

9 He went up into the boat, crossed over and came to his own town. ²And they brought to him a paralyzed man lying on a mat. When Yeshua saw their faith, he said to the man, Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.

—commentary—

9:1 To his own town – The story, or at least a similar one, appears in the other synoptic Gospels (cf. *Mark 2:1-12; Luke 5:17-26*). He returns to Galilee, where redemption begins. “His own town” is probably Kefar-Nahum, because it has already been said that after leaving Nazareth Yeshua made his home in Kefar-Nahum (*Matt. 4:13; cf. Mark 2:1*).

9:2 And they brought to him – This passage can be read as an allegory, teaching how a person paralyzed by sin can be brought back under the wings of the Shekhina by others. A man often becomes like a spiritual paralytic when his transgressions leave him with no power nor will to draw closer to the Creator. He can only be brought back by the work and intercession of loyal spiritual friends, like the Talmud says, “The one who is trapped cannot free himself” (*Berakhot 5b*). A similar teaching is learnt from the Torah when the people of Israel messed up so much, that the course of action contemplated in Heaven was their utter annihilation, but then Moshe interceded and saved them. If not for Moshe, Israel would have been blotted out for their sins (cf. *Rashi on Ex. 32:9-10; Shemot Rabbah 42:9*).

9:2 When Yeshua saw their faith – This gospel says that “Yeshua saw their faith”, although it does not give any remarkable or noticeable details about it. It is almost like implying that he sensed or perceived their faith. According to the other Synoptics, though, Yeshua was inside a house surrounded by multitudes and the paralytic was lowered down through an opening in the roof (*Mark 2:4*). This tremendous effort in bringing the paralytic close to Yeshua – clearly not an easy task – is Mark’s explanation for the rabbi noticing their faith. The two ways to tell the story do not necessarily contradict each other, because a person can see with their own eyes the effort a person is making, and still not value or appreciate it, because they lack empathy. Spiritual empathy is a Messianic characteristic, as the sages taught, the Messiah “will judge by the sense of smell” (*Sanhedrin 93b*). A person whose Messianic spark has been awakened feels empathy towards others and is sensitive towards the intentions of the heart.

9:2 When Yeshua saw their faith – Here the word “faith” does not refer to an academic understanding and acceptance of religious dogmas. The author has in mind the Hebrew word **emunah**, which refers to faith, trust, in that the power of God can do even that which goes against common sense. Emunah is the very key to redemption, as R. Hayim Friedlander explains, to merit the full redemption from Egypt, the Israelites needed a profound level of emunah (cf. *Siftei Hayim, emunah veBekhirah*). These people, too, in order to bring redemption to this paralytic, also demonstrated to have tremendous amount of emunah. Emunah is an absolute belief in the unseen that transcends reason accompanied with deeds, as another Nazarene text says, “By emunah the walls of Yerikho fell down after being encircled by the Israelites for seven days” (*Hebr. 11:30*). The mere fact that these men strove to bring a paralytic man close to Yeshua to change his life was both an act of faith and of mercy. Why bringing him to Yeshua? Because he was a good miracle maker? No, that is not what the text implies. They believed God works through him, as it is written, “they believed in Hashem and in Moshe his servant” (*Exodus 14:31*). The Hassidic philosophy teaches that a tzaddiq, through his intercession and his compassion for the sinners, persuades the Divine Providence to “move from the seat of Judgment into the seat of Mercy” (cf. *Avodah Zara 3b*). This is precisely the purpose of miracles in the first place, to change a natural phenomenon that occurs from the side of judgment, and bend it to the side of mercy, which is an aspect of redemption. This is because a tzaddiq is attached to God’s heart, as the sages say, “Do his will as if it were yours, so that he will do your will as if it were his” (*Pirquei Avot 2:4*). Yitzhaq our father, for instance, was asked to intercede for his wife, who was barren, and when he did so she found God’s favor (cf. *Gen. 25:21*).

9:2 Take heart – As established in the previous chapter (*Matt. 8:7*), every illness comes from Hashem, and it often comes as a retribution of sin. This is the Gospels’ general understanding and even Yeshua acknowledged it. Rabbi Soloveichik explains this by using our sages saying, “It is not the lizard that kills, but the sin [which gives power to the lizard]” (*Berakhot 33a*). Still, the relationship between sin and illness is not so clear-cut as most religious people believed back then. Remember, for instance, the book of Iyov, which is about a man stricken by God, but not because of sin, but quite the opposite. Hence, there is a tradition in which the disciples ask Yeshua why a man had to be born blind, and they specifically ask who committed the sin; he or his parents (*John 9:2*). Yeshua’s response is that, in that case, the illness

—relevant quotes—

“The concept of emunah (faith) includes also the concept of bitakhon (trust)... Emunah is having absolute knowledge about the past; that Hashem created the world and performed miracles for our people... while bitakhon is the action that results from that knowledge; the admission and total belief that just like Hashem did these great miracles in the past, he will also perform them for us in the future” (*R. Meir Kahane, Ohr haRaayon p.178*).

³At this, some scribes said to themselves, This is blasphemy! ⁴But Yeshua saw their reasoning and said, Why do you think of evil in your hearts?

commentary

had nothing to do with sin. But imagine being a paralytic born and raised in such a culture. Not only you, but everybody around you associates your current status with a sin that you may or may not have committed. Also, the fact that you remain a paralytic means, in your eyes, that your sins have not been forgiven. Now you feel like a failure, a spoil rejected by society and by God himself. But now, you see your chance to talk with an agent of God; a tzaddiq who can turn the scales to your favour. It is contextually implied, therefore, that when the man was being brought to Yeshua, he was, in a way, also confessing his flaws and asking for forgiveness. Being this his mindset, the words “take heart, son” are quite meaningful, because illness and sin in their eyes were interconnected.

9:2 Take heart, son – Yeshua “saw their faith”, meaning, a proper disposition, the proper kavanah, and so he encouraged him with the words, “Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven”.

“Son” (in Aramaic “my son”, *bari* ברי) is a tender expression of kindness here, but it can also be a hint to something deeper, for the word “bar” (בר, son) means clear or pure as well, as in the verse: “The command of Hashem is ברה pure” (*Psalms 19:9*). Because of his faith he was cleansed from the contamination of his sin. Let me take the liberty to reinterpret Yeshua’s phrase to apply it to our lives: “Make the effort, purify yourself and your sins will be forgiven”. Yeshua saw beyond the man, dealing with the root of his suffering rather than making a superficial healing. This is an aspect of the tzaddiq, for a tzaddik is like a mirror, as the Hassidic philosophy explains, “When a person looks at a tzaddik he is seeing a reflection of himself” (cf. *Baal Shem Tov*).

