**The Charity of Non-Jews in a legend found in the Babylonian Talmud**

In today’s class we shall study a Talmudic passage, that can be understood based upon what we learned last week about the place of generous giving in the Greco-Roman world. The passage is framed as a symposium where the master (the great scholar), in this case the famous Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, challenges his students to resolve a complex problem and then decided which of the answers is the most correct. The discussion is focused upon a verse in Proverbs (14:34). The verse is challenging in its own right and one can find various translations and interpretations amongst the commentators. The verse reads in Hebrew:

צְדָקָה תְרוֹמֵם-גּוֹי; וְחֶסֶד לְאֻמִּים חַטָּאת

The verse like many others is built upon two legs, but the meaning of the words and the relationship between the two parts is unclear. Most would agree that *zeddaka* in Proverbs means general righteousness, although recall (from one of the first classes) that the talmudic sages almost always took this word to mean “charity” to the poor. So the first part of the verse is pretty straightforward “Righteousness [or “charity”] exalts a nation”. The second part of the verse is more complex “and the *chessed* of the people is *chatat*”. First lets us examine the words I have placed in italics “chessed” and “chatat”

These days the word “chessed” means: acts of mercy, deeds of lovingkindness, of goodness, done for one’s neighbor. This is an understanding derived from its usage in Psalms and in Hosea (see below). However, in early biblical Hebrew the word had the meaning of an “abomination”, or of being “cursed”. The word “chatat is also open to interpretation. It could mean “sin” or a “sin offering” – the sacrifice that atones for sin! What emerges is that both of these words in this part of the verse have possible positive meaning or possible negative meaning. In addition, regarding the relationship between the two parts of the verse, it is either one of **contrast** or **parallel** to the first part (this will depend on the different meanings of the words chessed and chatat). All however would seem to agree that the first part of the verse is saying something positive about being righteous (or being generous for the talmudic rabbis) but what about the second part?

The accepted translation of the second part of the verse amongst Israeli scholars is that one should read it (in a rearranged fashion) like this: And sin (“chatat” found at the end of the verse) is an “abomination” (“chessed”) for the people. This would be in **contrast** with the opening positive phrase “Righteousness exalts a nation.” However, an important medieval commentator Abraham ibn Ezra reads the second part as being parallel to the first. For him *chessed* means good deeds and *chatat* means a sin-offering. According to his reading there is no need to rearrange the words. The phrase teaches “and the good deeds of the people is equivalent to bringing a sin offering (i.e. that it atones for one’s sins)”. In other words both parts of the verse are saying something positive about charity and of good deeds carried-out by the “nations”, the “people”. The approach of Ibn Ezra is especially important as it is most probably reflects the way rabbinic Jews in talmudic times understood the verse.

It is also, worth noting that according to all the various reading of the verse there is no distinction between Jews and Non-Jews. The verse uses the generic terms “*goy*” – which we have translated as “nations” and *le-umim* – which we have translated as “people”. There is absolutely no indication that any parts of the verse pertain specifically to Jews in contrast to Non-Jews. In fact, if one looks at the Talmudic passage below (paragraph F) one finds that the great sage, R. Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, who initiated the discussion on this verse, seems to have read it like Ibn Ezra, as saying something positive about the good deeds done by Non-Jews, and I quote:

Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai said to them that the verse should be understood as follows: **Just as a sin-offering atones for Israel, so charity atones for the nations of the world**.

With all this background information let us now move on to the Talmudic discussion (Bava Batra 10b). I will mainly let the sources speak for themselves,

The Babylonian Talmud Bava Batra 10b (and I am utilizing the translation and explanations of the Steinzaltz edition as found on the Sefaria website) opens with R. Yoḥanan ben Zakkai posing a challenge to his students:

[A.] It is taught in a *baraita*: Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai said to his students: My sons, what is the meaning of that which the verse states: “Righteousness [read “charity”] exalts a nation, and the kindness of the peoples is like a sin[offering]” ([Proverbs 14:34](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Proverbs.14.34))?

