

**Jeffrey L. Rubenstein**

**The Land of Truth: Talmud Tales, Timeless Teachings**

**Study Guide**

Introduction: Contemporary Scholarship and Talmudic Stories

In this book I approach Talmudic and rabbinic stories as didactic fictions composed by storytellers to instruct, edify, communicate values and lessons, and grapple with tensions and problems of their culture. A few words about this approach may be useful.

From the beginnings of the academic study of Judaism in the early nineteenth century until the 1970s and 1980s (and even later for some scholars), stories from the Talmud and rabbinic literature were studied as historical and biographical sources. Scholars collected the stories about a particular rabbi in order to reconstruct his biography, and in turn analyzed the stories about rabbis who lived around the same time in order to reconstruct the history of that age. For example, scholars gathered all the stories about Rabbi Akiva, attempted to set them in chronological order, and—with the assistance of information culled from Rabbi Akiva’s legal traditions and other materials—composed a biography: “The Life of R. Akiva.” By then coordinating those findings with stories about R. Akiba’s contemporaries, ideally with biographies of R. Akiba’s contemporaries composed in the same way, scholars authored synthetic histories of that period of Jewish history.

Beginning in the 1970s and 1980s scholars realized that this method was not tenable, as rabbinic stories are not reliable biographical or historical sources, but closer to what we would call didactic fiction. The reasons for this shift include: (1) the awareness that many rabbinic stories contradicted what we know from external sources, primarily Greco-Roman literature; (2) the fact that many rabbinic stories exist in different and contradictory versions in different rabbinic documents; (3) the presence of miracles, divine intervention and supernatural phenomena in many stories; (4) the recognition that a high degree of narrative art, typical of fictional and folkloristic literature, characterizes rabbinic stories. Rabbinic stories can be used for types of intellectual and cultural history, but not for conventional biography and history.

A general introduction to this approach to rabbinic stories and a discussion of their literary character can be found in the introduction to my book, *Rabbinic Stories* (Classics of Western Spirituality Series; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2002), 1-22.

A more detailed and scholarly account of this shift in scholarship can be found in the first chapter of my academic book, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 1-33.

Links to both of these chapters can be found on my webpage on the site [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu): <https://nyu.academia.edu/JeffreyRubenstein>

Books on Talmudic and Rabbinic Stories

Those interested in learning more about Talmudic and Rabbinic Stories may be interested in the following books:

(1) Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *Rabbinic Stories* (Classics of Western Spirituality Series, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2002).

In this book I translate many of the most well-known Talmudic stories and provide brief introductions and notes, though not detailed analysis.

(2) Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

This is an academic book with a detailed introduction and a comprehensive analysis of six Talmudic stories.

(3) Ein Yaakov: *The Ethical and Inspirational Teachings of the Talmud*. By Yaakov ibn Haviv. Translated by Avraham Yaakov Finkel. (Lanham, Maryland: Jason Aronson, 1999).

Rabbi Yaakov ibn Haviv, c. 1480-1545, excerpted the aggada of the Babylonian Talmud and collected it in a book he titled "Ein Yaakov" ("The Eye of Jacob"). The book became a classic, and has been published in numerous editions over the past four centuries. However, it contains all of the Talmud's non-legal material, including midrashim (biblical interpretations), proverbs, and liturgical texts, and not only stories.

(4) For Hebrew readers, books by Yonah Frankel, among the pioneers of the literary approach to rabbinic stories, are valuable resources. His short book, *Studies in the Spiritual World of the Aggadic Narrative* [עיונים בעולמו הרוחני של סיפור האגדה] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1981), contains brief analyses of many rabbinic stories. His articles were collected and published as *The Aggadic Narrative: Harmony of Form and Content* [סיפור האגדה - אהדות של תוכן וצורה] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2001).

(5) Ruth Calderon, *A Bride for One Night: Talmud Tales* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2014).

Calderon offers creative retellings of Talmud stories, often from the first-person point of view of one of the characters, filling in gaps and details, followed by a discussion of the original story and its themes.

(6) A fine book discussing the stories about Rabbi Akiva, emphasizing their didactic content, is Barry W. Holtz's, *Rabbi Akiva: Sage of the Talmud* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

(7) Louis Rieser's, *The Hillel Narratives: What the Tales of the First Rabbi Can Teach Us about Our Judaism* (Ben Yehuda Press, 2009), explores the stories of Hillel from a literary perspective.

(8) Binyamin Lau, *The Sages: Character, Context & Creativity*. Vol.1: *The Second Temple Period*. Vol. II: *From Yavne to the Bar Kokhba Revolt*. Vol. III: *The Galilean Period*. Volume IV: *From the Mishna to the Talmud*. (Maggid Books Jerusalem, 2010-2015)

This multi-volume series on the Talmudic sages by the Israeli Rabbi and scholar Binyamin Lau was originally written in Hebrew and has been translated into English. Lau collects stories about

the leading Talmudic sages, as well as their traditions and sayings, and provides historical context and discussion. At times, his approach becomes too interested in reconstructing the biography, in the “real life” of the sage, in my opinion. But the series also contains solid analysis of a great many stories.

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### **Chapter 1: The Surreal Sleeper (Ta’anit 23a), pp. 3-20.**

#### **Text of the Story:**

R. Yohanan said: All his life that righteous man [Honi the Circle-Drawer] was troubled by the Scripture, *When the Lord restored those who returned to Zion we were like dreamers (Psalms 126:1)*. He said [to himself], “[How could they be] in a dream for seventy years?”

One day he was walking along his way when he saw a certain man planting a carob tree. He said to him, “Now a carob tree does not bear [fruit] for seventy years. Are you sure that you will live seventy years and will eat from it?” He said to him, “I found the world with carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted for me, so I plant for my offspring.”

He [Honi] sat down to eat his meal. Sleep (*sheinta*) came upon him. While he slept, a mound of earth (*meshunita*) encircled him and he was concealed from sight. He slept for seventy years.

When he awoke he saw a man gathering carobs from that carob tree. He said to him, “Do you know who planted that carob tree?” He said to him, “My father's father.”

He said [to himself], “Certainly seventy years [passed] in a dream!”

He went to his house. He said to them, “Does the son of Honi the Circle-Drawer yet live?” They said to him, “He is no more, but his grandson lives.” He said to them, “I am he [Honi].” They did not believe him.

He went to the study house. He heard the Sages saying, “Our traditions are as clear today as in the years of Honi the Circle-Drawer. For when he entered the study house, he solved every difficulty of the Sages.” He said to them, “I am he.” They did not believe him, and they did not treat him with the honor that he deserved. He prayed for mercy and his soul departed.

Rava said, “Thus people say, ‘Either fellowship or death.’”

(*Ta’anit 23a*)

#### **Study Questions:**

##### **(A) Questions about the Text.**

(1) Why does Honi have difficulty understanding the verse? What does the simile “like dreamers” mean in context? How does Honi (mis)understand it?

(2) What is the origin of the “seventy years”? That is, why does Honi think the verse refers to a seventy year span?

- (3) As you read the story, try to get a sense of the character of Honi? What kind of man is he? What character traits emerge from each of his encounters?
- (4) Why does Honi not understand why the man plants carob trees? What lesson does the planter's answer communicate? Does Honi appreciate this lesson immediately? How does his long sleep make the lesson more effective?
- (5) How is Honi able to sleep for seventy years? What (or Who) causes the sleep? What do we learn about the genre of this story from this miraculous sleep?
- (6) How does Honi feel when members of his household do not believe who he is? How does he feel when the sages and students in the study house do not believe who he is? Which makes him feel worse? Why?
- (7) What kind of "honor" did Honi deserve? How should the sages have honored him?
- (8) How do we reconcile this episode, which suggests that Honi was one of the most erudite and learned sages, with the first part of the story, where he cannot understand both the biblical verse and why the farmer plants carobs?
- (9) What does Rava's saying mean in this context? What does it mean in general?

(B) Discussion Questions.

- (1) The farmer tells Honi, "I found the world with carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted for me, so I plant for my offspring." What are our obligations to future generations? Are we as individuals and as a community living up to these obligations? How can we do better?
- (2) In what ways can we all say that our "ancestors planted" for us? What efforts and sacrifices did they make such that we were born into a better world?
- (3) That Honi's grandchildren do not recognize him points to an acute generation gap between grandparents and grandchildren. What are some ways this gap manifests itself today? What causes alienation between generations? How can we address this problem?
- (4) Honi suffers so much from the lack of honor that he prays to die. Do we agree with this death wish? Who else prays for death? Does the fact that God seems to answer his prayer suggest divine approval? Or can we understand his death differently?
- (5) Loneliness is widely considered to be a modern health problem with negative psychological and physiological consequences. What kind of loneliness do we or those we know experience today? Why? How is it similar to or different from the case of Honi? What can we do to ameliorate it?
- (6) Rava emphasizes the importance of "fellowship" to human wellbeing. What "fellowship" is most important to us today? How does it impact our lives?