9:2 your sins are forgiven – In Shem Tov Ibn Shaprut’s, commentary and Hebrew version, the verse reads: “Take heart, my son. It is by the faith of God that your sins have been forgiven” (*Matt. Shem Tov 9:2*). This is similar to other instances in which Yeshua says, “Your sins have been forgiven... your faith has saved you” (*Luk. 7:44, 48-50*).

9:3 some of the scribes – Some of the Torah scholars who were present; not all of them. In this block and until chapter 10, Yeshua is materializing the “kingdom” that he talked about in the sermon of the mount. This section is prefacing some opposition and differences of opinion between Yeshua’s Judaism and other groups. It will be explained later on this chapter, but it is worth noting that the opposition here is still “scholarly”, so to speak, because its narrative purpose is to define the type of Judaism Yeshua followed. It is in chapter 11 that we will find authentic opposition towards Yeshua, together with positive reactions.

9:3 This is blasphemy – “This [is] blasphemy” זה מגדף. The word which we have translated as “blasphemy” comes from the Aramaic root ‘gadal’ גדף. It has the connotation of cutting or scrapping, as in the verse, “you have scraped out the dish and lessened its thickness” (*Sifre Bamidbar 112. See also Pesachim 42a, Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 7, 25b*). It also has the connotation of reviling, like in the verse: “Because Sisera... reviled them [i.e., Israel] ... he therefore died an ignominious death” (*Bamidbar Rabbah 10:2. cf. Targum to 1Kings 21:13*). The Gospels themselves use it in this sense in various places (cf. *Mark 15:29; Matt. 12:32; Acts 13:45*). In this passage, then, the scribes are saying, “This is scrapping, offensive, this is reviling!” But reviling whom? Reviling God, so it makes perfect sense to translate it as “blasphemy”. However, we need to understand: In first century Jewish law, the sin of blasphemy was a capital crime, but in order to be considered an authentic blasphemy, the criminal had to misuse and utter God’s Sacred name audibly and in the presence of witnesses (cf. *Lev. 24:10-23; Mishna Sanhedrin 7:5*). Technically speaking, nothing else constituted a crime of blasphemy. Nevertheless, there were attitudes, behaviors and teachings that in the eyes of different sects could be considered “scrapping out the dish and lessening its thickness”; in other words, lessening the glory and holiness of the Creator here on Earth. The term “Khilul Hashem” (חילול השם, desecrating the Name) was later preferred. The Gospel of Mark offers a possible explanation concerning why these scribes thought Yeshua was blaspheming: “He is blaspheming because only God can forgive sins” (*Mark 2:7*), as it is written, “the hope of Israel is Hashem” (*Jer. 17:13*). Yeshua’s statement, “your sins are forgiven” was understood by those scribes as a form of Khilul Hashem, for they perceived, according to Mark, that Yeshua was usurping God’s authority, even though Yeshua did not say in any moment “I forgive your sins”, but “Your sins are forgiven”, i.e., in Heaven, very much like the prophet Samuel’s words to king David: “Hashem has taken away your sins” (*2Sam. 12:13*). “Your sins are forgiven” is used in Luke 7:48 too, and Yeshua adds at the end, “your faith has saved you” (cf. *Luke 7:50*).

9:4 But Yeshua saw their reasoning – He understood what they were thinking; they had taken Yeshua’s words in the worst possible way and with their murmurs and with their thoughts they were defaming him. We need to understand that these types of so-called “blasphemies” were often in the eye of the beholder, meaning, it is your theology and religious conceptions that determine how you understand a message. In other words, it was according to these scribes’ reasoning that Yeshua’s words were blasphemy, but what he was saying was not necessarily blasphemous or unbiblical. That is precisely the point of the author. Similar accusations are seen in later literature, for instance, when the Rambam

⁵For which is easier: to say, your sins are forgiven, or to say, arise and walk? ⁶But I want you to know that the son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins. So he said to the paralyzed man, Arise, take your mat and go home.

commentary

calls “heretics” to those who believe in the corporeity of God, to which the Raavad replied that even if it may be an erroneous belief, accusing them of heresy is absurd, as some of those scholars were actually greater than Rambam (cf. *Raavad on Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Teshuva 3:6*). As we will see later, for Yeshua it was his opponents who were blaspheming, and warns them not to ‘blaspheme’ against the spirit, which is a sin that cannot be forgiven (cf. *Matt 12:31-32; Mark 3:22-29*). This will be explained in chapter 12.

9:5 For which is easier – To say “you are forgiven” is apparently easier: because it does not require visual, physical evidence, so one can believe to have been forgiven or not. However, telling a paralytic to walk goes against nature, against common sense, for nobody expects the man to walk afterwards, so the rabbi can be perceived as a false teacher. On the other hand, for a person with immovable faith and God’s favor both statements are equally easy, being “rise up and walk” better in the eyes of the masses, because once the man gets up and walks, there is nothing left to discussion.

9:6 but I want you to know – The two things have taken place: the paralytic has been physically healed and his sins have been forgiven. The attainment of forgiveness has been triggered here on earth, by mere mortals.

9:6 that the son of man – It is commonly understood that whenever Yeshua uses the expression “the Son of Man” he refers to himself in an allusion to the “son of man” that Daniel sees in his vision (cf. *Daniel 7:13*). This is not the case. “Son of man” is used in the Tanakh hundreds of times as an idiom for “human being”, “person”, “mortal”, as it is written: “God is not a son of man” (*Num. 23:19*) and somewhere else: “the son of man is a maggot” (*Iyov 25:6*). In the book of Ezekiel the angels call the prophet “son of man” more than 90 times, with the intention to draw a distinction between them – divine powers – and him – a mere mortal. In addition to this, Daniel does not say he sees in his vision “the Son of Man”, but rather “one/something like a son of man”. In other words, he sees a spiritual entity that in the vision looks like a human. Some later midrashim took the expression “son of man” as a messianic title, but that is not the way that it is being used in our passage. Yeshua refers to every son of man here, not only himself. This is contextually proven in the end of the passage, which says people marveled that God has given such authority to “men”, in plural, not to one man alone.