The way I choose to understand this challenge is along the lines of my preface to the passage. Both the teacher and the students understood the simple meaning of the verse, as saying positive things about the charity and the good deeds of all people including the Non-Jew (see Ibn Ezra and the citation from Yoḥanan ben Zakkai’s own understanding quoted above). He was asking them to be creative and to **transform** this verse into saying something negative about the Non-Jews charity (for a possible motivation for this see below, at end of class). His students answer his request willingly. They follow the same basic approach of splitting the verse into two (the only exception is the approach of Neḥunya ben HaKana at pargraph E). They suggest that the first half of the verse in Proverbs “Righteousness [read “charity”] exalts a nation, refers to the charity of the people of Israel, and is positive. However the second half “and the kindness of the peoples *is like a sin*” refers to the charity of the non-Jews, and is viewed negatively “like a sin”. The difference between the various opinion [paragraphs B-C-D] is their explanation – why are their good deeds considered sinful. I will now cite three approaches but will be focusing upon B+C:

[B.] Rabbi Eliezer answered and said: “Righteousness [read “charity”] exalts a nation”; these are the people of Israel, as it is written: “And who is like your people Israel, one nation on the earth?” (I Chronicles 17:21). “But the kindness of the peoples *is sin*,” **meaning that all the acts of charity and kindness that the nations of the world perform is counted as a sin for them, since they perform them** **only to elevate themselves in prestige, as it is stated**: **“That they may sacrifice offerings of pleasing aroma to the God of heaven,** **and pray for the life of the king and of his sons**” ([Ezra 6:10](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Ezra.6.10)). Even though they donated offerings, they did so only for their own benefit.

[C.] Rabbi Yehoshua answered Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai’s challenge to interpret the verse and said: “Righteousness [read “charity”] exalts a nation”; these are the people of Israel, as it is written: “And who is like your people Israel, one nation on the earth.” **“But the kindness of the peoples is sin” means that all the acts of charity and kindness that the nations of the world** **perform is counted as a sin for them,** **since they perform them only** **to perpetuate their dominion**, as it is stated by Daniel to Nebuchadnezzar: “Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you, and break off your sins by charity, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the poor; **that there may be an extension of your serenity”** ([Daniel 4:24](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Daniel.4.24)). Since this is the argument that persuaded Nebuchadnezzar, it would appear that his actual motive was his own benefit.

[D.] Rabban Gamliel answered and said: “Righteousness [read “charity”] exalts a nation”; these are the people of Israel, as it is written: “And who is like your people Israel, one nation on the earth.” “But the kindness of the peoples is sin” means that all the acts of charity and kindness that the nations of the world perform is counted **as a sin for them, since they perform them only in order to act haughtily through them**, and whoever acts haughtily falls into Gehenna, as it is stated: “The proud and haughty one, scorner is his name, acts in arrogant wrath” ([Proverbs 21:24](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Proverbs.21.24)). And wrath means nothing other than Gehenna, as it is stated: “That day is a day of wrath” ([Zephaniah 1:15](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Zephaniah.1.15))…..

Let us focus upon the first two approaches [B+C], of Eliezer and Yehosha, they both say similar things with slightly different point of emphasis. They both say that the charity done is not deserved of praise because the motivation behind their good deeds are not pure. The people doing good are not motivated out of religious or humanitarian concerns but rather mere utilitarian ones, those of self-interest and self-benefit. The only difference between the two students is in their description of that self-interest. Eliezer talks about להתגדל בו which has been translated as “to elevate themselves in prestige” which sounds about right. Meaning its not about politics but about status and standing within society. This is something that we emphasized with regard to the centrality of “euergetism” in the Greek world. Yehoshua writes that their motivation was שתימשך מלכותן “to perpetuate their dominion” – this already is more of a political motivation, one that was central in the policy of the Roman rulers who distributed free bread to their citizens to ensure that there should be no social unrest within their realm.

The common denominator in the approach of the two students is that they did not feel it was right to reward good deeds when their motivation was so far from the religious approach found in the Bible and the Talmud (which is then later adopted by Christians and Moslems). Charity and good deeds that was not motivated by a religious or humanitarian impulse cannot be considered something worthy of admiration. Clearly, in their thinking, the generous giving of the Greco-Roman world was **not** what the wise man in Proverbs had in mind when he praised the good deeds of the nations.

Let us now turn to the final two passages at E+F where we have the opinion of Neḥunya and the Master’s summary statement. Neḥunya doesn’t get involved in explaining why he thinks the good deeds of the non-Jew is worthless and should be considered “a sin”, for that he may agree with the previous opinions mentioned. He instead focusses on creatively reading the verse in Proverbs so that being exalted due to “charity” **and** “kindness” relate to the Jew and then that he leaves for the Non-Jew are the words “*leumim chatat*” i.e. that the non-Jews receive “sin”! it is fascinating to see the reaction of the master R. Yoḥanan ben Zakkai - he simply loves this playing around with the verse which is the furthest thing from its simple meaning.