**Additional Sources and Resources:**

(1) This story of Honi appears in the Talmud just after the story of Honi causing rain to fall in a time of drought, which relates to his name, “Honi the Circle-Drawer,” also found on Ta’anit 23a. Our story’s opening line, “All his life that righteous man,” refers to that story—the “righteous man” is Honi, the protagonist the Talmud has just featured.

The text of that story can be found here: <https://www.sefaria.org/Taanit.23a?lang=bi>. (The Talmudic story is a reworking of an earlier version of that story, which appears in Mishnah Ta’anit 3:8, and can be found here: [https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah\\_Taanit.3?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Taanit.3?lang=bi)).

An interesting question is how that story impacts our view of Honi? Do we get a better sense of his character by reading both stories together? Do the storytellers portray him consistently? What do we gain by reading the stories as a unit?

(2) A different—probably earlier—version of the story of Honi’s long sleep appears in Yerushalmi Ta’anit 3:10, 66d. Here is the text of that story:

R. Yudan b. Guria said: This Honi the Circle-Drawer (of the previous rainmaking story) was the grandson of Honi the Circle-Drawer who lived close to the destruction of the [first] temple. He went out to his workers in the fields. While he was there, it rained. He entered a cave. When seated, he became drowsy and fell asleep. He stayed deep in sleep for seventy years, until the temple was destroyed and rebuilt a second time. At the end of seventy years he awoke from his sleep. He went out of his cave and saw a changed world. A place that was a vineyard became an olive grove. A place that was an olive grove became a sown field. He inquired in the city. He said, “What is going on in the world?” They said to him, “Do you not know what is going on in the world?” He said to them, “No.” They said to him, “Who are you?” He said to them, “Honi the Circle-Drawer.” They said to him, “We have heard that when he entered the courtyard [of the temple] it became light.” He entered and it became light. He applied to himself the verse, “When the Lord restored those who returned to Zion we were like dreamers (Ps 126:1).”

An interesting exercise is to make a list of similarities and differences between the two versions. Consider the following: What is the historical setting of each story? What is the physical location or locations where each story takes place? Why does Honi fall asleep in each story? What is the function of the biblical verse? Who asks questions in each story? What kind of light does Honi provide in the temple courtyard, and what kind of “light” in the study house? What lessons or didactic points does each storyteller try to impart to his audience? Which story is more dramatic? Are the stories optimistic or pessimistic, happy or sad?

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## **Chapter 2: What to Do with an Aged (and Annoying) Mother? (Qiddushin 31b), pp. 21-32.**

### **Text of the Story:**

Rav Assi—he had this elderly mother.

She said to him: “I want jewels.”

He got them for her.

[She said to him:] “I want a husband.”

[He said to her:] “I will look into it for you.”

[She said to him:] “I want a husband who is as handsome as you.”

He left her and went to the Land of Israel.

He heard that she was following after him.

He came before Rabbi Yoḥanan.

He said to him, “Is it permitted to go out of the Land [of Israel] to [areas] outside of the land?”

Rabbi Yoḥanan said to him, “It is forbidden.”

Rav Assi said to him, “To greet one’s mother—is it permitted?”

Rabbi Yoḥanan said to him, “I do not know.”

Rav Assi waited [*itarah*] a little while. He came again [to Rabbi Yoḥanan].

Rabbi Yoḥanan said to him: “Assi, have you reconciled yourself to go? May God [*Hamakom*] bring you back safely.”

Rav Assi went before Rabbi Elazar. He said to him, “God forbid, perhaps Rabbi Yoḥanan became angry [*mirtah ratah*]?”

Rabbi Elazar said to him, “What did he say to you?”

Rav Assi said to him, “May God bring you back safely.”

He said to him, “Had he been angry [*ratah*], he would not have blessed you.”

In the meantime, Rav Assi heard that her coffin was coming.

He said [to himself], “Had I known, I would not have left.”

(*Qiddushin* 31b)

### **Study Questions:**

#### (A) Questions about the Text.

(1) Does Rav Assi respond appropriately to his mother’s requests? Why or why not? What would be a better response?

(2) How do we evaluate Rav Assi’s decision to move to the Land of Israel? Is he fleeing for good reasons, to extricate himself from an impossible situation? Or fleeing for poor reasons, to avoid dealing with a difficult situation maturely and appropriately?

(2) Why did the Sages institute a prohibition against leaving the Land of Israel (except for purposes of Torah study or marriage)? What are the advantages and disadvantages of this precept?

(3) What does R. Yohanan mean by, “Assi, have you reconciled yourself to go? May God bring you back safely”? Why does he not give a more straightforward answer?

(4) What does Rav Assi mean by, “Had I known, I would not have left?” Left where? What does he regret? Is he being fair to himself?

(B) Discussion Questions.

(1) What kind of inappropriate requests do parents make of their adult children, especially as they age? Ought a child to attempt to fulfil them? How should children respond?

(2) Rav Assi moves far away from his mother and his home. What reasons cause people to settle far from parents and relatives? What are the positive and negative aspects of such a decision?

(3) The prohibition against leaving the Land of Israel gives legal expression to the concept of the special status or holiness of Israel. What are some other ways the holiness of the Land of Israel is manifested and recognized?

(4) Rav Assi has a difficult decision to make, and asks for help, but does not receive a clear answer. How do we go about making difficult decisions? Are there some decisions that no one can help us make? How do we make the best decision in these cases?

**Additional Sources and Resources:**

(1) A comprehensive discussion of the commandment to honor one’s parents, with a great many relevant sources, is: Gerald Blidstein, *Honor thy Father and Mother: Filial Responsibility in Jewish Law and Ethics* (New York: Ktav, 1975).

(2) A different version of the story appears in Yerushalmi Nazir 7:1, 56a. This version is earlier and less developed:

Rabbi Yassa heard that his mother had come to Bosora. He asked Rabbi Yohanan, “What is the law about leaving the Land of Israel? He said to him, “If [to protect her] on account of danger on the roads – go; if for honor of your mother, I do not know.” Said Rabbi Shmuel bar Yitshaq: “It was still uncertain to R. Yohanan. [Rabbi Yassa] pestered him, and he said, ‘You have decided to leave? May you return in peace.’” [When] Rabbi [E]lazar heard, he said: “There is no [indication of] permission greater than than this.”]

“Rabbi Yassa” in the Yerushalmi is Rav Assi of the Babylonian Talmud, and Bosora is a city in Jordan.

What are some similarities and differences when comparing the versions? Which story is more dramatic? In which does the character of Rav Assi emerge more clearly? Do the two versions communicate the same message or teach different lessons?

(3) The Babylonian Talmud provides some general guidance as to the legal obligations to honor and fear parents, based on the commandments of Exodus 20:12 (“Honor your father and your mother”) and Leviticus 19:3 (“You shall fear your mother and your father”):

The Sages taught: What is “fear” and what is “honor”? “Fear”: One may not stand in his place, and may not sit in his place, and may not contradict his statements, and may not choose sides [when his parent argues with someone else]. “Honor”: He gives him food and gives him drink, dresses him and covers him, brings him in and escorts him out.

What is the Sages’ general understanding of the commandment? Does it cover situations like that of Rav Assi and his mother and other such cases? Should we consider these minimum guidelines or a comprehensive understanding of the commandment?

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### **Chapter 3: Forbidden Fruit, or How not to Seduce Your Husband (Qiddushin 81b), pp. 33-51.**

#### **Text of the Story:**

Rabbi Ḥiyya bar [son of] Ashi regularly would fall on his face [in prayer] and say, “May the Merciful One save me from the evil inclination.”

One day his wife heard him. She thought, “Since it has been many years since he has separated from me, what is the reason he speaks thus?”

One day he was repeating traditions in the garden. She adorned herself and passed back and forth in front of him.

He said to her, “Who are you?”

She said, “I am a courtesan who has arrived at this place just now.”

He propositioned her.

She said to him, “Bring me the pomegranate from the top of the branch.”

He jumped up, went, and brought it to her.

When he returned to his house, his wife was lighting the oven.

He went up and sat inside it.

She said to him, “What is this?”

He told her, “Such and such happened.”

She said to him, “It was I!”

He said to her, “Nevertheless, I intended to sin.”