9:6 has authority to forgive sins – To recap, the scribes were – at least according to Mark – arguing that only God forgives sins (which is, at the last instance, absolutely true), but they were implying that there is nothing a man can do about it and that Yeshua was taking the place of God. Yeshua argues with them that God has given the power to mankind to “forgive” sins. Hebrew has three words for “forgiveness”: Selikha, Kapparah and mekhillah. The word which we translated as “to forgive” in the Aramaic is שבק *‘Shabaq’* (the Greek uses *aphienai ἀφιέναι*) which parallels the Hebrew selikha, from the root ‘salakh’ סלח. This root means both ‘to forgive’ and ‘to send forth’. R. Soloveichik in his commentary (*Qol Qore*) uses it in the sense of “releasing”, “sending forth” or “putting away”, which in the Aramaic or Hebrew reading makes so much sense. A man has been given God’s authority to put their sins away. And how so? By the power of repentance, by the gift of faith in the Creator, by the act of purification. It is of utmost importance to understand that without penitence there is nothing in heaven or earth that can atone for anybody’s sins, not even death, not even the feast of Yom Kippur (cf. *Yoma 85b [Mishna]*). A person’s sins are atoned, sent forth, forgiven in heaven, only after they repent and have emunah (faith, fidelity) in the Creator. While a righteous person serves, through his merits, as a mediator in the process, the act of repentance and forgiveness is only between the person a God. This is clearly implied when the Torah says (*Lev. 5:21-26 [6:7]*), “If a person sins... he must restore [that which he stole]... and he will bring his guilt before Hashem... then... the priest will make atonement for him before Hashem and he will be forgiven [in Heaven, not by the priest]”. The priest here acts as an intermediary for the ritual, but the forgiveness of sin is something that happens in the sinner’s heart.

9:6 has authority to forgive sins – Contrary to Mark’s rendering of the story, Mattai does not say what it is that the scribes perceive as blasphemy. They simply say, “This is blasphemy”. Maybe they meant the whole incident and not Yeshua’s words alone. A paralytic being declared forgiven, without an oral confession of repentance, without a ritual done at the temple, no priest involved, and this Galilean implying he has the authority to do so anyway. If this is the case, then they did not analyze the incident the way we did it above. It is similar with the prophet Samuel declaring David forgiven; no protocol is required, as forgiveness is something between a person and God. The ritual protocols are merely secondary, as it is written, “I desire mercy, not sacrifices, and knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings”

⁷Then he rose up and went home. ⁸When the crowd saw this, they were struck with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to men.

—commentary—

(*Hoshea 6:6*), and elsewhere: “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and crushed heart, God will not reject” (*Psalms 51:19*).

9:6 the son of man has authority to forgive sins – Some may feel uncomfortable with the above interpretation as they are used to the traditional translation and explanation of the text. For those I offer a second interpretation which is based on the teachings of Rabbi Nahman of Breslev. Let us assume, like Christians do, that “son of man” is used as a messianic title. As we said above, Daniel (*7:13*) does not explicitly use “Son of man” as a title, but he says he had a vision and in it there was **כְּבֹד אֱנוֹשׁ** “something like a son of man” coming with the clouds, approaching the Ancient of Days. Some midrashim deduce from verse 14 that the enigmatic figure refers to the king Messiah, and so the book of Enoch (*Hanokh 46:3*) turns “the son of man” into a messianic title (cf. *Zohar I:145b*). Still, the whole narrative is symbolic and spiritual, not literal. The vision portrays a force: the messianic spark, the soul of Messiah. This soul will be entirely embodied by the person who is to become Messiah on earth, that is true. However, the angelic figure that interprets the dream for Daniel says that this “son of man” is a collective consciousness, not one man alone (cf. *Daniel 7:18, 22*); like Rashi puts it, it refers to the saints of Israel. No contradiction, because each and every person has a spark of Messiah in them, and the tzaddiqim (the righteous people) are those sparks of Messiah that shine brighter than the others. Having explained this properly, let us tackle the question: can a tzaddiq declare someone forgiven? Certainly so, in different ways. First of all, a tzaddiq with the gift of **ruakh haqodesh** (minor prophecy) can speak for God and declare those things he receives from above, as it is written, “Son of man... whenever you hear a word from me, give people my warning” (*Ezek. 3:17*). Yeshua alludes to this when he says: “I cannot do anything on my own; I judge only as I hear... for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me” (*John 5:30*). Therefore, whenever he tells somebody, “Your sins are forgiven”, it is only because he has received such message from above. Secondly, as already mentioned, a tzaddiq makes God’s will his own, and so God makes the tzaddiq’s will his own too (cf. *Pirquei Avot 2:4*). This way, a tzaddiq can turn judgment into mercy by pacifying God’s attribute of anger (cf. *Liqutei Moharan I:29:8*). On the verse: “I have forgiven them in accordance with your word” (*Num. 14:20*), Rabbi Nahman taught the following (my elucidations in brackets):

“Davar (דָּבָר, word) is an acrostic for [the messianic verse]: **‘D**ishanta **V**ashemen **R**oshi’ – you anointed my head with oil (*Psalms 23:5*) [Oil is also a symbol for wisdom (*Zohar 3:39a*)]. For there are true tzaddiqim who have the power to forgive iniquity, through their occasional drinking of wine^a [or through joy in the deeper studies of Torah, as Yayin, יַיִן wine, has the numeric value of sod, סוּד secret (cf. *Maharal on Eiruvim 65a*)]. As the sages say concerning wine (*Yoma 76b*): If a person is worthy, he becomes the head [One of the Hebrew names for wine is **תִּירוֹשׁ** ‘tirosh’, whose root can be **רִשׁ** ‘rash’ (poverty), or **רֹאשׁ** ‘rosh’ (head)]... And if he becomes the head [i.e., if he attains spiritual wisdom (cf. *Liqutei Moharan I:29:8*)], he can pardon iniquity, as it is written (*Prov. 16:14*): ‘The wise man causes forgiveness’. This is the meaning of: I forgive them in accordance with your word” (*Liqutei Moharan I:177:1*).

9:8 they praised God, who had given such authority to men – All of the above commentary demonstrates that the son of man can indeed forgive sins, although as we have seen, it is more accurate to say that the actions and faith of a son of man cause Heaven to grant forgiveness, either for himself or for others. It comes to mind the Talmudic passage in which Rabbi Meir prayed for some hooligans to repent for their sins and, because of his prayer, they repented (cf. *Berakhot 10a*). Additionally, Judaism emphasizes the importance of forgiving each other’s sins on Yom Kippur; the Biblical day of atonement, about which it is taught: “Yom Kippur does not atone for sins between man and man until a man does not look for his fellow’s forgiveness” (*Mishna Yoma 8:9*). There is so much more to say, for such is the power that God has given to the children of men; whose free will and faith impact on the spiritual spheres so strongly, that it causes people to repent and to purify their souls. Barukh Hashem.

