

Synopsis

Forward:

Many researchers, during different periods, have questioned the purpose behind the homilies of the Sages. One of the main differences in their conclusions concerns the proportion of homilies whose purpose is to explain the scriptures, and those whose goal is didactic, educational/ethical. Most researchers are of the opinion that the majority of the homilies have a didactic, educational purpose as compared to those few whose purpose is to expand the scriptural story. We have adopted this approach in our research, and use it in trying to look closely into the Darshan's reality, by means of his homilies on biblical characters. Our hypothesis is that the Sages used their homilies on biblical characters as a vehicle to publicize their own ideological, ethical, religious and social viewpoint. The Sages living in Israel directed their homilies to a wide audience and tried, via them, to explain ideological concepts and give practical guidance in dealing with the issues of the day.

The blossoming of the Eretz Yisraeli Midrash in the time of the Talmud is a result of the demanding conditions under which the Sages functioned. The Jews of Eretz Yisrael were required to cope with difficulties in many areas: the economic crisis that affected the whole empire, and caused poverty and hunger amongst the Jews; the lowered status of the Nassi, the emigration to Bavel, life alongside foreigners, the growth of Christianity and more. The hypothesis is that alongside their extensive work in the realm of Halacha, the sages prepared homilies in which they inserted indirect teachings and veiled instructions on how to cope with the new conditions. The Sages "used" Biblical personalities as a parable for the troubles of the time, and their attitude to those figures served as an allegory for the solutions they offered their community.

The Midrashic literature of Eretz Yisrael is the main source of our research, however there is a wealth of homilies attributed to the Sages of Eretz Yisrael, to be found in the Talmud Bavli. The use of homilies from the Bavli necessitates dealing with methodological questions connected to the credibility of the source and the authenticity of the material presented.

Working with so much material from all branches of Midrashic literature, makes it feasible, to a certain extent, to differentiate between homilies that are doubtful as

coming from a certain Sage, and those that supported the general trend that was typical of that Sage according to what appears in the Eretz Yisraeli literature. Thus it was possible, with the necessary caution, to draw also on the "trusted" homilies from the Bavli, and with their help to outline the world-view of their Darshan.

The research includes eight chapters divided according to the field of endeavor of the Sages, and an additional chapter that attempts to observe which area characterizes the main pre-occupation of some of the Sages, and the reason for their choice of this particular area. The first chapter describes the efforts of the Sages to introduce Torah learning as the top prerequisite. The second chapter deals with the polemic amongst the sages regarding the importance of the leadership of the Nassi during their era. The third chapter discusses the position of the Sages regarding contact between Jews and foreigners. The fourth chapter deals with the status of the Amei Ha'aretz, the proselytes, and the repentants among the population. The fifth chapter is devoted to the description of the work of the Sages to strengthen the inhabitation of Jews in their land, and their efforts to lighten the hardship of poverty. In the sixth chapter there is a description of the debate between the Sages concerning the importance of the family lineage for confirming the status of a person and his suitability to assume public office. In the seventh chapter we present the positions of the Sages regarding diverse family issues: promoting births, and encouraging those suffering from infertility, the command to honor parents, relations between brothers and the status of women. The eighth chapter deals with the Jewish Christian polemic, and the place of homilies concerning Biblical personalities in this polemic. The ninth chapter examines the scope of the approach used by the Sages of Eretz Yisrael. This allows a more extensive look into the personal world of several of the Sages, and shows the contribution of each of them to instilling their students and the community as a whole with ideological and educational values.

Chapter one: "He was a Torah scholar" - learning Torah as the highest aspiration

The economic crisis that befell the inhabitants of the Roman Empire affected, as stated, the Jews as well. The economic blow undercut several stable foundations within the Jewish community, one of which was the study of Torah. Scholars left the Bet Midrash and worked for their living and others emigrated to Bavel. The Yeshiva heads realized the danger that could befall Torat Eretz Yisrael and invested much effort in the attempt

to return the yeshiva students to their regular learning schedule, and to prevent the emigration of others to Bavel. Their efforts were spent in two directions: a. raising the value of learning Torah in Eretz Yisrael b. increasing the public support of scholars. They preached in praise of those who learn Torah and described their greatness and their reward via homilies that describe Biblical personalities that lived during periods of national distress and hunger and nevertheless did not give up their Torah learning. The importance of Torat Eretz Yisrael was stressed in homilies that related to Biblical personalities that worked towards settling Eretz Yisrael and who were knowledgeable in Torah and made sure to spread it. Enlisting the community to support the scholars was done by describing the virtue of exemplary Biblical figures, who were used as a model for appropriate conduct by the scholar. The scholar was expected to demonstrate his absolute virtue and his knowledge of Torah, and the fact that he does not misuse his status, but only uses it as a means to inculcate the Torah amongst the community.