*(Qiddushin 81b)*

### **Study Questions:**

#### (A) Questions about the Text.

- (1) What is Rav Hiyya bar Ashi’s conception of the evil inclination? With what does he associate it? Why?
- (2) Before hearing his prayer, why did Hiyya bar Ashi’s wife think he had ceased being intimate with her? After hearing the prayer, what was her new understanding?
- (3) Why did the wife not confront Rav Hiyya bar Ashi directly? Why the elaborate ruse? What was she trying to teach him?
- (4) Why does the wife demand that Rav Hiyya bar Ashi give her a pomegranate? What does picking a fruit evoke?
- (5) How did the wife convince Rav Hiyya bar Ashi that she was the “courtesan”?
- (6) Did Rav Hiyya bar Ashi sin? If so, what exactly is the nature of this sin?
- (7) Is the punishment extreme? Why is Rav Hiyya bar Ashi so distraught with what he has done that he commits suicide?
- (8) Can you identify both comedic and tragic elements in the story? Why does a storyteller include both?
- (9) What is the storyteller trying to teach with this tragic ending? Who should be blamed for it?

#### (B) Discussion Questions.

- (1) The story includes a negative view of sex (R. Hiyya bar Ashi) and a more favorable view (the wife). To what extent do we encounter such views today? Where do they come from? With what groups, cultures or religions are each associated?
- (2) Both husband and wife do not seem to know each other deeply and truly. Can we say this of couples today? What kinds of secrets do partners withhold from each other?
- (3) What is the relationship between intention and wrongdoing? When do we distinguish intentional from unintentional offenses, sins or crimes? Why do we make this distinction?
- (4) The Rabbis believed all humans possess an evil inclination, a propensity toward sin and wrongdoing, that we must try to resist in the pursuit of the good and holy. How does this evil inclination impact all of us? What is the best way to fight against and resist it? Is prayer effective?

## Additional Sources and Resources:

(1) For additional reading on Jewish view of sex and marriage, see:

David Biale, *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

*Jewish Choices, Jewish Voices: Sex and Intimacy*, eds. Elliot N. Dorff and Danya Ruttenberg (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2010).

Norman Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Love and Marriage* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980).

Danya Ruttenberg, "Jewish Sexual Ethics," *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Ethics and Morality*, eds. Elliot N. Dorff and Jonathan K Crane (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 383-400.

Michael L. Satlow, "Rabbinic Views on Marriage, Sexuality, and the Family," *Cambridge History of Judaism Vol. 4*, ed. Steven T. Katz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 612-26.

(2) The Talmudic passage in which the story of Rabbi Hiyya bar Ashi appears, Qiddushin 81a-b, also includes several other stories of sexual temptation, and these can be profitably studied as a unit.

(a) **Those captive women who were brought to Neharde'a, where they were redeemed, were brought up to the house of Rav Amram the Pious. They removed the ladder from before them to prevent men from climbing up after them to the attic where they were to sleep. When one of them passed by the entrance to the upper chamber, it was as though a light shone in the aperture due to her great beauty. Out of his desire for her, Rav Amram grabbed a ladder that ten men together could not lift, lifted it on his own and began climbing.**

**When he was halfway up the ladder, he strengthened his legs against the sides of the ladder to stop himself from climbing further, raised his voice, and cried out: There is a fire in the house of Amram. Upon hearing this, the Sages came and found him in that position. They said to him: You have embarrassed us, since everyone sees what you had intended to do. Rav Amram said to them: It is better that you be shamed in Amram's house in this world, and not be ashamed of him in the World-to-Come. He took an oath that his evil inclination should emerge from him, and an apparition similar to a pillar of fire emerged from him. He said to his evil inclination: See, as you are fire and I am mere flesh, and yet, I am still superior to you, as I was able to overcome you.**

(b) **Rabbi Meir would ridicule transgressors by saying it is easy to avoid temptation. One day, Satan appeared to him as a woman standing on the other side of the river. Since there was no ferry to cross the river, he took hold of a rope bridge and crossed the river. When he reached halfway across the rope bridge, the evil inclination left him and said to him: Were it not for the fact that they proclaim about you in heaven: Be careful with regard to Rabbi Meir and his Torah, I would have made your blood like two *ma'a*, i.e., completely worthless, since you would have fallen completely from your spiritual level.**

(c) **Rabbi Akiva would likewise ridicule transgressors. One day, Satan appeared to him as a woman at the top of a palm tree. Rabbi Akiva grabbed hold of the palm tree and began climbing. When he was halfway up the palm tree, the evil inclination left him and said to him: Were it not for the fact that they proclaim about you in heaven: Be careful with regard to Rabbi Akiva and his Torah, I would have made your blood like two *ma'a*.**

<https://www.sefaria.org/Kiddushin.81a.12?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>

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#### **Chapter 4: Men are From Babylonia, Women are from the Land of Israel (Nedarim 66b), pp. 52-72.**

##### **Text of the Story:**

A certain man from Babylonia went up to the Land of Israel, and he married a woman there.

He said to her, “Cook me two lentils.” She cooked him two lentils.

He seethed with anger at her.

The next day he said to her, “Cook me a *geriva* [a very large measure] of lentils.” She cooked him a *geriva*.

He said to her, “Go and bring me two *botsinei* [pumpkins].

She brought him two lamps [another meaning of *botsinei*].

[He said to her,] “Go and break them on the head of the gate [*bava*].

[Rabbi] Bava ben [son of] Buta was sitting at the gate [*bava*] and judging cases.

She went and broke them on his head.

He said to her, “What is this thing that you have done?”

She said to him, “Thus my husband commanded me.”

He said to her, “You did your husband’s will. May God bring forth from your belly two sons like Bava ben Buta.”

(*Nedarim* 66b)

##### **Study Questions:**

###### (A) Questions about the Text.

- (1) What is the source of the wife’s misunderstandings? Is this her “fault”?
- (2) Are the husband’s angry reactions justified? How would you describe his character?
- (3) Why does the husband order the wife to break the lamps at the top of the town gate? Why this location? What do lamps—and the breaking of lamps—symbolize?

(4) Why does Bava ben Buta not get angry at the woman? What personal characteristics does he exhibit?

(5) How do we understand the final blessing?

(B) Discussion Questions.

(1) What are common sources of tension between married couples? What kind of misunderstandings can cause tension?

(2) How do we learn the meaning of expressions and idioms that deviate from the literal meaning of the words?

(3) Misunderstandings happen because language can be ambiguous or unclear. Think of a time when you misunderstood someone or they misunderstood you. What happened? What was the result? Did you become frustrated or annoyed?

(4) Have you ever experienced misunderstandings that resulted from different cultural assumptions or expectations? What happened and how did you address the problem?

**Additional Sources and Resources:**

The Talmud includes several other stories of Rabbis who tried to restore harmony between husbands and wives despite affronts to their dignity. In this story found in Yerushalmi Sotah 1:4, 16d a husband vows that he will not allow his wife to return to his house unless she spits in the face of Rabbi Meir. Failure to comply would require the couple to divorce, which perhaps was the husband's goal.

Rabbi Meir regularly preached in the synagogues of Hammat every Sabbath eve, and there was a woman there who regularly listened to his voice. Once he preached for a long time, and the woman went home to find that the lamp had gone out. Her husband said to her, "Where have you been?" She said to him, "I was listening to the voice of the preacher." He said to her, "I swear that this woman (=you) shall not enter this house until she spits in the face of the preacher." Rabbi Meir perceived [what happened] through the Holy Spirit, and pretended to have an eye ailment. He said, "Any woman who knows how to whisper an incantation over an eye, let her come and whisper it." The woman's neighbors said to her, "Here is an opportunity for you to return home. Pretend to whisper an incantation, and spit in his eye." She went to Rabbi Meir. He said to her, "Do you know how to whisper an incantation for an eye ailment?" Because of her reverence for him, she said to him, "No." He said, "If one spits in it seven times, it is good for it." After she spat he said, "Go and say to your husband, 'You told me to spit once and that woman (=I) spat seven times.'"

His students said to him, "Ought one disgrace the Torah in this way? Had you told us, we would have brought him here, lashed him upon a bench and forced him to make up with his wife." He said to them, "Should Meir's honor be greater than the honor of his Creator? For if Scripture says that the Holy Name, which is written in holiness, should be erased in the [ritual bitter] waters in order to restore peace between a man and his wife (cf. Numbers 5:11-31), how much the more is this true of Meir's honor?"

In the following story a husband takes an oath that his wife not benefit from him until she has two Rabbis taste her food—apparently she was a terrible cook. Here too failure to comply would require the couple to divorce.

There was a **certain person who said to his wife: I swear that you not benefit from me until you have given Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Shimon your cooked food to taste**, so they can see for themselves what a bad cook you are.

