׂאִין שׁוּם זְכוּת בְּמֵי שְׂבוּתָן פְּרוּטָה הָרֵאשׁוֹנָה, דְּאִם לֹא הָיְתָה זֹאת הָאֶחָדוּנָה לֹא הָיָה יָכוֹל לְקַנּוֹת הַלֶּחֶם אִם בְּכֹל מָה שְׂנַתְנּוּ הָרֵאשׁוֹנִים, כְּדַמְיוֹן הַשְּׂרִיֹן שְׂאָם לֹא תִהְיֶה הַקְּלִיפָה הָאֶחָדוּנָה הָרִי שְׂרִיֹן כְּאִילוּ אִינוּ, כִּי מֵאוֹתוֹ נִקְבַּב יוֹכֵל לְעִבּוֹר חֲנִינִית וְחִץ. וּמִשׁוּם הַכִּי דְרִישׁ מִקְרָא ד' וּכְבָגֵד עֲדִים" וְכו', מָה בְּגָד זֶה כֹּל נִימָא וְנִימָא וְכו', דְּאָרִיגַת הַבְּגָד אִינוּ כְּשֶׁרָגַן שְׁנַעֲשֶׂה מְעַט מְעַט, אֲלֵא אֲדַרְבָּא בְּבָגֵד צְרִיד שִׁיְהִי קִשׁוּרוֹת כֹּל הַנִּימִין יַחַד לְעֲשׂוֹת טְלִית אַחַת, וְאִם כֵּן הָרֵאשׁוֹנָה וְהָאֶחָדוּנָה מִצְטַרְפּוֹת זֶה עִם זֶה כִּי אֵין לָהֶם תְּקוּמָה אֲלֵא יַחַד עַכ"ל.

Why does the Gemara cite two opinions? Aren't they saying the same thing, that every small coin given as charity is precious? According to the Rif, they have two different opinions. A coat of mail missing a link is defective and dangerous. Thus, by analogy, one who adds the final link gets the most credit. In contrast, a garment can't be made until all the threads are first collected. Thus, by analogy, each person providing a thread gets credit.

The Rif explained that Rav holds that if a poor person is hungry and wants to buy a loaf of bread to eat, and he collects small coins from various people, the reward is greater for the one who gives him the final coin than for all the others. It is considered as if the one who gave the final coin has given the entire loaf. This is the meaning of "it combines into a large sum," as if that final coin is the equal of the sum of all the other coins that he collected from others.²

Rabbi Chanina did not want to learn from this teaching, as the Rif understood it, because if so, it would appear that there was no merit in being the one who gives the first coin. I.e., with this approach, if not for the last coin, the loaf could not be purchased, even with all that the earlier ones gave. It is like a coat of mail, where if the last link is missing, the armor is as though it doesn't exist, because through that gap, a spear or arrow can pass.

Therefore, [Rabbi Chanina] instead interprets from the verse, "And all our charity is as a polluted garment," as "just as with regard to this garment, each and every thread in it combines to form one large garment." The weaving of a garment is not like armor, which is made bit by bit. On the contrary, in a garment, all the threads must be tied together to make a single garment. Thus, the first and the last threads join together because they only have substance when they are together.

² Rabbi Yoshiyahu Pinto ("the Rif") (c. 1565 - c. 1648), *Meor Einayim*, a commentary on *Ein Yaakov*. See *Ein Yaakov* 1:14.

ולפי זה אמר הכתוב "ומוצא אני מר ממנות את־האשה" וכו' "טוב לפני האלהים ימלט ממנה", כיצד ימלט, ראה זה מצאתי, שבנותינת הצדקה האדם יכול להנצל ולהמלט מאשה רעה שהיא מר ממנות והצדקה תציל ממנות ממיתה משונה וממיתה עצמה, והיא מצוה אחת שמצטרפת אחת לאחת, דהיינו פרוטה מזה ופרוטה מזה. ולא תאמר אפשר שאני אתן לעני ולא יספיק לכדי צרכו ויבא אחר וישלים ויהיה פל השקר שלו, וכסברת רב ופדמיון השריון, לכה סיים "למצא תשובון", שאף אחר מציאת התשובון יהיה אהד לאהד, שכה הוא שכה פרוטה הראשונה כשכה פרוטה האחרונה וכסברת ר' תנינא.

Based on this, we can understand the previous verse, which says, “Now, I find woman more bitter than death; she is all traps, her hands are fetters and her heart is snares; he who is pleasing to G-d escapes her, and he who is displeasing is caught by her.”

How can one escape? This is what I have found: that by giving charity, a person can be saved and escape from an evil woman, who is more bitter than death. Charity saves from death, both an unnatural death and death itself.³ This is one mitzvah that accumulates bit by bit, meaning one coin from this person and one coin from another.

Do not say, “Perhaps I will give to a poor person, but it won’t be enough to meet his needs, and then another person will come and complete it, and all the reward will go to him,” as Rav suggested, similar to the analogy of armor.

Therefore, the verse concludes, “to find a sum,” meaning that even after the total is completed, it is still considered one after another, i.e., the reward for the first coin is the same as the reward for the last coin, in accordance with the view of Rabbi Chanina.

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³ Shabbat 156b.