As part of the effort to attest to the virtue of scholars and to cleanse them of any stain attached to them, there is a tendency in the homilies to cover up the sins of the Biblical personalities. In many cases the sins of the Biblical personalities are explained as not actual sins, but the result of pressure and lack of choice and not the consequence of hopelessness and weakness.

Next to these there is a series of homilies that describes Biblical figures who, although they showed extensive knowledge of Torah, their lack of virtues and the manner of their learning removed them from their position and brought them to their end. These homilies warn about the harsh consequences of misusing the crown of Torah.

Chapter Two: The polemic regarding the ideal form of government

The institution of Nassi during the period of the Talmud was not similar to its equivalent during the period of the Mishna. The decline in the status of the institution of Nassi is explained as a corollary to the financial situation of the Jews, which caused tension between those appointed by the Nassi to collect taxes and the community, and also, as a result of the personalities of some of those who held the office of Nassi who did not inherit their ancestor's excellence in Torah and greatness in leadership. The question of the necessity of the institution of Nassi cropped up on the agenda in full force, and the Sages expressed their view for or against it in several ways. Those against

the authorities tried to point out the blemishes in King David's ancestry from its inception, and they enumerated the defects both in David's personality and in the way he administered his kingdom. Scriptural stories which sometimes describe shady aspects from the period of the inception of the dynasty and from the days of the founding of the kingdom of the House of David were used as raw material to prove their position. On the other hand, those who supported the continuation of the institution of Nassi, tried to construct homilies in defense of the Davidic dynasty from the beginning of its inception. They spoke positively about the sins of the fathers of the dynasty and idealized the kingdom of the House of David, both with regard to the character of the king and regarding the functioning of the kingdom. Scriptural stories about the dynasty of the House of David and the monarchy of David, even the embarrassing ones, were explained in a manner where the conduct in which the heads of the dynasty withstood their trials and rose above the temptations set before them, was emphasized.

The whole period of the monarchy was used by the Sages from both schools of thought: while those against the Nassi delved into the sins of the kings to prove through them that power harms those at the top and the people under its jurisdiction, those supporting the Nassi portrayed the contribution of each of the kings of Yehuda and Yisrael – even the biggest sinners amongst them – to the kingdom: they built cities, assisted scholars, promoted communal projects. However even the supporters of the Nassi could not deny the failure of the kings that brought destruction and exile to their kingdom. But while the opposition saw these sins as sufficient reason to remove the Nassi and change his administration, the supporters presented the sins as criticism of specific aspects of the Nassi's rule. The Sage, accordingly, chose to preach about a sin of a Biblical king that conveyed in his view the shortcomings of the Nassi in his times, whose improvement would allow the continuation of his rule.

In other homilies dealing with the kings, the supporters, using descriptions of the relationship between the king and the prophet, clarified what is the correct relationship between the leadership of the Sage and the administration of the Nassi. The Nassi was expected to confer with the Sages; however the Sages must comply with his authority.

Chapter Three: The attitude to foreigners

The attitude of the Jews of Eretz Yisrael to foreigners during the period of the Talmud is dealt with on a number of planes: the philosophical view versus the practical view, and the liberal approach versus the conservative one. It seems there is a tendency in the homilies of the Sages to present Biblical foreigners as having a lack of virtue and a harmful influence on the Jewish community. In several homilies it is stressed that even when an effort was made by foreigners to move towards the Jews, their intentions were evil, and their goal was to ensnare the Jews and change their way of life. Biblical personalities, even the righteous amongst them, who appeared to show friendship towards foreigners, received searing treatment in homilies, together with a description of their personal punishment and that of the following generations. On the other hand, the Darshanim are effusive in their descriptions of the virtue and the reward received by those Biblical personalities who separated themselves from the foreigners in whose midst they lived and avoided copying their practices. Alongside these, there are also a few homilies that describe the benefit derived by some Biblical figures specifically as a result of the blessing of a foreigner; and similarly, homilies that show leniency towards those Biblical figures who befriended foreigners for the sake of their livelihood. The gap between the two types of homilies can be explained as the difference between the utopian reality which the Sages advocated and which they saw as the ideal to which one ought to aspire, and their understanding of the needs of the time, and the necessity to be flexible when contact with foreigners was not with the aim to assimilate, but for the purpose of earning a living. Likewise, there is an apparent difference between the Sages who were more conservative who were against any show of openness towards foreigners, and those Sages who were more liberal and who could differentiate between openness that was dangerous, and a Jewish - foreigner connection that was functional, caused by necessity.