She brought the food to them, and **Rabbi Yehuda tasted** it, without concern for his honor. **He said:** This is an *a fortiori* inference: **And what** can be seen, **that** in order **to make peace between a man and his wife, the Torah said: My name, that is written in sanctity, shall be blotted out in the waters that curse**, as the words written on a scroll, including the name of God, were blotted out during the ceremony of preparing the water that a *sota* would drink. And this is so even **in** a case of where it is **uncertain** if this will bring peace between them, as she may or not be guilty of adultery. **I, all the more so**, should waive my honor in order to bring peace to this couple.

Conversely, **Rabbi Shimon did not taste. He said: Let all the children of the widow die, and Shimon will not budge from his place.** In other words, the husband can die and leave his wife a widow and his children orphans, and let them die too, rather than have people belittle the dignity of Torah scholars by taking such vows. **And furthermore**, there is another reason for my refusal: **So that they should not become used to taking vows.**

<https://www.sefaria.org/Nedarim.66b.2?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>

These stories can be compared and contrasted to better understand the predicament Rabbis faced when husbands or wives swore oaths that jeopardized the marriage. In fact, the second story appears in Nedarim 66b, just before our main story, which invites the audience to consider them as a unit.

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### **Chapter 5: Sufferings! Not Them and Not Their Reward! (Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah 2:16, Berakhot 5b), pp. 73-94.**

#### **Text of the Stories:**

Rabbi Yoḥanan became afflicted and endured fevers for three and a half years. Rabbi Ḥanina went up to visit him. He said to him, “What has come upon you?” He said to him, “My burden is too great to bear.” He said to him, “You should not say that. Rather you should say, ‘The faithful God. . . .’”

After some time Rabbi Ḥanina became sick. Rabbi Yoḥanan went up to visit him. He said to him, “What has come upon you?” He said to him, “How difficult are sufferings!” He said to him, “But how great is their reward!” He said to him, “I want neither them nor their reward.”

(*Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* 2:16)

Rava, and some say Rav Ḥisda, said:

If one sees that sufferings come upon him, let him examine his deeds, as it says, “Let us search and examine our ways, and turn back to the Lord” [Lam. 3:40].

If he examines [his deeds] and finds no [sin], he should attribute [the sufferings] to his neglect of Torah [study], as it says, “Happy is the man whom you discipline, O Lord, the man you instruct in your Torah” [Ps. 94:12].

If he found no neglect of Torah, he should know that these are sufferings of love, as is written, “For whom the Lord loves, he rebukes” [Prov. 3:12].

Rava, quoting Rav Sehorah quoting Rav Huna, said:

He whom the Holy One loves, he crushes with sufferings, as it says, “But the Lord chose to crush him by disease” [Isa. 53:10].

Is it possible [the Holy One imposes sufferings] even when one does not accept them with love? [No!], as it says, “If he made his soul an offering of restitution” [Isa. 53:10]. Just as an offering requires consent, so sufferings [of love] require consent.

If he accepts [sufferings with love], what is his reward? He will live a long life, see his offspring, and in addition, his knowledge [of Torah] will endure, as it says, “Through him the Lord’s purpose will prosper” [Isa. 53:10]....

Rabbi Elazar became ill. Rabbi Yoḥanan visited him. [Rabbi Yoḥanan] saw that [Rabbi Elazar] was lying in a dark room. He uncovered his arm and light shone. He saw that Rabbi Elazar was weeping. He said to him, “Why do you weep?”

“[Do you weep] because of Torah, that you did not proliferate it? Have we not learned, ‘All the same is a large measure and a small measure, as long as his intention is for the sake of heaven [*Mishnah Menahot* 13:11]?’

“[Do you weep] because of [your lack of] sustenance? Every man does not merit two tables [i.e., riches in this world and in the next].

“[Do you weep] because of [lack of] children? This here is the bone of my tenth child [who died, yet I do not weep].”

[Rabbi Elazar] said to him, “I weep for that beauty [of yours] which will wither.” [Rabbi Yoḥanan] said to him, “For that you may justly weep,” and the two of them wept together.

Meantime, Rabbi Yoḥanan said to him, “Do you cherish sufferings?” [Rabbi Elazar] said to him, “Not them and not their reward.” [Rabbi Yoḥanan] said to him, “Give me your hand.” [Rabbi Elazar] gave him his hand and he healed him.

(*Berakhot* 5b)

### **Study Questions:**

(A) Questions about the Text.

- (1) Why does Rabbi Hanina tell Rabbi Yohanan not to complain about suffering? What does his alternative response ‘The Faithful God’ mean in this context?
- (2) Why does Rabbi Yohanan not follow his own directions when he becomes ill? What do we learn from this?
- (3) What is the “reward” for sufferings that Rabbi Yohanan wants none of?
- (4) How do we understand the concept of “sufferings of love”? The full verse quoted from Proverbs 3:12 reads: “For whom the Lord loves, he rebukes, as a father the son whom he favors.” Does this analogy between God and the sufferer, on the one hand, and a father and son, on the other, help us make sense of suffering?
- (5) Why does Rav Huna stress that “sufferings of love” must be accepted by a sufferer? What does this mean?
- (6) Rabbi Elazar lies on his deathbed weeping in the final scene. Why do people tend to weep on their deathbed? Are Rabbi Yohanan’s suggestions about the cause of the weeping plausible?
- (7) What does Rabbi Yohanan mean by saying that the amount of Torah one has or has not learned is less important than one’s intention “for the sake of heaven”? Do you think he means this or is just trying to make his friend feel better? Would we not ordinarily give more credit to someone who has mastered a greater amount of Torah through self-discipline and perseverance?
- (8) Theological or philosophical explanations for suffering generally should be distinguished from words of consolation spoken to those in states of suffering. What is appropriate and what is not appropriate for each context? The stories tell of real sufferers, but the Talmud, overall, is also a theological resource. How do these two contexts, the narrative context and the larger Talmudic context, complicate our understanding of the story?

(B) Discussion Questions.

- (1) What are some explanations for sufferings that you have heard? Which of these are satisfying or comforting? Why or why not?
- (2) How do you feel about the doctrine that suffering is punishment for sin? Does this help or make the problem worse?
- (3) Do we sometimes “blame the victim” for his or her suffering? Is this ever appropriate? (A chain smoker who gets cancer?) Why would we do this?
- (4) Is there any larger purpose to suffering? Any ‘silver lining’?
- (5) How should we best console someone who is suffering, or in such pain that he or she is weeping? Is R. Yohanan’s strategy effective?
- (6) Do you think these texts would be of comfort to sufferers today? Why or why not?
- (7) Ought we to distinguish personal or individual suffering, as in these texts, from large scale suffering, for example that caused by natural disasters or war? Why or why not?

### **Additional Sources and Resources:**

Here are a few books on suffering in the Hebrew Bible and in classical Jewish sources (not including literature on the Holocaust specifically, which is its own category):

Yaakov Elman, "When Permission Is Given: Aspects of Divine Providence," *Tradition* 24 (1989), 24-45.

Louis Jacobs, "The Sugya on Sufferings in B. Berakhot 5a, b." In *Studies in Aggadah, Targum and Jewish Liturgy in Memory of Joseph Heinemann*, ed. Jakob J. Petuchowski and Ezra Fleischer (Jerusalem: Magnes and Hebrew Union College Press, 1981), 32-44.

David Charles Kraemer, *Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995)

Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988).

Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press), 1984.

Solomon Schechter, "The Doctrine of Divine Retribution in Rabbinical Literature." Reprinted in *Studies in Judaism: Essays on Persons, Concepts, and Movements of Thought in Jewish Tradition* (New York: Atheneum, 1970).

Ephraim Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1979), 420-523.

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### **Chapter 6: The Ugly Vessel (Ta'anit 20a-b), pp. 95-115.**

#### **Text of the Story:**

Our Rabbis taught: "A person should always be soft like a reed and not hard like a cedar."

Once Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar was coming from his master's house of study in Migdal Gedor. He was riding on a donkey, traveling slowly along the bank of the seashore. He felt great happiness because he had studied a great deal of Torah.

He chanced upon a very ugly [*mekho'ar*] man, who said to him, "Peace be upon you, Rabbi!"

Rabbi Shimon did not answer his greeting but said to him, "Scoundrel [*reiqā*]! How ugly you are! Perhaps all the people of your village [*irkha*] are as ugly as you are?"

He said to him, "Go and say to the craftsman who made me: 'How ugly is this vessel that you made.'"

Realizing that he had sinned, Rabbi Shimon got down from his donkey, and prostrated himself before the man, and said to him, "I humble myself before you. Forgive me." He said to him, "I will not forgive you until you go to the craftsman who made me and say to him: 'How ugly is this vessel that you made.'"

