

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Talmud and Midrash with a Twist

[12]

If I am Worthy, I Shall Eat! Insights into Leviticus Rabbah 25:5

Background to Our Story



Publius Aelius Traianus Hadrianus (January 24, 76 – July 10, 138), known as Hadrian in English, was emperor of Rome from 117 to 138 CE.

When Hadrian first became the Roman emperor in 118 C.E., he was sympathetic to the Jews. He allowed them to return to [Jerusalem](#) and granted permission for the rebuilding of their [Holy Temple](#). The Jews' expectations rose as they made organizational and financial preparations to rebuild the temple. Hadrian quickly went back on his word, however, and requested that the site of the Temple be moved from its original location. He also began deporting Jews to North Africa.

In 130, Hadrian visited the ruins of Jerusalem left after the First Roman-Jewish War of 66–73. He promised to rebuild the city, but planning it as a pagan metropolis to be called Aelia Capitolina. A new pagan temple on the ruins of the Second Temple was to be dedicated to Jupiter. In addition, Hadrian abolished circumcision (*brit milah*), which he, as an avid Hellenist, viewed as mutilation. A Roman coin inscribed *Aelia Capitolina* was issued in 132. Hadrian's policies triggered the massive Jewish uprising (132–135), led by Bar Kokhba and Akiba ben Joseph. Following the outbreak of the revolt, Hadrian called his general Sextus Julius Severus from Britain, and troops were brought from as far as the Danube. Roman losses were very heavy, and it is believed that an entire legion, the XXII Deiotariana was destroyed. Roman losses were so heavy that Hadrian's report to the Roman Senate omitted the customary salutation "I and the legions are well". Hadrian's army eventually defeated the revolt however. According to Cassius Dio, during the war 580,000 Jews were killed, 50 fortified towns and 985 villages razed. After the end of the war, Hadrian continued the religious persecution of Jews, according to the Babylonian Talmud. He attempted to root out Judaism, which he saw as the cause of continuous rebellions, prohibited

the Torah law, the Hebrew calendar and executed Judaic scholars. The sacred scroll was ceremoniously burned on the Temple Mount. At the former Temple sanctuary, he installed two statues, one of Jupiter, another of himself. In an attempt to erase any memory of Judea, he removed the name off the map and replaced it with Syria Palaestina, after the Philistines, the ancient enemies of the Jews. He reestablished Jerusalem as the Roman pagan polis of Aelia Capitolina, and Jews were forbidden from entering it.

Hadrian, (His bones be ground to dust!)

A common curse invoked upon mention of an infamously evil person (Matnos Kehuna to Vayikra Rabbah 18:1). Hadrian earned this curse through the cruelty he evinced in his response to Bar Kochba's revolt and his brutal enforcement of anti-religious decrees that included the murder of the Ten Martyrs (Artscroll Midrash Rabbah. Leviticus Rabbah 25:5. Note 62).

"Therefore all the nations instigated by envy and impiety rose up against us, and all the kings of the earth motivated by injustice and enmity applied themselves to persecute us. They wanted to thwart God, but He cannot be thwarted. Ever since the time of Revelation, every despot or slave that has attained to power, be he violent or ignoble, has made it his first aim and his final purpose to destroy our law, and to vitiate our religion, by means of the sword, by violence, or by brute force, such as Amalek, Sisera, Sennacherib, Nebuchadnezzar, Titus, Hadrian, may their bones be ground to dust, and others like them." (Maimonides' Epistle to Yemen)

Denarius



The Roman currency system included the denarius (plural: *denarii*) after 211 BCE, a small silver coin, and it was the most common coin produced for circulation.

The Fisherman and His Wife

The Fisherman and His Wife is a German fairy tale collected by the Brothers Grimm. Its theme is similar to that of *The Tale of the Fisherman and the Fish*, an 1835 poem by Aleksandr Pushkin



In Pushkin's poem, an old man and woman have been living poorly for many years. They have a small hut, and every day the man goes out to fish. One day, he throws in his net and pulls out seaweed two times in succession, but on the third time he pulls out a golden fish. The fish pleads for its life, promising any wish in return. However, the old man does not want anything, and lets the fish go. When he returns and tells his wife about the golden fish, she gets angry and tells her husband to go ask the fish for a new washboard (their washboard is broken), and the fish happily grants this small request. The next day, the wife asks for a new house, and the fish grants this also. Then, in succession, the wife asks for a palace, to become the ruler of her province, to become the tsarina, and finally to become the Ruler of Sea, to subjugate the golden fish completely to her boundless will. As the man goes to ask for each item, the sea becomes more and more stormy, until the last request, where the man can hardly hear himself think. When he asks that his wife be made the Ruler of the Sea, the fish cures her greed by putting her back in the old cottage and giving back the broken washboard. The moral of the story is: do not get too greedy, or you will end up with nothing.

