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THE RABBI AND THE GABBAI: A HORSETORICAL BROMANCE

Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

The gaon Rav Chasdai, who was known for his outgoing and generous nature, once came across a group of children looking crossly at one another. He asked them what was the matter, and their reply was: We all want to play horsey, but no one is willing to be the horse. So he volunteered to be the horse. The children tied a rope around him and rode him or led him around for a while. When they got tired and hungry, they tied the rope very securely to a tree and told him to wait like a good horsey while they went home and returned.

Of course, they forgot about him entirely. The gabbai of the shul found him half an hour later, and said he would come back with a knife to cut the ropes. But Rav Chasdai insisted that he instead go bring the children back to untie him, saying that he did not wish to disappoint them.

Thus I heard the story from Rav Chasdai's grandson, whose credibility is beyond question.

To my mind, however, his grandfather gave the gabbai an implausible rationale. The children would not have been disappointed. They had forgotten all about the game, and would never have expected their "horse" to still be there when they remembered.

I suggest instead that Rav C thought it was important for the children to understand and take responsibility for their actions. What if the gabbai hadn't come by for hours? Plainly the knots were so tight that he was unable to free himself. Children have to learn that games can also have real consequences.

But why didn't Rav Chasdai tell the gabbai his true motivation? First of all, the gabbai was prepared to destroy the children's rope, and Rav Chasdai was gently calling to his attention that the children had legitimate interests here. Second, perhaps the gabbai had no sympathy for children, and would otherwise have punished them severely.

That was my speculation. But it happens that I shared it with a colleague who turned out to be the grandson of the gabbai, and he assured me that his grandfather was legendary for his rapport with children.

Why then did Rav Chasdai pretend to be concerned about the children's disappointment? My colleague had a very different perspective. His family tradition was that Rav Chasdai loved to play with children, and would be sad when they grew bored of him. So he suggested that perhaps Rav Chasdai really just wanted the gabbai to bring his playmates back.

I was rather taken aback by the suggestion. Would the gaon Rav Chasdai have used the gabbai's time dishonestly? Would he want to play with children, any children, so much that he would simply waste time waiting around for them?

Perhaps there was no wasted time, and Rav Chasdai spend his wait-time reviewing Shas in his head. Indeed, I wonder whether Rav Chasdai loved playing with children because their games, unlike the social play of adults, let him have human contact and relationships without distracting his intellect from Torah. Chasidic rebbeim are often described as functioning on both levels simultaneously, but Litvaks may not have the same capacity.

Perhaps Rav Chasdai spent his days looking for excuses to get away from adults, and the errand he gave the gabbai was the best he could think of in the moment. He viewed it as a white lie, as the alternatives were either insulting the gabbai or else wasting time better spent studying Torah.

With all humility, though, I'm not sure he was right. The Talmud famously declares that even Hashem tells white lies in order to preserve marital harmony, but hopefully everyone understands that this isn't a license to tell your spouse that you've gone to daf yomi when

you really went in to work. And this isn't obvious, but I think it also means that you can't tell your spouse that you're going in to work when you're really going to daf yomi. Preserving marital harmony doesn't mean deceiving your spouse so that s/he won't stop you from doing what you want to do, even if you think you'll be happier doing it. I also suspect that preserving rabbi-gabbai harmony is not at the same level of priority as preserving marital harmony.

But what if it wasn't about their roles, but about their very human selves? Both Rav Chasdai's grandson and my colleague describe their grandfathers as deeply intimate, almost inseparable friends. Sometimes inseparability can become overwhelming, and one person's unwillingness to enforce boundaries, added to the other's inability to recognize them, can put a profound relationship into crisis. Aggada recognizes that same-sex friendship can be as powerful as heterosexual love; perhaps halakhah does as well, or at least should. Surely Rav Yochanan would have been right to dissemble rather than shatter his relationship with Resh Lakish.

Moreover, the Talmud reports that Hashem once did lie in order to preserve a beit midrash society. When Rabban Gamliel was removed from office for abusing Rabbi Yehoshua, his successor Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah opened the Academy to hordes of previously excluded students, and Torah flourished. Rabbi Gamliel grew depressed, so G-d sent him a dream in which the new students were shown to be worthless hypocrites. The Talmudic narrator makes sure we know that the dream was false; but believing that it was true gave Rabban Gamliel the emotional strength to return to the scene of his humiliation, and eventually to (mostly) regain his office. (Perhaps he also eventually gained the strength to realize that the dream was false.)

So if Rav Chasdai really needed the space, and he dissembled to the gabbai, I think I might be fine with it.

Except that there's a difference between a one-time falsehood in a crisis, and an ongoing habit. At some point Avraham would have caught on that Sarah thought of **him** as too old to have children; at some point Rabban Gamliel would have recognized that his dreams were a little too convenient.

So maybe this story became so worth retelling because it in fact records a crisis passed, and a relationship saved.

But I need to emphasize that it's very possible that neither the rabbi nor the gabbai ever really understood what had happened between them. Maybe in the moment the rabbi projected his desire to play onto the children; surely the gabbai really thought the rabbi needed amusement rather than privacy. Real people do real things for complex and ambivalent motivations, so maybe nothing wholly false was thought or said, and a friendship was saved.

One difference between halakhah and aggada is just that allowance for unclarity. The Talmud states that one who learns Torah lishmoh has fulfilled the purpose of creation, whereas one who learns Torah not lishmoh would have been better off uncreated. It isn't until chassidut that we really consider the question of whether anyone learns purely one way or the other. Assuming that we will always be somewhat but not fully lishmoh, are we better off learning, or not?

Another way of putting it is that halakhah teaches us how to act, but aggada teaches us how to be.

Note: This dvar Torah is a fictional riff on versions of a story sometimes told about a specific past rabbi. Any resemblance to him, or to any other specific historical figure, is wholly coincidental.