Rabbi Shimon traveled slowly, following after [the man] until he reached his village.

The people of the village came out to greet him, and they were saying to him: "Peace be upon you, our Rabbi!"

The man said to them, "Whom are you calling 'Rabbi'?" They said to him, "That one following after you." He said to them, "If he is a Rabbi, may there not be many like him in Israel!" They said to him, "For what reason?" He said to them, "He did such- and-such to me." They said to him, "Nevertheless, forgive him, for he is a man of great knowledge of Torah." He said to them, "I forgive him for your sake, providing that he does not make a habit of acting in this way."

Immediately Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar entered [the study house] and taught, "A person should always be soft like a reed and not hard like a cedar."

### **Study Questions:**

#### (A) Questions about the Text.

(1) The text begins and concludes with a saying about the softness of reeds as opposed to the hardness of cedars. What does this saying mean? What positive and negative characteristics do we tend to associate with softness and hardness?

(2) Why does the Rabbi insult the man? Is there any possible justification for this response? What circumstances might account for this insult?

(3) Who is the "craftsman that made" the man? How is this retort effective?

(4) Should the man have forgiven the Rabbi immediately? Is he cruel to withhold immediate forgiveness? Or is he trying to teach the Rabbi a lesson?

(5) What does the man mean by "I will not forgive you until you go to the craftsman who made me and say to him: 'How ugly is this vessel that you made.'" What does he actually want the Rabbi to do?

(6) Why does the Rabbi follow after the man until he reaches his village? Would he have been justified in saying to himself: "I apologized. I asked for forgiveness. I humbled myself before this man. He rebuffed me. So I can now go home with a good conscience."

(7) Why are the villagers sympathetic to the Rabbi? What does this tell us of the storyteller's sympathies?

(8) What does the man mean by his final proviso, "providing that he does not make a habit of acting in this way?"

#### (B) Discussion Questions.

(1) Where do ideas of beauty and ugliness come from? Are these consistent across cultures or within a given culture? Are beauty and ugliness really "in the eye of the beholder"?

- (2) Are judgments or perceptions of beauty and ugliness in our control? Ought we ‘blame’ ourselves if we think another person is ugly?
- (3) Are we obligated to forgive those who insult or offend us if they ask for forgiveness? How do we know that they are sincere?
- (4) What are some strategies to help us see beyond superficial appearances to “inner” beauty, that is, whether someone is a good person?
- (5) Can the theological principle that all human are created in God’s image help us to see beyond superficial appearances? How so? Or is this idea too abstract?
- (6) According to the storyteller, we should strive to be “soft like a reed.” How? What exactly does this mean? What personality traits should we cultivate?

### **Additional Sources and Resources:**

For an in-depth exploration of the ramifications of the doctrine that humans are created in God’s image, and commanded to imitate God’s ways, see Yair Lorberbaum, *In God’s Image: Myth, Theology and Law in Classical Judaism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

Text of the piyyut (liturgical poem) for Yom Kippur known as “Ki Hinei Ka-homer” (“Like Clay in the Hands of the Potter”), which beautifully elucidates the metaphor of the divine artisan who fashioned human beings, can be found here (p. 227).

<http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/jewish-law/holidays/mls/mahzor-kol-nidrei.pdf>

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### **Chapter 7: An Arrow in Satan’s Eye (Qiddushin 81a-b), pp. 116-40.**

#### **Text of the Story:**

Pelimo was in the habit of saying each day, “An arrow in Satan’s eye!”

One day, on the eve of the Day of Atonement, Satan appeared to him [disguised] as a poor person.

He came and knocked on the door.

They brought him a loaf of bread.

He said to them, “On such a day as this—everyone should be inside and I remain outside?!”

They brought him inside, and they brought him a loaf of bread.

He said to them, “On such a day as this—everyone [has a seat] at the table and I remain alone?!”

They brought him [in] and sat him at the table.

Satan was sitting, and his body became filled with boils and sores, and they were discharging pus upon him, and he was doing disgusting things with them [e.g., picking at the sores].

Pelimo said to him, “Sit nicely!”

Satan said to him, "Give me a drink."  
They gave him a drink.  
He coughed and threw up phlegm into the cup.  
They rebuked him.  
Satan fell down dead.  
They heard it being said, "Pelimo killed a man! Pelimo killed a man!"

Pelimo ran away and hid himself in a latrine.  
Satan went after him.  
[Pelimo] fell down before him.  
When Satan saw how much Pelimo was suffering, he revealed himself to him.  
Satan said to him, "Why do you speak thus?"  
Pelimo said to him, "How then should I speak?"  
Satan said to him, "My master should say, 'May the Merciful One rebuke Satan'" [cf. Zech. 3:2].

(*Qiddushin* 81a-b)

### **Study Questions:**

#### (A) Questions about the Text.

- (1) Why does (Rabbi) Pelimo say each day "An arrow in Satan's eye"? Is this an attempt at self-motivation or a challenge to Satan? If his purpose is to motivate himself, how could he do so more effectively?
- (2) What is the effect of the setting on the "eve of the Day of Atonement"? What happens at this time?
- (3) Do Pelimo and his family give charity appropriately or inappropriately? When the beggar-Satan first knocks at the door, should they have welcomed him to the table immediately? Why do they not do so? Can we fault their response?
- (4) What kinds of behaviors do we find disgusting? Why? How should we react when disgusted? Does it matter where we are, for example, in our own home as opposed to in another's home or in public?
- (5) What is Satan trying to teach Pelimo? How should Pelimo respond to the beggar-Satan's boils and expectorations?
- (6) Who says "Pelimo killed a man"? How do we understand this charge?
- (7) Why does the final scene take place in a latrine? What is the impact of this setting?
- (8) What is Satan's final lesson to Pelimo? What happens in the biblical passage he quotes (Zechariah 1:1-3) and how does it apply to Pelimo?

#### (B) Discussion Questions.

(1) How should we respond when beggars knock at our door? Is it enough to give them food and money, or should we do more? Is it different now as opposed to ancient times? Is it different in the diaspora as opposed to in Israel?

(2) Many professions require interactions with disgusting substances—doctors, nurses, plumbers, among others. Of course all parents who deal with soiled diapers and suchlike share in this experience too. How can reactions to the disgusting best be managed?

(3) Satan in the story can be understood as a personification of our “evil inclination” that leads us to avoid the good and choose to sin. Is this a useful way to conceptualize human evil and sin? What are some contemporary parallels?

(4) What kind of substances or behaviors do we consider disgusting? Why? Is this universal or individual / culturally specific? For example, what do we eat that others consider disgusting and vice versa?

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## **Chapter 8: The Land of Truth (Sanhedrin 97a), pp. 141-61.**

### **Text of the Story:**

Rava said: Once I used to think that there is no truth in the world.

Until a certain Sage—his name was Rav Tavut (and some say his name was Rav Tavyomi)—who would not lie even if given all the possessions in the world—told me [this story]:

“One time I came to a certain place, and its name was Qushta [Truth]. The residents did not ‘modify their words’ [lie], and no one living there died prematurely.

I married a woman from among them and had two sons from her.

One day my wife was sitting and washing her hair. A neighbor came and knocked on the door. I thought, ‘It is not proper [to tell the neighbor that my wife is washing]. I said to the neighbor, ‘She is not here.’ Her [my wife’s] two sons died.

The residents of the place came to me. They said, ‘What is this?’ I told them what had happened. They said to me, ‘We beg of you: leave our place and do not stir up death against the rest of us.’”

*(Sanhedrin 97a)*

### **Study Questions:**

#### (A) Questions about the Text.

(1) Why would Rava say “There is no truth in this world”?

(2) Why do no residents of Qushta die prematurely? What is the assumption behind this phenomenon?

- (3) Why does the Rabbi lie about his wife washing her hair? What is he trying to conceal or protect?
- (4) How do we know the town of Qushta is a fiction, that the story is a type of parable?
- (5) What is the storyteller's message? What should we learn from this story?

(B) Discussion Questions.

- (1) What (white-)lies, half-truths and deceptions have you told recently? What was the motivation in each case? What would have happened had you told the truth?
- (2) What was a recent occasion when you were lied to or deceived? Why did the other person do so? How did you feel?
- (3) What are some of the most common lies and untruths? Are many of these just an issue of politeness (e.g. I love your haircut!)? Should we tell the truth in these cases?
- (4) How would you distinguish a legitimate or justified lie from one that is illegitimate?
- (5) It is sometimes said that "honesty is the best policy"? Is this true? When is this the case?