The Three Wishes



The Text: Leviticus Rabbah 25:5

אֲדָרְיָנוּס שְׁחִיק טְמִיא הוּא עֵבֶר בְּאֵלִין שְׁבִילֵינָא דְטַבְרִינָא וְחֵמָא חַד גָּבַר סַב קָאִים וְחֻצִיב חֻצוֹבָן לְמַנְצַב נְצִיבִין, אָמַר לִיה סָבָא סָבָא אִי קִרְצָתָא לֹא תִשְׁכַּת, אָמַר לִיה קְרִיצַת וְחֻשִׁיכַת, וּמָה דְהֵנִי לְמַרִי שְׁמִיא עֵבִיד, אָמַר לִיה בְּחִיפָא סָבָא בַר כַּמָּה שְׁנִין אֶת יוֹמָא דִין, אָמַר לִיה בַר מָאָה שְׁנִין, אָמַר לִיה וְאֶת בַר מָאָה שְׁנִין וְקָאִים וְחֻצִיב חֻצוֹבִין לְמַנְצַב נְצִיבִין, סָבַר דְאֶת אֲכִיל מְנַהוֹן, אָמַר לִיה אִין זְכִית אֲכִלִית, וְאִם לֹא כִשֵׁם שְׁיָנְעוּ לִי אֲבַהֲתִי, כִּד אֲנִי יָגַע לְבַנִי. אָמַר לִיה בְּחִיפָא, אִם זְכִית אֲכֹל מְנַהוֹן תְּהִוָה מוֹדַע לִי. לְסוֹף יוֹמִין עֲבָדִין תְּאַנְיָא, אָמַר הָא עֲנַתָּה נוֹדַע לְמַלְכָא, מָה עֲבַד מְלָא קִרְטָלָא תְּאַנְיָין וְסַלְק וְקָם לִיה עַל תַּרְע פְּלִטִין, אָמְרִין לִיה מָה עֲסַקָא, אָמַר לִין עֲלוֹן קָדָם מַלְכָא, כִּיּוֹן דְעַל אָמַר לִיה מָה עֲסַקָא, אָמַר לִיה אָנָּא סָבָא דְעֵבְרַת עָלֵי וְאַנָּא חֻצִיב חֻצוֹבִין לְמַנְצַב נְצִיבִין, וְאַמְרַת לִי אִין זְכִית תִּיכּוֹל מְנַהוֹן תְּהִיא מוֹדַע לִי, הָא זְכִיתִי וְאַכִילִית מְנַהוֹן וְהִילִין תְּאַנְיָא מִן פְּרִיהוֹן. אָמַר אֲדָרְיָנוּס בְּהִיא שַׁעֲתָא קְלוּוֹנִין אָנָּא תַתְּנוּן סִילוֹן דְדַהֲבָא וִיתִיב לִיה, אָמַר קְלוּוֹנִין אָנָּא דְתַפְנוּן קְדִין קִרְטַל דִּידִיה וְתַמְלוּן תִּיהַ דִּינְרִין. אָמְרִין לִיה עֲבַדוּהִי כֹל קְדִין מוֹקְרָא תִיקְרִינָה לְקְדִין סָבָא דִּיהוּדָאִי, אָמַר לְהוֹן בְּרִינָה אוֹקְרִיא וְאַנָּא לֹא אָנָּא מוֹקְרָא לִיה. אֲנַתְתִּיה דְמַגִּירָא הוּא בְּרַת פַּחִין, אָמְרָה לְבַעֲלָהּ בַר קַבְלוּי חֲמִי דְהָדָא מַלְכָא רַחֲמָא תִינִין וּמְפַרְגָּא בְּדִינְרִין, מָה עֲבַד מְלָא מְרַעֲלִיה תִינִין וְאַזַּל וְקָם קָדָם פְּלִטִין, אָמְרוּן לִיה מָה עֲסַקָא, אָמַר לִין שְׁמַעִית דְמַלְכָא רַחֲמָא תִינִין וּמְפַרְגָּא בְּדִינְרִין, עֲלוֹן וְאַמְרִין לְמַלְכָא חַד סָבָא קָאִים עַל תַּרְע פְּלִטִין טַעִין מְלָא מְרַעֲלִיה תִינִין, וְאַמְרָנָא לִיה מָה עֲסַקָא אָמַר לִין שְׁמַעִית דְמַלְכָא רַחֲמָא תִינִין וּמְפַרְגָּא בְּדִינְרִין, אָמַר קְלוּוֹנִין אָנָּא דְתַקִּימוּן תִּיהַ קָדָם תַּרְע פְּלִטִין וְכֹל מֵאן דְעֵייל וְנִפְקִי יְהִי טַרִי עַל

אפיה. באפתי רמשא פנון יתיה ואזל לביתה, אמר לאנתתיה ככל קדין יקרא אנא שלים לה,
אמרה אזיל גלוג לאמך דהוון אינון תיניו ולא הוון אתרוגיו, דהוון בשילן ולא פגינן.

Hadrian - his bones be ground to dust! - once passed along the paths leading to Tiberias and saw an old man standing and digging trenches to plant shoots of fig-trees.

He [Hadrian] said he to him [to the old man]: Greybeard, greybeard! If you had got up early to do the work you would not have had to work late!

He [the old man] answered him [Hadrian]: I have worked early and am working late, and let the Lord of Heaven do as it pleases Him.