9:8 authority to men – For the word “men”, the Greek uses ‘anthropois’, and the Aramaic manuscripts use ‘Bnainasha’ **בְּנֵי נִשְׂאָה** (lit. children of men). Both expressions are plural, indicating that the audience understood Yeshua’s words as referring to everybody.

^a Rebbe Nahman gave this teaching in a wedding, so he probably meant “casual drinking of wine” literally. However, it is common knowledge that wine in mysticism is symbolic; it represents the discovery or the revelation of deeper secrets in the Torah, the Torah itself being compared to water. One who reveals profound secrets in the Torah is turning water into wine.

⁹As Yeshua went on from there, he saw a man named Mattai sitting at the tax collector's booth, and he said to him: Follow me, and he got up and followed him. ¹⁰While Yeshua was reclining at Mattai's house, many tribute-gatherers and sinners came and reclined with him and his students,

commentary

9:9 Mattai – In other gospels the story's character is called Levi (*Luke 5:27*). This author is the only one that identifies the tax collector with one of the twelve disciples (*Matt. 10:3*). All the gospels agree that the disciple among the twelve is called Mattai (cf. *Luk. 6:5; Acts 1:13*). There are three possible explanations for the two names: Firstly, it may be, as it often happens with oral traditions, that when the story is passed down from mouth to mouth, some of the details vary. There are examples of this in Oral Torah, like when they say: "Rav Qahana said it, although some say that it was Sheila bar Mari who said it" (*Gittin 58a*). Conversely, it is possible that the author of Mattai intentionally wanted to give the character a midrashic background, so that we could infer a moral lesson from it (as we shall see later). Lastly, perhaps Mattai/Levi was called by both names, for it was not uncommon back then to have two names. Whatever the case was, there is something interesting to notice: Levi alludes to the tribe of priests who, not having their own share in the land of Israel, receive tithe donations from the other tribes (cf. *Num. 18:21-26*), whereas the name Mattai derives from the word "matat" מַתַּת, which means "gift" or "reward". Now, how ironic it is when the narrative says Mattai is a tax collector! A tax collector is similar to a Levite in that they both collect money from their people, however, the tax collector instead of receiving tithe gifts, imposes heavy payments.

9:9 tax collector's booth – Roman taxes were collected by the governor or the procurator of each state. The job was carried out by the lessees, who could be either Romans or Jews (cf. *Josephus, Wars 2:14:5*). Tax collectors made money overcharging the taxpayer, for they would pay the government their part and keep for themselves a profit (cf. *Antiquities 12:4:3*). Hence, it is written in the hallakha: "No money may be taken for change, either from the box of the custom collectors or from the purse of tax collectors, and neither may charity be taken from them" (*Mishna, Bava Qama 10:1*). The Gemara explains this refers to collectors who were self-employed and therefore overcharged the citizens on their own accord with heavy and unfair taxes, which is a sin of robbery (*Bava Qama 113a; cf. Sanhedrin 25b*). Therefore, a Jew who worked for Rome as a tax collector had become in the eyes of the Israelites both a sinner and a traitor. The tax collector's booth here was probably a douane on Kefar-Nahum's lake shore.

9:9 follow me – There are several moral lessons to learn if we take the story metaphorically, for it is unlikely that a person will randomly ask somebody in the street to follow him and they will do so. It may be that Mattai had heard Yeshua's teachings around the town, or that Yeshua knew his heart, even though everybody else perceived him as just another sinner. The Divine Presence is constantly calling us all to return under the wings of the Shekhina, but it depends on us to take the leap of faith and leave at one the comfort of our sinful and traitorous life. On the verse "when a ruler sins... and realizes his guilt" (*Lev. 4:22*), Sforzo explains that the Torah almost takes for granted that powerful people are going to sin, but it is essential to feel remorse for their sins in order to begin the correction of their soul. Even when a person falls in the deepest sin, there is hope as long as he keeps feeling remorse, for that part of the soul which is holy keeps calling him to repentance and so the sinner feels uncomfortable with his current life, as it is written: "And Hashem called to the man, and said to him: where are you? And he said, I heard your voice in the garden and I was afraid, because I was naked and I hid myself" (*Gen. 1:9-10*), and somewhere else: "Even at night my conscience instruct me [to fear Hashem]" (*Psalms 4:7*). At some point, this person's messianic spark is going to awaken within him and as he listens to it, he will change his life drastically, from darkness to light.

9:9 and followed him – The meaning is that he became his disciple. The next verse makes it clear that it was actually Yeshua who followed him to his home immediately after. When a person awakens his messianic spark within and pays attention to it, it follows him wherever he goes.

9:10 reclining at Mattai's home – Reclining; i.e., having dinner, for that was the custom, to recline to eat instead of sitting on chairs. The act of reclining in Judaism is an expression of resting in freedom, because one who leans back and lies on his side is momentarily free from every burden, in a state of relaxation. This is why the Jewish law commands to recline in order to celebrate the Passover meal (cf. *Pesakhim 108a*), because it represents the absolute freedom that the Israelites enjoyed after leaving Egypt. Now, the fact that Yeshua is reclined in Mattai's house surrounded by sinners can be seen as an allegory to the inner redemption a sinful man experiences when the messianic light begins to shine inside of his soul and all types of transgressions come to light, for a home represents at times the receiving aspect in one's soul (the sefirah of Malkhut), as it is written: "I will make them joyful in my house of prayer" (*Isa. 56:7*), and again, "Let them make me a sanctuary and I will live within them" (*Exo. 25:8*), which refers to people being a temple, a dwelling place for the Divine Presence. In the narrative sense, it may be, as Luke puts it, that the tax collector prepared a big

¹¹and Pharisees saw this and asked his students, Why does your rabbi eat with tax collectors and sinners? ¹²On hearing this, Yeshua said, It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.

—commentary—

feast for Yeshua at his home and invited all his friends, and because of his position, the only friends he had were non-religious people who lived separated from Torah.