**Additional Sources and Resources:**

An interesting article by A.J. Jacobs who attempted a policy of "radical honesty" and never lying can be found here:

<https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a26792/honesty0707/>

An article published in *National Geographic*, "Why we Lie," can be found here:

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2017/06/lying-hoax-false-fibs-science/?user.testname=none>

Two well-known books on truth and lying are:

Sisela Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (New York: Vintage, 1999).

David Nyberg, *The Varnished Truth: Truth Telling and Deceiving in Ordinary Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

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**Chapter 9: Torah for Richer or Poorer (Yoma 35b), pp. 162-80.**

**Text of the Story:**

Our Rabbis taught: the poor man and the rich man will come for judgment in the next world.

To the poor man they [the heavenly court] will say, “Why did you not busy yourself with Torah? If he should say, “I was poor and was preoccupied with my sustenance,” they will say to him, “Were you poorer than Hillel?”

It was said of Hillel the Elder that every single day he would work and earn one *tarpiq*. He would give half to the guard of the academy, and he would use half to support himself and the members of his household.

Once he was not able to earn [the money], and the guard of the academy would not allow him to enter. He climbed up and sat upon the aperture [in the roof] so that he could hear the words of the living God from the mouths of Shemayah and Avtalyon.

It was said that that day was the eve of the Sabbath, and it was the winter season, and snow fell upon him. When dawn broke Shemayah said to Avtalyon, “Avtalyon, my brother. Each day this building is light, and today it is dark!” They looked about and saw the figure of a man in the aperture. They went up and found him covered with three cubits of snow. They extracted him and washed him and rubbed him with oil and sat him next to the fire. They said, “This one is worthy of having the Sabbath desecrated on his behalf.”

To the rich man they [the heavenly court] will say, “Why did you not busy yourself with Torah?” If he should say, “I was rich and was preoccupied with my possessions,” they will say to him, “Were you richer than Rabbi Elazar ben Harsom?”

It was said of Rabbi Elazar ben Harsom that his father left him one thousand cities on land and one thousand ships in the sea. But he never went to see them. Rather, the whole day and the whole night he would sit and busy himself with Torah. Each day he would put his daily bread upon his shoulder, and he would go from city to city and from region to region to learn Torah.

Once his servants happened upon him and imposed forced service upon him. He said to them, “Please leave me be.” They said to him, “By the life of Elazar ben Harsom we will not leave you be.” And he did not wish to reveal to them that he was their master.

(*Yoma* 35b)

### **Study Questions:**

#### (A) Questions about the Text.

- (1) What else could Hillel do with his meager earnings? What trade-off is he making in using half his wages to study Torah?
- (2) What do we make of the figure of the guard? Who authorized him to charge an admission fee?
- (3) What do the Rabbis mean by, “This one is worthy of having the Sabbath desecrated on his behalf”?
- (4) Why did R. Elazar ben Harsom never visit his cities or ships? Why does he wander from town to town to learn Torah rather than remain in his home town?

- (5) What does “forced service” refer to? How are we to understand that the Rabbi’s own servants apprehend him for this “forced service”?
- (6) Why does R. Elazar ben Harsom not want to reveal his identity? And why do the servants not recognize him? Should we understand that he was in disguise?
- (7) Why does the heavenly court ask specifically about Torah study? What else might we expect them to ask about?

(B) Discussion Questions.

- (1) Should there be a fee for Judaic studies classes? Or for admission to a rabbinic seminary or learning center? If so, what if some individuals cannot afford to pay? If not, how are these institutions and teachers compensated?
- (2) What generally prevents the poor from finding time for Torah study? What generally prevents the wealthy from finding time for Torah study? Who faces the greater challenge?
- (3) Are financial issues the main barrier today to Torah study? If not, what is?
- (4) If you were on the heavenly court, would this be your main question to the soul? What else would you ask?

**Additional Sources and Resources:**

The original Talmudic source actually includes a third story together with the stories of the poor man (Hillel) and the wealthy man (R. Elazar b. Harsom). The Talmud tells that a “wicked” (*rasha*) man will also be asked why he did not engage in Torah study, though the story that follows is about a “handsome” (*na’eh*) man, based on the biblical character Joseph. Perhaps we should understand the target as a “sensuous” individual, that is, one who has difficulty resisting sensual pleasures. Here is the story:

To the wicked man they will say, “Why did you not busy yourself with Torah?” If he should say, “I was handsome and was preoccupied with my [evil] inclination,” they will say to him, “Were you more handsome than Joseph?”

It was said of Joseph the Righteous that every day the wife of Potiphar would try to seduce him. The clothes she wore during the day—she did not wear them at night. The clothes she wore at night—she did not wear them during the day. She said to him, “Submit to me!” He said to her, “No.” She said to him, “I will throw you in prison.” He said to her, “*The Lord sets prisoners free (Ps. 146:7)*.” She said to him, “I will break your back.” He said, “*The Lord makes those who are bent stand straight (Ps. 146:8)*.” She said to him, “I will blind your eyes.” He said to him, “*The Lord opens the eyes of the blind (Ps. 146:8)*.” She gave him 1000 talents of silver to submit to her “*to sleep with her and be with her*”(Gen. 39:10), but he would not consent.

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**Chapter 10: Heroism and Humor (Ta’anit 22a), pp. 181-201.**

## **Text of the Story:**

Rabbi Baroqa of Huzestan was standing in the market of Beit Laphat. Elijah the Prophet came and appeared to him. Rabbi Baroqa said to him, "Is there anyone in this market who will enter the world to come?" Elijah said to him, "No one."

Meanwhile he saw a certain man come by wearing black shoes and not wearing a blue thread [in the fringes] of his cloak. Elijah said, "This one will enter the world to come."

Rabbi Baroqa ran after him. He said, "What is your occupation?" The man said, "Go away today, and come back tomorrow."

On the morrow, Rabbi Baroqa said to him, "What is your occupation?" He said to him, "I am a jailer, and I confine men by themselves and women by themselves, and I place my bed between the men and the women so that they do not sin.

"When I see a Jewish girl whom the gentiles have set their eyes upon, I risk my life to save her.

"Once there was a betrothed maiden with us whom the gentiles set their eyes upon to assault. I took dregs of wine and scattered them on the bottom of her skirt, and I said to them, 'See, she is menstruating.'"

Rabbi Baroqa said to him, "Why do you not have a [blue] thread [in your fringes] and wear black shoes?" He said to him, "I go in and out among the gentiles such that they do not know that I am a Jew. When they decree a persecution, I inform the Sages, and they pray and annul the decree."

"What is the reason when I said to you, 'What are your deeds?' you said 'Go away today and come back tomorrow?'"

He said to him, "Just then they decreed a persecution. So I thought, 'First let me go and inform the Sages in order that they pray and annul the edict.'"

Meanwhile, two brothers passed by. Elijah said, "They too will enter the next world."

Rabbi Baroqa went to them and said, "What are your deeds?" They said, "We are jesters. We make jokes for those who are unhappy. Also, when we see two who have a quarrel between them, we exert ourselves and make peace."

*(Ta'anit 22a)*

## **Study Questions:**

### (A) Questions about the Text.

- (1) Why is the story set in a market? With what do we associate markets?
- (2) What does the blue thread signify? (See Numbers 15:38)
- (3) What colors are mentioned in the story? What is the role of each?

- (4) The story mentions both individuals and groups who are vulnerable. Who is vulnerable and why? How are they protected?
- (5) Identify boundaries and borders in the story. Who crosses or violates the boundaries, and who cannot? Why?
- (6) Is it surprising that the brother-jesters also will enter the next world? What is so important about what they do? What is the storyteller telling us by juxtaposing the jailer and the jesters?
- (7) Would we consider the jailer a hero? The jesters? What does it take to be heroic?
- (8) What is the role of Elijah the Prophet in the story? Why does he “keep company” with the Rabbi?

(B) Discussion Questions.

- (1) With what do we associate the “World to Come”? Who do we expect will be admitted or be denied? Does the story confirm or dispute those expectations?
- (2) The storyteller portrays the jailer as a courageous hero. What historical figures do his actions recall? Do we have such heroes today? Who are they?
- (3) How does humor function in our society today? Do we have a high or low opinion of comedians/jesters/funny men and women? Why?
- (4) The story underscores the importance of dress and clothing. Historically, which groups have dressed differently than the majority culture and why? How does dress remain a crucial aspect of identity today? Who changes their dress and in what contexts?

**Additional Sources and Resources:**

For additional reading see:

Leonard Greenspoon, *Olam ha-zeh v'olam ha-ba : this world and the world to come in Jewish belief and practice* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2017).