Chapter Four: the Amei Ha'aretz, repentants and proselytes

In the homilies of the Israeli Talmud scholars one finds a tendency to relate positively towards the Amei Ha'aretz and to proselytes, and descriptions of many Biblical figures as repenting. What is common to all three types of homilies is the feeling of opening the gates and widening the circle of those joining the typical Jewish community. What

caused the Sages to be lenient about Jews joining their community, and were they not concerned about the possible bad influence of those who joined for inappropriate reasons? It appears that the reality of the period, where the Jewish community suffered from an economic crisis and religious intimidation, brought the realization that only by enlarging the community and guarding its unity, could they defend it from the efforts to undercut its existence. The Christians exploited the economic hardship from which most of the Jews suffered: they encouraged the poor and claimed that poverty is the ideal, and through them the promise of the Final Days will be fulfilled. They called upon them to annul the commandments and to believe in Jesus as the messiah, with the promise of reward and a better future for the believers. Drawing the Amei Ha'aretz closer and cultivating the suggestion of repentance are the reaction of the Sages to the Christian propaganda campaign. The Amei Ha'aretz and the sinners, who were led astray by the promises of the Christians, are called upon to retract, and to rejoin the Jewish path. The description of the repentance of the great amongst the Biblical sinners was meant both to encourage those who left the fold, and to promise them that their repentance would be accepted, and also to open the hearts of the population to accept them back in the community. As part of the same tendency, there are homilies that criticize Biblical figures, who were part of the leadership of their time, and avoided approaching sinners or giving their deeds the benefit of the doubt. The homilies describe the severe punishment they received as a result of their denunciation.

The positive attitude to proselytes is also explained by this trend. Many amongst the Sages described in their homilies about how the Biblical proselytes brought great advantage to the people of Israel by joining them, and their contribution to the strengthening of the community. However, noticeable on this issue, is the voice of some of those who object to the inclusion of proselytes, out of fear that one can not always discern the pure intentions of those joining, and they might introduce unacceptable ideas among the community.

Chapter Five: Holding on during crisis

As we have seen, the economic crisis undermined several solid fundamentals amongst the Jews, one of which was holding on to Eretz Yisrael despite the difficulties. It appears that there was a movement amongst many Jews, scholars amongst them, to

search for a solution to their troubles in Bavel, where the Jews enjoyed better political and economic conditions. On this issue many Sages joined the struggle to maintain the status of Eretz Yisrael. The struggle included ideological disputes surrounding the question which land is preferable and who are the ideal Torah scholars. However, added to this dispute, there also appeared mutual expressions of malice and mockery. The homilies contributed with their descriptions praising Biblical personalities who immigrated to Eretz Yisrael or worked in that direction and on the other hand, criticizing Biblical figures who emigrated from Eretz Yisrael or who harmed its inhabitants, and the punishment of those sinners. In this group of homilies, there is a lack of personal and behavioral details about the person being investigated, and his worth is determined according to his contribution to the inhabitants of the land, or to his hold on it, or the damage that he caused.

In other homilies, the Sages of the Talmud try to ease the distress of the inhabitants by raising the value of the commandment to give charity, whose practical application includes hospitality. They speak in praise of Biblical figures who kept this commandment and illustrate the description of their reward, as opposed to the punishment of one who was able to help the needy, but refrained from doing so.

The sympathy of the Sages for the distress of the poor is expressed in the collection of homilies that portray the harshness of poverty, and the care of their money by the righteous, while, on the other hand, there are homilies that describe the personal dangers that await the rich – "riches are hoarded to the detriment of their owner", which describe Biblical personalities whose riches caused them to lose their common sense and led to their downfall. The homilies about wealth and poverty and those that portray the value of hospitality also contain a polemic element (Jew - Christian). The Darshanim debate the high regard for poverty in Christianity, and present the ancient sources of the Jewish commandment of charity, as against the Christian boasting of their charity institutions.