9:11 and Pharisees – The tax collector’s story serves as a narrative bridge which introduces us to a Yeshua who is immersed in the debates and differences of observance between various religious groups of the first century Israel. The outcome of these debates and conflicts would flesh out the Jewish Law (hallakha) that Judaism would follow after the destruction of the second temple. A few sources attest that in the first century there were three major Judean philosophies: The Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Essenes (cf. *Josephus, Wars II:8:119-166*). This does not even count other major groups outside of Judea, such as the Hellenistic Jews or the Samaritans. Of the three mentioned by Josephus, Yeshua fits better with the Pharisees, as we have seen in the sermon of the mount, where he straightforwardly quotes teachings of the school of Hillel. However, the matter is not that simple. For once, “Pharisee” was a generic term that encompassed many different schools of thought: the schools of Hillel, Shammai, and Gamliel (cf. *Sotah 9:15*) being the most well-known. In addition to this, there were many other schools of thought and other philosophical and political streams that somehow came under the umbrella of Pharisaism, such as the zealots or the Herodians. To add another layer on the matter, some of the Galileans had their own, more charismatic and faith-centered, philosophical outlook. The sages called them ‘Hassidim’ (pious ones). Some of these Galilean Hassidim were mentioned together with the sages, like Hanina ben Dosa, who was a Hassid, but also belonged to the pharisaic school of Yohanan ben Zakai (*Berakhot 34b*; cf. *Pirkei Avot 3:9*). It is, therefore, not possible to fully count the Hassidim and the Pharisees as two different sects. Nevertheless, there were some philosophical discrepancies between the mainstream Judean Pharisees (called the ‘Haverim’) and the Galilean Hassidim, which is why the two groups talk about each other as separate groups. From this we conclude that, even if Yeshua could technically be a Pharisee himself as he was clearly in agreement with Pharisaism, the Gospels depict him advocating the Hassidic philosophy of Galilee, and so they draw a distinction with the ‘Haverim’ by calling them ‘Pharisees’ – in Aramaic ‘parishaya’ פִּרְיָשָׁיָא, a word that means “the set apart ones, the separated ones” – because they would set themselves apart from everyone else, as we shall see below.

9:11 Pharisees saw this – Yeshua dragged large crowds of people towards him, from religious to sinners. The house of a wealthy man usually consisted of several rooms which surrounded an inner or open-air courtyard. This is where people gathered at Mattai’s home. The Pharisees that followed Yeshua refused to enter a tax collector’s home in rejection to their lifestyles, and so they watched from the outside.

9:11 Why does your rabbi eat with tax collectors and sinners? – “The sages taught: Any Torah scholar who feasts excessively everywhere (with feasts that are not for the sake of Heaven) will ultimately destroy his house... and his students will be forgotten. Much dispute will come upon him, his words will not be heeded and he will desecrate God’s name” (*Pesakhim 49a*). Yeshua makes it clear that he was there with a heavenly purpose, like a doctor for the sick, but the Haverim would not associate themselves with sinners, “For assistance must not be given to transgressors” (*Gittin 5:9*). The “Haverim” (i.e., the fellowship members; literally, the friends) observed very rigorous purity laws, highly inspired by the priestly purity rituals at the temple (cf. *m. Hagiga 2:7*). They would set themselves apart from everybody else with these purity observances and consider everyone else ‘Am haAretz’, which means: common people, earthly people (cf. *Demai 2:2-3*; cf. *Ezra 4:4*). The ‘am haAretz’ could be a Jewish sinner or simply somebody who was not as meticulous with his purity observance as they were. Therefore, the Mishna says things like: “One who takes upon himself to become a ‘haver’... must not be the guest of an ‘am haAretz’ nor must he host an ‘am haAretz’ as a guest while he is wearing his own garment” (*Demai 2:3*), and somewhere else: “If a tax collector enters a house, the house becomes unclean” (*m. Taharot 7:6*). This way of thinking is also found among the Qumran texts (cf. *1QS 5:2, 10-11*; *Damascus Document 6:14-18*) and in some of the Apocrypha, such as the book of Tobit: “Give some of your food to the hungry... but do not give anything to sinners” (*Tobit 4:16-17*).

9:12 It is not the healthy who need a doctor – The stringency of the haverim was in direct contrast with the philosophy of the Galilean Hassidim (cf. *Mishna Berakhot 5:1*; *Taanit 3:8*; *Seder Eliyahu*), who would put faith and heart over many of the Pharisaic purity regulations, which they would ignore (cf. *Yerushalmi Taanit 23a*; *Avot d’Rabbi Nathan 12*). The formers would not associate with sinners and avoid becoming ritually unclean by them; Yeshua would ignore such ideas and turn those sinners into his disciples. The calling to Mattai: “follow me” and other similar verses where these sinners are called his “followers” (cf. *Mark 2:15*), clearly imply that Yeshua’s association with them was for the sole purpose of bringing them to repentance.

¹³Go and learn what this means: I desire compassion, not sacrifice. Hence, I have not come to call the righteous, but the sinners. ¹⁴Then Yohanan's disciples came and asked him, Why do we and the Pharisees fast a great deal and your disciples do not?

commentary

9:12 but the sick – It is worth noticing that despite the clear confrontation between the two movements and Yeshua's following admonition against their ethical behavior, his metaphor can still be interpreted with a ray of positive light towards them, as in: "I eat with sinners because it is them who need a doctor, not you". However, Yeshua is clearly not looking for anybody's approval or trying to be politically correct. He would later get in trouble with his behavior, but he does not mind. He is showing an aspect of Messiah, who "will judge righteously" (*Isaiah 11*).

9:13 Go and learn what this means – Whenever there was a conflict between Pharisaic ritual purity and compassion towards another human being, Yeshua's Hassidic outlook "refused to compartmentalize the two but greatly prioritized the latter" (*Jonathan Klawas, Impurity and sin in ancient Judaism, p. 160*). The BeSHT's Hassidic movement favors Yeshua's words with the concepts of 'redeeming the holy sparks', and of 'turning darkness into light' (*Zohar 1:4a*). The Zohar itself begins such concept by saying: "The Other Side dominates the wilderness, and the children of Israel walked on it for forty years in order to smash its strength, and had they been righteous during the entire forty years, they would have removed the Other Side from the world" (*Zohar 2:157a*). The underlying teaching here is that righteous people are heavenly sent to places of darkness – such as tax collectors and sinners' homes – in order, not to be assimilated by them, but to redeem them and turn them into light. "For there is greater satisfaction [in Heaven] from transforming something which was previously evil to good, than from something which was always good" (*Rebbe miLubavitch, Sikkhot vol. 17: Behar Bekhukotai, 5743*). Therefore, on the verse (*Psalms 34:15*): "Depart from evil and do good" – in Hebrew: 'Sur meRah vaAsei Tov' – the Baal Shem Tov interprets: "Turn the evil and make it good". This is a secret in the verse: "When you go out to wage war against your enemy [that is; the Other Side] you will capture his captives" (*Deut. 21:10*).