David Charles Kraemer, *The Meanings of Death in Rabbinic Judaism* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

Kristen H. Lindbeck, *Elijah and the Rabbis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

Simcha Paull Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife* (2d ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

Peninnah Schram, *Tales of Elijah the Prophet* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991)

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**Chapter 11: Showdown in Court (Sanhedrin 19a-b), pp. 205-21.**

**Text of the Story:**

Why is a king of Israel “not judged” [*Mishnah Sanhedrin 2:1*]? Because of what once happened. For—

the slave of King Yannai killed someone. Shimon ben Shetaḥ said to the Sages, “Set your eyes upon him and let us judge him.”

They sent a message to [Yannai], “Your slave killed someone.” Yannai sent [the slave] to them.

They sent to him, “It is written, *‘If that ox had been in the habit of goring, and its masters have been warned, and it kills a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned and its master, too, shall be put to death’* [*Exod. 21:29*]. The Torah stated, ‘Let the master of the ox come and stand by his ox.’” Yannai came and sat down.

Shimon ben Shetaḥ said to him, “King Yannai! Stand on your feet and let them give testimony regarding you. You do not stand before us but before He-Who-Spoke-and-the-World-Came-into-Being, as it says, *‘The two parties to the dispute shall stand before the Lord, before the priests or magistrates in authority at the time’* [*Deut. 19:17*].” Yannai said to him, “I will not act as you say but as your colleagues say.”

He turned to his right, but they looked down to the ground. He turned to his left, but they looked down to the ground.

Shimon ben Shetaḥ said, “Are you preoccupied with your thoughts? Let the Master of Thoughts come and punish you.” The angel Gabriel came and struck the Sages to the ground and they died.

At that time they said, “A king does not judge others and is not judged in court. He does not testify and is not testified against.” [*Mishnah Sanhedrin 2:1*]

(*Sanhedrin 19a-b*)

### **Study Questions:**

#### (A) Questions about the Text.

- (1) How would you describe Shimon ben Shetaḥ and King Yannai? What are some characteristics of each? Are they sympathetic characters?
- (2) How might King Yannai have responded when his slave was summoned to the court? When he himself was summoned? When asked to stand? Are his responses to his credit or discredit?
- (3) What is motivating Shimon ben Shetaḥ? Law and Justice? Power?

(4) Shimon ben Shetah quotes two biblical verses to justify his actions. How does he understand each verse and apply it to his policies? Is this the only way to understand the verses? What could King Yannai respond?

(5) Would we ordinarily assume that the slave acted independently or at the behest of King Yannai?

(6) Should Kings be treated like everyone else when summoned to court? Should they have any special privileges?

(7) The storyteller relates, “He turned to his right, but they looked down to the ground.” Who turned, Shimon b. Shetah or King Yannai, and why did they (=the other Sages) look to the ground?

(8) What is the storyteller trying to teach us by relating that the Angel Gabriel struck the Sages to the ground? Does this ending support either Shimon b. Shetah or King Yannai?

#### (B) Discussion Questions.

(1) What is the difficulty in summoning kings, sovereigns, dictators and other governmental officials to judgment? How do different political systems attempt to deal with this problem?

(2) Should judges have the power to put the sovereign on trial? Which branch of government should be supreme and why?

(3) How do we resolve conflicts between sovereigns (presidents, prime ministers) and judges and legislative bodies (parliaments, congresses) today?

(4) The storyteller claims the law was changed due to the disastrous ending of this conflict. How do we assess the revised law—as an unfortunate compromise or a healthy understanding of realpolitik?

(5) What does this tell us of the nature of rabbinic law? Why else causes law to change?

#### **Additional Sources and Resources:**

(1) The full Mishnah, which is quoted in part at the end of the story, reads (Mishnah Sanhedrin 2:1):

The king may not judge nor be judged himself; may not testify, nor may others testify against him; may not perform *chalitzah*, nor may others perform *chalitzah* for his wife; and may not marry through levirate marriage, nor may others marry his wife through levirate marriage. Rabbi Yehudah says, if he wishes to perform *chalitzah* or marry through Levirate marriage, he is remembered for good [i.e. it is meritorious]. [The Sages] said to him: We do not listen to [the king in this respect]. And none may marry his widow. Rabbi Yehudah says, a king may marry the widow of [another] king, for thus we find with respect to David, who married the widow of Saul, as it says (**II Samuel 12:8**), “And I gave you the house of your master, and the wives of your master in your bosom.”

[https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah\\_Sanhedrin.2.2?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Sanhedrin.2.2?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en)

(2) Some scholars see the story as having originated in an historical event narrated by Josephus, the first century Jewish historian. In Josephus's account Herod is put on trial by Hyrcanus. This account was probably told and retold in legendary and folkloristic ways over the centuries, and adapted by the Rabbis for their own purposes. An interesting exercise is to compare and contrast the two stories. Here is Josephus's account (Antiquities of the Jews. XV.4.170)

<http://penelope.uchicago.edu/josephus/ant-14.html>

4. ...The mothers also of those that had been slain by Herod raised his indignation. For these women continued every day in the temple, persuading the King, and the people, that Herod might undergo a trial before the Sanhedrin, for what he had done. Hyrcanus was so moved by these complaints, that he summoned Herod to come to his trial, for what was charged upon him. And accordingly he came. But his father had persuaded him to come, not like a private man; but with a guard for the security of his person; and that when he had settled the affairs of Galilee in the best manner he could for his own advantage, he should come to his trial; but still with a body of men sufficient for his security on his journey. Yet so that he should not come with so great a force, as might look like terrifying Hyrcanus; but still such an one as might not expose him naked and unguarded, [to his enemies.] However Sextus Cesar, president of Syria, wrote to Hyrcanus; and desired him to clear Herod, and dismiss him at his trial: and threatened him beforehand if he did not do it. Which epistle of his was the occasion of Hyrcanus's delivering Herod from suffering any harm from the Sanhedrin: for he loved him as his own son. But when Herod stood before the Sanhedrin, with his body of men about him, he affrighted them all: and no one of his former accusers durst after that bring any charge against him. But there was a deep silence; and no body knew what was to be done. When affairs stood thus, one whose name was Sameas, (21) a righteous man he was; and for that reason above all fear; who rose up, and said: "O you that are assessors with me, and O thou that art our King, I neither have ever my self known such a case; nor do I suppose that any one of you can name its parallel; that one who is called to take his trial by us, ever stood in such a manner before us. But every one, whosoever he be, that comes to be tried by this Sanhedrin, presents himself in a submissive manner; and like one that is in fear of himself; and that endeavours to move us to compassion: with his hair disheveled; and in a black and mourning garment. But this admirable man Herod, who is accused of murder, and called to answer so heavy an accusation, stands here clothed in purple; and with the hair of his head finely trimmed; and with his armed men about him: that if we shall condemn him by our law, he may slay us: and by overbearing justice may himself escape death. Yet do not I make this complaint against Herod himself. He is to be sure more concerned for himself, than for the laws. But my complaint is against your selves, and your King; who give him a licence so to do. However, take you notice, that God is great: and that this very man, whom you are going to absolve and dismiss, for the sake of Hyrcanus, will one day punish both you, and your King himself also." Nor did Sameas mistake in any part of this prediction. For when Herod had received the Kingdom, he slew all the members of this Sanhedrin;<sup>22</sup> and Hyrcanus himself also: excepting Sameas.

(See too the parallel account in Josephus, *Jewish War*, I. 6. 206-210.)

<http://penelope.uchicago.edu/josephus/war-1.html>

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**Chapter 12. Alexander the Great and the Faraway King (Jerusalem Talmud, *Bava Metzi'a* 2:5, 8c), pp. 222-35.**

**Text of the Story:**

Alexander Macedon traveled to the Faraway King. The king showed him much gold. He showed him much silver. Alexander said, "I do not need your gold or your silver. Rather, I have come to observe your ways: how you do business, how you judge."

While the king was occupied with Alexander, a certain man approached, disputing with his fellow. He had bought a field, and while he was digging it up he found a treasure of gold coins.

The one who bought the field said, "I bought a field; I did not buy a treasure."

The one who sold it said, "I sold you a field and everything in it."

While they were arguing with one another the king said to one of them,

"Do you have a male child?" He said, "Yes."

He said to the other, "Do you have a female child?" He said, "Yes."

He said, "Marry them one to the other, and the treasure will go to both of them."

Alexander began to laugh. The king said to him, "Why do you laugh? Did I not judge well?" The king then said, "If this case had come before you, how would you have judged?" Alexander said, "We would kill both the one and the other, and the treasure would fall to the king."

The [Faraway] King said to him, "Then you love gold so much?!" He made Alexander a meal. He brought before him meat made from gold and fowl made from gold. Alexander said to him, "Do I eat gold?" He said to him, "Blast your bones! If you don't eat gold, then why do you love it so much?"