Chapter Six: The debate concerning the importance of lineage

One of the societal issues that caused debate among the Sages was the question of the importance of the family lineage of a person to decide his status and his duties. Although there are in Judaism functions designated to persons from a particular family or tribe, nevertheless the question is does the family origin of a person affect only his

ability to participate in these functions, or perhaps the consideration of a person's origin is expanded to include additional societal issues such as the choice of spouse and accepting positions of influence. It is possible to examine the position of the Sages in this area through familiarity with their homilies about Biblical personalities from the priestly aristocracy, and with homilies that deal with the family link of Biblical personalities as part of their assessment. In the homilies of some of the Israeli Talmud scholars regarding the sin of Nadav and Avihu and the causes of the disagreement of Korach, one finds assertions that express their distaste for the methods used by the sons of the aristocracy in the pursuit of prestige, which is in their view the main reason for the sin and decline of the those with noble lineage. In the homilies that deal with Pinchas, the Sages show a noticeable partiality to his character and actions, however, even Pinchas did not escape the arrows of criticism for his pride in his lineage. The tragic end of Yiftach's daughter is attributed to him, since he was more concerned for his honor, than preventing her death.

Other homilies show, that there were among the Sages those who were fastidious about safeguarding their lineage and recommended union with first-rate families, in order to ensure that the sons would follow in the footsteps of their fathers. In contrast, other Sages stressed the need to refrain from cataloguing people according to their family connections. They point out the damage caused by the presence of differences in rank on the basis of lineage and the Divine attempt to blur every element of pedigree that could cause a social hierarchy. In these homilies much weight is given to the acts of man as compared to the negligible value of his ancestry.

The collection of homilies that deal with the sons of Biblical personalities such as: Shmuel and Eli, illustrate perhaps the position of their Darshanim regarding the sons of Sages who assume leadership roles.

It appears that the position of this or that Sage regarding the importance of lineage is dependant on his personal status, his proximity to positions of authority, the status of his ancestors, and perhaps even the place of his development. The assumption is that Sages with a Bavli orientation tended to give more weight to family pedigree than their counterparts who grew up in Eretz Yisrael, where the subject of lineage was less important than in Bavel.

Chapter Seven: Facets of family life in Eretz Yisrael in the Talmudic period

The changes that the Jews of Eretz Yisrael experienced in many areas did not leave out family life. The economic crisis undercut the stability of the family, especially the standing of parents, whose lack of ability to provide for their family caused them, at times, to lose their status as heads of the family. The economic crisis also affected, it appears, the number of children in the family. It could be that Christian ideas idealizing celibacy also had an affect on planning a family and its size. Many homilies of the Israeli Talmud scholars entail the encouragement of births, and describe the virtue and reward of midwives, and in contrast there are homilies describing the punishment of those who refrained from fulfilling the commandment to procreate. It appears that in these homilies the Sages are battling the widespread practice of reducing the number of births, and fighting the opinion that encourages a life of celibacy. Also the infertility of Biblical personalities is discussed in many homilies. These homilies show that on the one hand, the Sages wish to encourage those families who suffer from this lot, and on the other hand they wish to distinguish between infertility and the prevention of conception by choice. The homilies on infertility reveal understanding for the distress of the women, and encourage them not to lose hope and try to give an inspiring explanation to the question "why were the foremothers barren".

The future promise for barren women in several homilies is explained according to the analogy in the prophets between infertility and the low point reached by Am Yisrael, which was used as a source of mockery by the Christians. The future promise to the barren women refutes the Christian doctrine that sees the temporary infertility of the people as a permanent state that verifies its abandonment by its G-d.

The commandment of honoring ones parents receives a special element in the homilies of the Israeli Talmud scholars. The honor of parents is discussed also from the aspect of sons who were distanced or abandoned by their parents or who lived far from their family, but nevertheless made the effort to keep the commandment to honor them in the best possible way. It seems that in this manner the Sages emphasized the importance of keeping the commandment even where the family unit is disintegrating, and even where the father does not completely fulfill his duties towards his son.

The story of the Biblical Yosef is transformed in the homilies of the Sages. There is an effort to minimize as much as possible the expressions of alienation between the

brothers, and to stress the instances of mutual affection that occurred from the time of Yosef's sale until his death. Thus the Darshanim express the abhorrence of dispute and the wish for harmony among brothers and between different parties.