[E.] **Rabbi Neḥunya ben HaKana answered and said: “Righteousness [read “charity”] exalts a nation and kindness” is referring to Israel; and in addition, “of the peoples is sin.”**

[F.] **Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai said to his students: The statement of Rabbi** **Neḥunya ben HaKana appears to be more precise than both my statement and your statements, because he assigns both charity and kindness to Israel, and sin to the peoples of the world**.

The Gemara asks: By inference, it appears that he, Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, also offered an interpretation of this verse. What is it? As it is taught in a *baraita*: Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai said to them that the verse should be understood as follows: Just as a sin-offering atones for Israel, so charity atones for the nations of the world.

The final issue I would like to clarify is: what motivated R. Yoḥanan ben Zakkai to seek out such farfetched readings of the verse in Proverbs (he clearly liked the most far-fetched and the most negative interpretation!)? This is especially curious since he himself, at one point in his life, had a more generous understanding of this verse in relation to non-Jews as we saw above! What happened? What changed that drastically altered his approach to the charity of Non-Jews, and in his specific context (living in Roman Palestine) – of the good deeds done by the Romans?

The scholar Ephraim Urbach has suggested an historical interpretation that makes some sense. He said that the difference between early R. Yohanan and late R. Yohanan is the traumatic historical event that he personally lived through – the destruction of Jerusalem and of the Temple by the Roman army. One can easily understand why someone who lived through such events would become less generous to his cruel enemy. Urbach however adds another rabbinic source relating to Yohanan that deepens this understanding.

In Avot d'Rabbi Natan version a, chapter 4 we are told the following:

It once happened that Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai was walking with his disciple Rabbi Yehoshua near Jerusalem after the destruction of the Temple. Rabbi Yehoshua said, “Woe to us, for the place where the sins of Israel were atoned for has been destroyed.” **Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai said, “Do not be bitter, my son, for we have another form of atonement which is as great, and this is gemilut hasadim (acts of kindness)*;* as the verse states, “****for it is kindness (*hessed*) I desire and not burnt offerings” [Hosea 6:6].**

R. Yehoshua (the same student mentioned above) could not contain himself at the sad sight of the temple in ruins and thought about the implication for atoning the sins of the Jewish people. Rabbi Yohanan comforted him by reminding him that one could achieve atonement through another route – via acts of kindness as taught to us from the verse in Hosea, as God proclaims – “for it is kindness (*chessed*) I desire and not burnt offerings”. Urbach argues that as long as the Jews had the temple and its sacrifices Rabbi Yohanan was able to be gracious in his approach to Roman charity. However, after the Romans destroyed the temple and left the Jews only with good deeds as a means of atonement – he felt absolutely no motivation to grant them this avenue (of good deeds) as a way to receive atonement. He therefore instructed his students to come up with creative readings of the verse in Proverbs to ensure that their good deeds not be rewarded but rather punished as a sin. It is therefore no surprise that he loved Neḥunya ben HaKana especially creative reading of the verse!

**Summary Questions**

What are the two meaning of chessed in the Bible?

What are the two possible way to understand the word chatat in Proverbs 14:34?

What is the accepted scholarly way to understand the verse in Proverbs 14:34?

What is the Ibn Ezra understanding of the verse in Proverbs 14:34?

What was R. Yohanan ben Zakkai own approach to the verse in Proverbs 14:34?

What is there in common between R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua’s approach to Proverbs 14:34?

What is different between R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua’s approach to Proverbs 14:34?

To what kind of charitable giving is R. Eliezer reacting to?

To what kind of charitable giving is R. Yehoshua reacting to?

How did learning about “euergetism” in the Greco-Roman help us understand the approach of R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua’s approach to Proverbs 14:34?

What is unique about Neḥunya ben HaKana approach to the verse in Proverbs 14:34?

How did we explain the change in R. Yohanan ben Zakkai approach to the verse in Proverbs 14:34?

What does the source from Avot d'Rabbi Natan add to our understanding of the change in R. Yohanan ben Zakkai approach to the verse in Proverbs 14:34?