The king said to him, "Does the sun shine for you?"

Alexander said to him, "Yes."

"Does the rain fall for you?" "Yes."

He said to him, "Perhaps there is small cattle among you?" He said to him, "Yes."

The king said, "Blast your bones! You live solely on account of the small cattle, as it says, *"You save man and beast, O Lord"* [Ps. 36:7, meaning, "you save man because of" or "on account of the beasts"].

(Talmud Yerushalmi, *Bava Metzi'a* 2:5, 8c.)

## **Study Questions:**

### (A) Questions about the Text.

(1) Why does Alexander say that he is not interested in gold and treasure at the beginning of the story? Is this true?

(2) How else could the “dispute” between the buyer and seller be settled? What is a more realistic scenario that would result from this case of the sale of a field with a buried treasure? How should that case be settled fairly?

(3) How does the King teach Alexander a lesson? Is it effective?

(4) What is the King’s explanation for why Alexander’s country endures? What other explanation might we give?

### (B) Discussion Questions.

(1) What is the relationship between the nature of the ruler or sovereign and the moral character of a society? What is our storyteller’s view of this matter?

(2) Should a judge’s decision differ based on the character and wishes of the litigants? Or do we expect the same verdict whether the litigants are virtuous or base?

(3) When hidden treasures are found, who should gain ownership? Would we say the same of dinosaur bones and national treasures such as those found in the tombs of the Pharaohs?

### **Additional Sources and Resources:**

Information on Alexander the Great in Jewish tradition can be found in the entry in the Jewish Encyclopedia:

<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/1120-alexander-the-great>

An article, “Alexander and the Jews,” by Jonathan Goldstein, which discusses some of these sources in more detail is here:

[https://www.jstor.org/stable/3622713?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/3622713?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents)

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### **Chapter 13: The Carpenter and His Apprentice (Gittin 58a), pp. 236-53.**

#### **Text of the Story:**

Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: to what does this verse refer: *“They defraud men of their households and people of their heritage”* [Mic. 2:2]?

Once there was a certain man who set his eyes upon the wife of his master—he was a carpenter’s apprentice.

At one point his master needed a loan.

The apprentice said to him: “Send your wife to me and I will give her the loan.”

The master sent his wife to him. She stayed with him three days.

The master went ahead and came to the apprentice. He said to him, “Where is my wife whom I sent to you?”

He said to him, "I dismissed her immediately, and I heard that some youths abused her on the way home."

The master said to him, "What should I do?"

The apprentice said to him, "If you wish to listen to my advice—divorce her."

He said to him, "Her marriage settlement is great."

The apprentice said to him, "I will loan you [the money], so that you can pay her marriage settlement."

This one [the master] rose up and divorced her. He [the apprentice] went and married her.

When the time came and the master had no money to pay back the loan, the apprentice said to him, "Come and work for me to pay your debt."

So they [the apprentice and the wife] were sitting and eating and drinking, and the master was standing and serving them drinks. His tears were falling from his eyes into their cups.

At that moment, the heavenly judgment of destruction was sealed.

*(Gittin 58a)*

### **Study Questions:**

#### (A) Questions about the Text.

- (1) Should the master have sent his wife to deliver the loan? Was he overly trusting? Or was there no reason to be suspicious?
- (2) How are we to understand that the wife stayed with the apprentice for three days? By choice? Against her will? Why does her husband wait this long before going after her?
- (3) Why does the husband not know what to do when the apprentice tells him that his wife has been abused on the way home? Does he assume she is complicit? Is he "blaming the victim"? How else might he have reacted?
- (4) What does the verse from Micah 2:2 contribute to the story? (Check the larger context of this verse).
- (5) What is the wife's role in this affair? Is she completely passive? Part of the plot?
- (6) Where do our sympathies lie and why? With the master? The wife? Neither?
- (7) How can these private events bring about the downfall of the people and destruction of the temple? Why should the actions of a few individuals, however reprehensible, impact the fate of the people?

#### (B) Discussion Questions.

(1) What factors would we generally identify to explain the Roman defeat of the Jews and destruction of the temple? How does the storyteller's perspective differ from our modern historical sensibility?

(2) How common in today's society are the type of events described in the story? What is responsible for the break-up of marriages today?

(3) How can a decline of social morality, or an increase in social decadence, undermine a society? Are there historical examples of this phenomenon?

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#### **Chapter 14: Standing on One Leg (Shabbat 31a), pp. 254-64.**

##### **Text of the Story:**

Once a gentile came before Shammai. He said to him, "I will convert to Judaism on the condition that you teach me the entire Torah while I stand on one leg [*regel*]."

Shammai drove him away with the builder's measuring stick that was in his hand.

He came before Hillel [with the same condition].

Hillel converted him. He said to him, "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the entire Torah. The rest is its commentary. Go and learn it."

*(Shabbat 31a)*

##### **Study Questions:**

###### (A) Questions about the Text.

- (1) What do we make of the gentile's motivation in approaching Hillel and Shammai? Is he serious and just naïve or being provocative?
- (2) Why is Shammai holding a stick in his hand? What does that tell us about him?
- (3) Why does Shammai drive the gentile away? How else might he have reacted?
- (4) Why does Hillel perform the conversion immediately? How else might he have reacted?
- (5) What does Hillel mean by "That is the entire Torah"?
- (6) Why did Hillel not direct the gentile to study first, and only then perform the conversion? Was he too "easy" on the gentile?
- (7) What might we infer about the storyteller's attitude toward conversion? Is this surprising?

###### (B) Discussion Questions.

- (1) What are motivations for conversion today? How easy is it to convert? Ought it to be easier?

(2) Are there fundamental principles of Judaism? Would you say that “That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow” is one such principle? What are others?

(3) Imagine that a gentile request that you teach him/her what is necessary to know for conversion: what would you respond?

(4) Should conversion to Judaism be encouraged or discouraged today? Should Rabbis “proselytize” and recruit converts? Why or why not?

### **Additional Sources and Resources:**

This story of “Standing on One Leg” is the second story of a series of three stories of proselytes who approach Hillel and Shammai. The three stories can also be analyzed as an integrated compilation. Here is the text of the other two stories:

**[Story 1]** Our sages taught: Once a gentile came before Shammai. He said to him, “How many Torahs do you have?” He said to him, “Two, the Written Torah and the Oral Torah.” He said to him, “I believe you about the Written but not about the Oral. I will convert on the condition that you teach me the Written Torah [alone].” He rebuked him and dismissed him with a reproach.

He [the gentile] came before Hillel. The first day he [Hillel] said to him, “aleph,” “beit” “gimmel,” “dalet.” The next day he reversed it. He [the gentile] said to him, “Yesterday, you did not tell it to me this way.” He said to him, “Did you not rely on me [for that]? As regards the Oral [Torah], you should rely on me too!”

**[Story 2]** [=Standing on One Leg]....

**[Story 3]** Another time a gentile was passing behind the academy and he heard the scribe's voice saying, “*These are the vestments they are to make: a breastpiece, an ephod, a robe, a fringed tunic, a headdress, and a sash (Exod 28:4).*” He said, “Who are these for?” They said to him, “For the High Priest.” That gentile said to himself, “I will go and convert so that they can make me the High Priest.” He came before Shammai. He said, “I will convert on the condition that you make me the High Priest.” He drove him away with the builder's cubit that was in his hand.

He came before Hillel. He converted him. He said to him, “They only appoint as royalty one who knows the protocol of royalty. Go and learn the protocol of royalty.”

He went and read [Scripture.] When he came to *Any outsider who encroaches [near the Tabernacle] will be put to death (Num 1:51)*, he said to him [Hillel], “To whom does this verse apply?” He said to him, “Even to David, King of Israel.”

That gentile made a *qal va-homer* inference about himself: Israel are called the sons of the Omnipresent, and he loved them so much that he called them *Israel, my first-born son (Exod 4:22)*. If it is written about them, *Any outsider who encroaches will be put to death (Num 1:51)*, then how much the more so [does this apply to] the lowly (*qal*) convert, who comes with [only] a staff and bag,

He came before Shammai. He said to him, “I am certainly not worthy to be the High Priest. Is it not written in the Torah, *Any outsider who encroaches will be put to death (Num 1:51)*.” He

came before Hillel. He said to him, “Hillel, may your gentleness bring you blessings, for you brought me under the wings of the Divine Presence.”

Later the three [gentiles] chanced to be in one place. They said, “The impatience of Shammai almost drove us from the world. The gentleness of Hillel brought us under the wings of the Divine Presence.”