9:13 I desire compassion, not sacrifice – "For Hessed (חסד, piety, loving-kindness) I desire, not a sacrifice, and knowledge of God more than burnt offerings" (*Hoshea 6:6*). In the original context, the prophet is admonishing Ephraim and Judah for offering sacrifices while "their compassion is like a morning cloud... that passes away" (*ibid. 6:4*). Similarly, Yeshua is reprimanding the Haverim for creating an excess of barriers between them and the sinners, who are souls in 'need of a doctor'. Additionally, these sinners – more specifically Mattai – had become listeners and followers of a Torah teacher, thus having begun the process of repentance – for strengthening one's faith in God is the first step in teshuva – and it is said in the name of Rabbi Yohanan: "Anyone who prevents his disciples from serving him, it is as if he withheld [the mitzva of] compassion from them" (*Ketuvot 96a*).

9:13 I have not come to call the righteous, but the sinners – The calling of sinners to bring all Israel back under the wings of the Shekhina is a sign of redemption, as it says, "Great is repentance, for it draws redemption closer" (*Yoma 86b*). This is, as we have explained (*on our Matt. 4:24 note*), that "The tzaddiq... will seek out the wicked and sinful to move them to teshuvah" (*Schochet, Chassidic Dimensions - Vol. 3, p. 93*). The prophets say about the messianic redemption: "The remnant of Israel will not do wrong anymore" (*Zeph. 3:13*), "They will not defile themselves" (*Ezekiel 37:23*), and "Your people will all be righteous" (*Isaiah 60:21*). Therefore, the Targumist says about Messiah that: "He will seek pardon for our sins, and our iniquities will be forgiven because of him" (*Targum Yonathan on Isaiah 53:4*).

9:14 Why do we and the pharisees fast – In Judaism, fasting is a form of asceticism, or, as the Torah calls it: affliction of the soul (*Isaiah 58:3*). There are several Biblical and commemorative fasting days: the most well-known and obligatory are the Taanit Yom Kippur (*Lev. 23:26-32*) and Taanit Tisha b'Av; the later commemorating several catastrophes in Jewish history, such as the sin of the twelve spies and the destruction of the Temple (*cf. Taanit 4:6*). Queen Esther's call to fast in the Purim narrative also became a national fasting day (*Esther 9:31*). Since all Torah observant sects observed these fasts, the text is certainly not referring to them. In addition to the Torah-mandated fasting days, the community could decree a fasting day – such as when Yehuda haNasi was dying (*Ketuvot 104a*), and a person could fast on their own accord for various reasons: accompanying a repentance prayer, mourning, supplicating, or even in gratitude. The apocrypha talks about Judith, a woman who "fasted during her entire widowhood except on Shabbat and Shabbat's eve, on New Moon and New Moon's eve and on the Jewish festivals" (*Judith 8:6*). Similarly, Mar ben Rabina fasted throughout the whole year with the exception of the Jewish holidays (*Pesakhim 68b*). Concerning these types of fasting, the sages offer two points of view (*cf. Taanit 11a*): some, like Rabbi Shmuel, discourage them – they say we should not take unnecessary suffering upon ourselves, as the nazirites did with their vows (*based on Num. 6:11 and Prov. 11:17*). Conversely, some sages like Rabbi Elazar encourage them – since the Torah defines those who take a nazirite vow as "holy" (*Num. 6:5*).

¹⁵Yeshua answered, How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them and they will fast. ¹⁶“No one puts a piece of new cloth on an old garment, for the patch may weaken the garment and make the tear larger. ¹⁷Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins; lest the skins burst, and the wine runs out, and the sacks are ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.

commentary

The Pharisees mentioned in this passage – which predates the modern hallakhic days – probably had a habit of fasting often. Rabbi Zeira took upon himself a one hundred days fast (*Bava Metzia 85a*), although he would not allow his disciples to embrace such ascetic practice if it caused them to become arrogant towards others (*Yerushalmi Berakhot II, 5d*). Similarly, Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai and other mystics – Yeshua himself included – would engage in some forms of fasting or asceticism for the sake of receiving Divine inspiration (cf. *Ketuvot 104a*; see commentary on Matt. 4:2). As for Yohanan’s community, he is described as living an ascetic life in the desert and people from Judea and the Jordan region following him (cf. *Matt. 3:4-5*).

9:15 How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? – Our sages have taught: “A bridegroom and his friends are free from the obligation of the sukka [during the feast of the tabernacles]... because they have to rejoice... and there is no real rejoicing except where a banquet is held” (*Sukka 25b*). Fasting is affliction of the soul, and therefore, it is not appropriate to fast in the presence of the bridegroom. Yeshua uses this hallakhic principle as an allegory (cf. *Thomas #104*). The bridegroom is the tzaddiq, the Torah teacher, the one who connects Heaven with earth and brings, like a wedding banquet, the heavenly energy of the Torah from above down to the kingdom, which is referred to as “the bride”. It is, thus, written: “The Torah... is the heritage of the congregation of Yaaqov” (*Deut. 33:4*). “Do not read מורשה ‘morasha’ – i.e., heritage – but מאורשה ‘meurasa’ – betrothed” (*Bahir #196*). About the study of Torah – represented by Moses our teacher – the Zohar applies the verse (*Psalms 19:6*): “It is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber” (*Zohar 3:148b*). It is important to notice that Yeshua’s disciples were not yet Torah scholars, but disciples taken from among the mundane and the sinners, or as he calls them: the sick in need of a doctor, so he would not encourage the practice of fasting for them while they are still learning Torah. This was the conclusion our sages taught concerning the two points of view on fasting: “A wise disciple should not afflict himself with fasting, for it will diminish his heavenly work” (*Taanit 11b*). He would feel disturbed or weak in his study of Torah, in which case abstinence is counterproductive; in the words of Rav Sheshet: “It would be as if he gave his food to a dog” (*ibid. 11b*).

9:15 The time will come when... they will fast – For there is a season and “a time for everything under heaven” (*Eccles. 3:1*); “a time to mourn and a time to laugh” (*ibid. 3:4*).

9:16 piece of new cloth on an old garment – Yeshua keeps addressing the question about why his disciples do not fast. The old garment refers to an unrepentant sinner, a sinner who returns to his sins. How would fasting – a piece of new cloth – would benefit them when they are still wrapped in an old garment? They need to wear new clothes first, which is repentance, “for a person may say, How can I be redeemed when I have been wicked so far?... He must be aware that a Baal Teshuvah – a penitent – is like a newborn baby” (*Vilna Gaon*). “Repentance is not like a new patch which merely fixes an old garment and whose fabric remains the same. Repentance is like being born completely fresh and not having a negative past” (*Shem miShmuel, Tetzaveh, 5667*). Similarly, fasting is like new wine, which must be used in a new wineskin, because a sinner who fasts but does not repent is weakening his own body and causing himself harm instead of empowering his soul.