He [Hadrian] said he to him [to the old man]: By your life, old man! How old are you this day?' A hundred years old, he [the old man] answered.

He [Hadrian] said he to him [to the old man]: So you are a hundred years old, and yet are standing and digging trenches to plant shoots of fig-trees! Do you ever hope to eat of them?

He [the old man] replied: If I am worthy I shall eat, and if not, then as my forebears have worked for me so will I work for my children.

He [Hadrian] said he to him [to the old man]: On your life! If you are privileged to eat of them, let me know.

In the course of time the trees produced figs. He [the old man] said: Now it is time to let the king know. What did he [the old man] do? He filled a basket with figs and went and stood at the gate of the palace.

He [the old man] was asked: What is your business here?

He [the old man] answered: I want to come before the king.

When he came in the latter [the king] asked him: What is your business?

He [the old man] answered him: I am the old man whom you passed by as I was digging trenches to plant shoots of fig-trees, and you said to me: "If you are privileged to eat of them let me know." Lo, I have been so privileged and have eaten of them, and these figs are some of the fruit. Immediately Hadrian exclaimed: I command that a chair of gold be set down and that he sit upon it. He [Hadrian] further said: I command that you empty this basket of his and fill it with denarii.

His servants said to him: Will you show all this honor to that old Jew?

He [Hadrian] answered them: His Creator honors him, and shall not I honor him too?

Now the wife of the old man's neighbor was a woman of low character. She said to her husband: O son of darkness! See how this king loves figs and exchanges them for denarii!

What did he [the old man's neighbor] do? He filled a haversack with figs and went and stood before the palace. He was asked: What is your business? He [the old man's neighbor] replied: I heard that the king loves figs and exchanges them for denarii.

They went in and told the king: A certain old man is standing at the palace gate carrying a haversack full of figs, and when we asked him: "What is your business?" he [the old man's neighbor] replied: "I heard that the king loves figs and exchanges them for denarii."

The king said: I command that you make him stand before the palace-gate and everyone who comes in or goes out shall throw a fig in his face.

Towards evening they cleared him off. He [the old man's neighbor] came home and said to his wife: I shall pay you back in accordance with all the honor I got!

She retorted: Go and tell your mother the gladsome tidings that they were figs and not citrons, or that they were ripe and not hard!



Explaining the Story

What's going on in our story? (The sequence of events)

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Why is the phrase "his bones be ground to dust" added after Hadrian's name?

? Why was the old man digging trenches and planting shoots of fig trees?

? Why does Hadrian stop and talk to the old man?

? Why does Hadrian address the old man as "Greybeard"?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Bonus ? What is the meaning of Hadrian's words to the old man: "If you had got up early to do the work you would not have had to work late!"?

? What is the meaning of the old man's reply to Hadrian: "I have worked early and am working late, and let the Lord of Heaven do as it pleases Him"?

? What does the expression "By your life!" mean?

Bonus ? Why does Hadrian ask the old man: "Do you ever hope to eat of them?"

? Why does the old man bring the figs to Hadrian?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Why does the old man bring the figs to Hadrian in a basket as opposed to a haversack?

Bonus ? Why doesn't the old man tell the guards what his business is and only asks to come before the king?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

? Why does the old man tell Hadrian: "I am the old man whom you passed by as I was digging trenches to plant shoots of fig-trees"?

? Why does Hadrian honor the old man?

Bonus ? Why do the servants ask Hadrian "Will you show all this honor to that old Jew?"

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Bonus ? How do we know from the story that the wife of the old man's neighbor is a woman of low character?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

? The low character woman calls her husband "son of darkness"? What does she mean?

The Essenes thought themselves to be the holy elect of Israel, the Sons of Light, who would at the end of time engage in a catastrophic war with the enemies of Israel, the Sons of Darkness.

? Why did the old man's neighbor fill a haversack with figs?

Bonus ? The old man's neighbor tells the guards: "I heard that the king loves figs and exchanges them for denarii." How did the old man's neighbor hear this? What *didn't* the old man's neighbor (or his wife) hear?


? What did the old man's neighbor mean by his reply to his wife: "I shall pay you back in accordance with all the honor I got!"?

More Analysis Questions

? Please describe (only according to the story) the following characters:

- Hadrian

- The Old Man
- Hadrian's Servants
- The Old Man's Neighbor
- The Wife of the Old Man's Neighbor

Extra Bonus  Why was the "old man" worthy to eat?

"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from the Text

When you do right for the right reasons, with no ulterior motives, simply and honestly, inexorably doors will open for you, and you "will be worthy to eat."



Our story contrasts the good, honest, and simple man, who does the right thing for the right reason (the tzadik); with his neighbor's wife, a woman of low character, whose ulterior motives insults the intelligence of the king and puts her husband in danger.

Our story is a perfect fairy tale with a happy ending: The usually evil emperor is just and fair, goodness and honesty are rewarded, and greed and callousness are punished.

While real life doesn't always play out the same way as in our story; its author wants the reader to relate and emulate the old man's righteousness, simplicity, sincerity, and authenticity.