An additional issue connected to family life is the status of women. One can learn about the status of women in the period of the Talmud from the homilies of the Sages concerning Biblical women. The significance the Sages gave to the actions of the Biblical woman show, to a certain extent, their attitude concerning her status in their own period. Criticism of the actions and personality of Biblical women demonstrates the concern of the Sages lest women assume public office in their times. One finds homilies that enumerate stereotypical characteristics of women, and others that minimize their wisdom or leadership ability, and tend to refer to women as having positive traits and talents that are essential for the proper functioning of their home. The main criterion for their approbation is their beauty and their strictness about their modesty. It appears that in the period of the Talmud, they were still concerned about women taking on leadership roles, and this concern was expressed by the Sages through positive or negative evaluations of Biblical women according to the task they fulfilled either within the family or publicly. Lone voices among the Sages of the Talmud express veiled criticism of the discrimination against women. These few Sages, in their homilies, attribute words of censure and grievance to some of the Biblical women who express their protest at being rebuffed from taking up leadership roles in the Torah and social sphere.

Chapter Eight: Biblical personalities in the Jewish Christian polemic in the Talmudic period

The growth of the Midrash in Eretz Yisrael can also be explained as a result of the escalation of the Jewish-Christian polemic in the period of the Talmud and the burgeoning of the writings of the Church fathers at that time, which used Biblical verses and explained them as an allegory for the message of Christianity and the belief in Jesus. The debate centered on three main axes: the belief in Jesus, the Jews as the chosen people, and the fundamentals of religion. The polemic homilies about Biblical personalities were aimed at all three axes, even if most of them were given as answers to the Christian propaganda concerning the fundamentals of religion and its messengers.

Prophecy and the prophets were portrayed in several homilies of the Sages in a hostile light, the words with which they rebuked their people are criticized, and their ineffectiveness and failure is described. It seems that the attitude of the Christians to prophecy: their belief in the prophecies of Jesus, and their comprehension of the prophecies of punishment, that were said to Am Yisrael, as proof of its abandonment – produced homilies censuring prophecy and the prophets, and the concept that the task of the prophets of Israel is to bring messages of consolation.

In other polemic homilies the devotion of Biblical personalities, especially that of the forefathers, to keeping the commandments is highlighted. The commandments that were emphasized are circumcision, Shabbat and the tithing of produce. Associating the commandments to personalities who lived at the beginning of civilization attests to their eternity, as against the claim of the Christians that the commandments have been cancelled and are considered to be a symbol of disgrace. Choosing to stress certain commandments comes as a reaction to the contempt shown by the Christians towards keeping the practical ones, as compared to the importance they bestowed on the ethical ones which they kept punctiliously.

Certain Biblical characters such as Hanoch and Malkizedek were adopted by the Christians, who saw them as heralding Christianity and predicting the coming of Jesus. As a result of this appropriation, these Biblical characters "earned" corresponding Jewish homilies, which removed them from the Christian legacy attributed to them. The Sages strived to portray them in a way that would make it impossible to prove through them the tenets of Christianity. They denounced those that became an emblem of righteousness for the Christians, and others regained their Jewish identity with proof of their steadfastness in keeping the commandments.

Chapter Nine: the connection between the status of the Sage and the contents of his homilies

The Sages of Eretz Yisrael in the time of the Talmud attended to many existential aspects of their times. Nevertheless, amongst some of them, one can discern greater concentration on a particular subject than on others, such as: a Sage who constantly speaks in praise of the Kings, or one who praises the virtue of humility, or one who gives great importance to the economic aspects of the persons under discussion, etc. It

appears that the "responsibility" for different subjects was "split" in one way or another between the Sages, and each Sage, according to his status and perspective, was more concerned about a particular subject than others, and devoted most of his efforts to it. A Sage's choice of subject on which to concentrate was a result, we believe, of the way he received his teacher's values. In the first generation of the period of the Talmud, the teachings of R' Yochanan formed the basis for the ideas which his students- colleagues would develop. R' Yochanan laid down the three essential fundamentals of leadership: the rule of the Nassi, the superiority of Eretz Yisrael over Bavel and embracing sinners. His students continued to develop these fundamentals, however, where they disagreed with one of the fundamentals, or thought that one of them was given excessive importance at the expense of another, the subject of the dispute became the main topic of their interest, since they needed to exert great efforts in order to persuade the community of the correctness of their view. Thus Resh Lakish became associated with the main opposition to the Nassi, R' Yitzhak is known for his extreme position against embracing foreigners and sinners, R' Elazar was the trumpet cry of the poor and R' Levi – the critic of the morals of the leaders of the community. The homilies of R' Shmuel bar Nachmani, who was not one of R' Yochanan's students, deal with another fundamental that strengthens the basis of R' Yochanan's leadership, yet it is specifically its future relevance that he emphasizes – the importance of preserving the lineage of the House of David in order to establish the Messianic foundations for the future to come.