¹⁸While he was saying this, a ruler came and knelt before him and said, My daughter has just died. But come and put your hand on her, and she will live. ¹⁹Yeshua and his disciples got up and went with him. ²⁰And behold, a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years came up behind him and touched the hem of his garments. ²¹For she was saying to herself, If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed. ²²Yeshua turned and saw her. He said to her, Take heart, daughter, your faith has given you life. And the woman was healed at that very hour.

commentary

9:18 a ruler – According to other accounts, the patron of a synagogue.

9:18 my daughter has just died – A similar passage appears in Mark, in which Yeshua resurrects the daughter of a man called Jair (*Mark 5:22-42*). Although the narrative is almost identical, some of the details are different. In the Markan story the girl has not died yet, but she dies during the incident with the bleeding woman. In both accounts Yeshua refuses to acknowledge that she is actually dead.

9:20 And behold – The story of the dying girl is interrupted by this event. The two stories are interconnected, as we will see later.

9:20 a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years – A woman whose bleeding does not stop is called zavah (cf. *Lev. 15:25; m. Niddah 10:3*). According to the Torah, a zavah is in a perpetual state of ritual impurity. During her niddah – i.e., menstruation – she is ritually impure, whoever touches her becomes ritually impure until the evening, and everything she sits upon is a carrier of tumah – ritual impurity (cf. *Lev. 15:19-23*). Since there is no temple nowadays, we consider the entire world as being in a state of ritual impurity (cf. *Magen Avraham, Orakh Hayim 561:2*) which is of little transcendence for most of us, but back in those days it meant she was not able to enter the sanctuary area or to touch the terumah – i.e., the foods and objects consecrated for the temple. It also meant – as it is also the case today – that she was not able to have marital relations with her husband (cf. *Lev. 15:24, 18:19*).

9:20 touched the hem of his garments – That is, his tzitzit, which every observant Jew wears according to the command: “They must make for themselves tzitzit upon the hem of their garments... so that they will remember and adhere to all of my commandments” (*Numbers 15:37-41*). The tzitzit are not considered magical or anything like that, but they serve as a reminder of the 613 commands in the Torah: “The numerical value of tzitzit is 600. Add the 8 threads and the 5 knots and we have a total of 613” (*Bamidbar Rabbah 18:21*). About this it is written: “Days will come when ten men from every nation and tongue will take hold of the hem of the garment of a Jew, saying: We will go with you, for we have heard that God is with you” (*Zech. 8:23*). The passage alludes to the future messianic era, in which the whole world will understand the unity of God on earth. By touching Yeshua’s hem, the woman was declaring his righteousness and at the same time acknowledging the unity of God on earth, as it is written: “On that day Hashem will be one and his name will be one [over all the earth]” (*Zech. 14:9*). A midrash explains that, at the time of the exodus, the angel Gavriel decreed the waters of the sea should part in front of Israel on the merits of the tzitzit they wore (*Hatam safer, Responsa, part 1, OC 195; cf. Menakhot 43a*). Similarly, the issue of blood left the woman after she touched Yeshua’s tzitzit. Because the touching of his hem was a sign of her faith, Yeshua responded accordingly: “your faith has healed you”.

9:21 for she was saying to herself – She would not ask directly to be healed because of her embarrassing condition. By touching Yeshua’s tzitzit, she would have technically rendered him unclean until the next day, but since they were in Galilee, far from the temple, it would not have bigger implications other than Yeshua having to immerse himself in water if he wanted to be in contact with anything that was consecrated to the temple. The author does not bother trying to explain how people learnt about this miracle. Mark, however, fills this gap by adding that Yeshua felt power coming out of him and that the woman told him everything after her healing.

9:22 Take heart, daughter – This is the feminine parallel to verse 9:2, “Take heart, son, your sins are forgiven”. You are not an outcast anymore.

9:22 your faith has given you life – That is, according to his literal words. Another way to interpret it: “Because of your faith you are saved” or “your faith has healed you”.

²³When Yeshua entered the ruler's house and saw the noisy crowd and people playing pipes, ²⁴he said, Go away. The little girl is not dead but asleep. And they scoffed at him. ²⁵After he put the crowd outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the little girl got up. ²⁶And this news spread through all that region.

commentary

9:23 noisy crowd and people playing pipes – He got rid of the mourners and whiners who were lamenting her death. Pipes were used on special occasions, including mournings (cf. *Jer. 48:36*). When the Romans sieged and massacred the inhabitants of Jotapata, “most people engaged flute-players to lead their lamentations” (*Josephus, Wars 3:150-161*). Concerning funerals, Rabbi Yehuda said, “Even the poorest man in Israel should not hire fewer than two flutes and one professional wailing woman” (*m. Ketuvot 4:4*). Mattai's version says the girl had died right before the incident with the bleeding woman. The Markan version implies that the incident with the bleeding woman caused Yeshua to arrive late to the house, and the girl had died in the process. “She is sleeping” is probably in reference to the death of those who raise up, as it is written: “Many who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake” (*Dan. 12:2*). According to another interpretation, the mourners took for granted she had already died, but Yeshua had absolute confidence that she was sleeping. Whatever the reason was, in order to bring her back to life he had to get rid of the noisy voices of unbelief.

9:24 The little girl – In the Markan story Yeshua says to the girl: “Talita qumi” (raise, damsel). In this version there is no account of Yeshua talking to the girl, however, he calls her “little girl”; in the Aramaic manuscripts: “Talita” טליטא. ‘Talita’ or the masculine ‘talaia’ טליא is used for boys or girls in their childhood; it denotes tenderness as it derives from the word ‘talah’ טלה; lamb. The gospel of Mark has the scribal addition that the girl was twelve years old (*Mark 5:42*), thus contrasting and interconnecting this narrative with that of the woman who was bleeding for twelve years. The implication is that on the day the little girl was born, the woman started bleeding and on the day that the girl died, the woman's impurity was healed. Then the girl was brought back to life, at the time when the woman began to live a completely new life. The age of 12 is the age a girl becomes a bat-mitzvah, which means she is now responsible for her actions and obliged to keep the commandments (cf. *Niddah 45b; Sulkhan Arukh, Orakh Hayim 55:9*), so both of them begin a new life too.

9:25 took her by the hand – Similarly the sages talk about the time when Rabbi Hiya bar Abba fell ill, then Rabbi Yohanan entered to visit him and asked him: “Is your suffering dear to you?” And he answered “no”; then he took him by the hand “and stood him up”. The same is then repeated, that then Rabbi Yohanan fell ill, and Rabbi Hanina healed him by taking him by the hand (*Berakhot 5b*).

²⁷As Yeshua went on from there, two blind men followed him crying out and saying, Have mercy on us, son of David! ²⁸And he entered a house and the blind men approached him, and he asked them, Do you believe that I am able to do this? They responded, Yes, master. ²⁹Then he touched their eyes and said, According to your faith let it be done to you; ³⁰and immediately their eyes were opened. Yeshua charged them and said, See that no one knows about this. ³¹But they went out and spread the news about him all over that region.

³²While Yeshua was going out, they brought to him a dumb man in whom there was a demon. ³³And when the demon was driven out, the man who had been mute spoke. The crowd was amazed and said, Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel. ³⁴But the Pharisees said, It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons.

commentary

9:25 son of David – They were addressing him as a rightful descendent of the royal family of King David, whose ancestry is traced through patrilineal lineage. As the Messiah comes from King David, they would be implying that he was the Messiah.

9:29 According to your faith – Every miracle in this chapter occurred because of their faith.

9:30 their eyes were opened – It is an idiom for the healing of sight, whether physical or spiritual. The Talmud, for instance, tells the story of when Yossi ben Durmaskit was punished with blindness. After Rabbi Elazar prayed for him it is written: “And his eyes were open” (*Hagiga 3b*). Also, the Psalmist says: “uncover my eyes and I will see wonders in your Torah” (*Psalms 119:18*), and the prophet says: “I will lead the blind in a way they do not know... I will make darkness into light before them” (*Isaiah 42:16*).

9:32 a dumb – He could not talk because of the demon (*see commentary on Matthew 4:23*). A deaf and a mute are exempt from attending the assembly and appearing in the Temple on the Jewish festivals (*Hagiga 3a*), as it is written: “that they may hear and they may teach” (*Deut. 31:12*).

9:23 the man who had been mute spoke – The Gemara talks about two mute people who used to enter the study hall with Yehudah haNasi. Rabbi prayed for God to have mercy upon them and they were healed (*Hagiga 3a*).

9:34 by the prince of demons that he drives out demons – In early literature, the only ones being recorded as driving out demons from people’s bodies are the Hassidim. The most notorious from among the sages being Hanina ben Dosa (*Pesakhim 112b*) and Abba Yose ben Yohanan (*Vayiqra Rabbah 24:3*). Chapter 9, therefore, has been introducing Yeshua’s Judaism as Galilean Hassidut. The Judean Pharisaic opposition here is bringing the chapter full circle. This is something that sadly happens in all religions and all sects, for the prejudice in them all say: If you are not like us, if you are not one of us, then your achievements, no matter how great they are, must not come from heaven.

³⁵Yeshua went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. ³⁶When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷Then he said to his disciples, The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. ³⁸Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.

commentary

9:35 proclaiming the good news of the kingdom – As explained in chapter 4, the goal in all these stories is to show Yeshua restoring the kingdom. It is written: “Then the eyes of the blind will be opened... the lame will skip like a hart and the tongue of the mute will sing” (*Isaiah 35:5-6*). Somewhere else: “Ascend upon a lofty mountain, you who says good tidings to Tzion; lift up your voice with strength, you who tells good tidings to Jerusalem, and be not afraid. Say to the cities of Judah: Behold your God!” (*Isaiah 40:9*), and again: “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger of good news, who announces peace, the harbinger of good tidings, who announces salvation; who says to Tzion: Your God reigns!” (*Isaiah 52:7*).

9:36 like sheep without a shepherd – For Isaiah’s verse on the good news continues: “Like a shepherd tending his flock, with his arms he gathers lambs, and in his bosom he carries them, the nursing ones he leads” (*Isaiah 40:11*). The fact that there were so many people in need and that he could not take care of all of them made him pray for more “workers into the harvest field”.

9:37 the harvest is plentiful and the workers are few – i.e., There is so much work to do, so many souls to save, so much Torah to teach, and not many people are working on it. This saying appears in some other places in different contexts. In Luke, Yeshua says this when he sends seventy disciples to proclaim the kingdom (cf. *Luke 10:1-3*). Here in Mattai he says this after visiting many places in Galilee and seeing crowds of people in need of Torah. The fact that Mattai says he felt compassion for them means that the harvest field represents the souls trapped in this world, or like Lurianic Kabbalah says, the sparks of holiness trapped in the Qlipot. There is a similar saying in the Mishna, attributed to Rabbi Tarfon, a sage who lived in the days after the destruction of the temple. He taught: “The days are short and the work is plentiful, but the laborers are lazy although the reward is great and the master of the house is urgent” (*Avot 2:15*). The interpretation of the saying is: “Time is running out and the work is still plentiful – that is: the work of Torah, refinement of the soul and attainment of virtues – such as love, awe and cleaving” (*Shaarei teshuva 2:22*).

9:28 Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers – Similarly Moshe Rabbeinu prayed: “Let Hashem, the God of spirits – i.e., He who knows every person’s character – appoint a man over the congregation” (*Num. 27:16*). Yeshua says that the workers of Torah are few, but he also says that we should pray for God to send more. It would be logical to assume that the more souls we reap, the more workers we have. Still, the passage differentiates between the harvest – that is: those who are sick in need of a doctor – and the workers – that is: the doctors. Being healthy does not equal being a doctor. Not everybody becomes a worker of the field. Therefore, this begs the question: Where are the workers? Why are they not working right now? Are they on vacation perhaps? Rabbi Tarfon’s version of the saying is like a response: the workers are lazy. Some Torah scholars do not take their Torah studies seriously enough, they think they have all the time of the world and that their mission can wait for another day. But the master of the field is urgent. Rabbi Tarfon would also say: “It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it” (*Avot 2:15*).

9:38 workers into his harvest field – While in Mattai’s context the harvest field appears to be the souls in the world, in the Zohar the harvest field is the Torah itself. The Zohar uses the expression “reapers of the harvest field” in reference to those who disclose the secrets of the Torah, “The secrets are only given to those reapers of the harvest field” (*Zohar II:166b*). The more you work on correcting yourself through the study of the Torah, the more pearls you will find. In reference to the saying, “the workers are lazy” (*Avot 2:15*), Moshe Rabbeinu said at Sinai, “If I sleep, how many pearls of words of Torah will I lose?” (*Rabbeinu Yonah on Pirqei Avot 2:15:1*).

