

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [15]

Mar Ukva and His Wife (Insights into Babylonian Talmud Ketuvot 67b)



Background to Our Story

Mar Ukva



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mar_Ukva

Mar Ukva (also known as Natan Tzutzita) was a Jewish Amora sage of Babylon, of the first generation of the Amora era. He served as an Exilarch during the days of Samuel of Nehardea, who was also his Rabbi, but at the same time, Samuel was subordinated to Mar Ukva in Ukva's capacity as "Av Beit Din" - Chief of the rabbinical Sanhedrin court, and its second-highest-ranking member. He resided at Kafri city, Babylonia, where his "Beth din" - rabbinical court - was also located. According to the Iggeret Rav Sherira Gaon, he was appointed Exilarch after R. Huna Kamma died. In the Talmud it is storied that he was a righteous man and used to give "Tzedakah" ("Charity") anonymously, in order not to shame the needy he handed the charity to. As a disciple of Samuel of Nehardea, he also had knowledge in medicine.

Zuzim and Dinarim



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zuz_\(Jewish_coin\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zuz_(Jewish_coin))



A Zuz (Hebrew-זוז; plural zuzzim Hebrew - זוזים) was an ancient [Jewish](#) silver [coin](#) struck during the [Bar Kochba](#) revolt, as well as a Jewish name for the various types of non-Jewish small silver coinage, used before and after the period of the revolt. The name was used from the Greek era of drachmas, through the Roman era of

Denarius, and then as the quarter denomination of [Bar Kochba coinage](#). The Jewish insurrectionists' zuz were overstruck on [Roman Imperial denarii](#) or [Roman provincial drachmas](#) of [Vespasian](#), [Titus](#), [Domitian](#), [Trajan](#) and [Hadrian](#). Four Zuz, denarii or drachmas make a [Shekel](#), a Sela or a [Tetradrachm](#).

It has been suggested that its name is probably a corruption of the Greek [Zeus](#) which was the deity portrayed on the reverse of every drachm and tetradrachm (four drachma) of the [Seleucid period](#). Another suggestion is that in Hebrew, the word "zuz" means "move", or "to move", so it was called "zuzzim" to show that it was constantly moving around, usually referring to the fact that Jews must give charity, or referring to the nature of money that it moves from one to another, alternating who is wealthy. It has also been suggested that *zuz* is related to a root (not occurring in the Hebrew Bible) meaning "shining" or "glittering".

According to Stephen Kaufman, however, *zūzu* is of [Akkadian](#) origin. American Heritage Dictionary also states: "from Akkadian *zūze*, *half, division, unit of weight*, from *zāzu*, *to divide*".

In the [Talmud](#), the Zuz and the dinar are used interchangeably, the [difference being](#) that the Zuz originally referred to the [Greek Drachma](#) (which was a quarter of the Greek Tetradrachm weighing approximately 17 grams) while the Dinar referred to the later Roman [Denarius](#) (which was a quarter of the [Tyrian shekels](#) and had the same weight as the [Jerusalem Shekels](#) and the Roman provincial [Tetradrachms](#) at approximately 14 grams).

The Zuz is mentioned in the [Passover Haggadah](#) in the [Passover song Chad gadya, chad gadya](#) (One little goat, one little goat); in which the lyric of *dizabin abba bitrei zuzei* (Which Father bought for *two zuzim* ([half shekel](#))) repeats at the end of every stanza. It may be significant that two zuzim equal the half-shekel tax required of every adult male Israelite in Exodus 30:13.

Daniel Chapter 3:1-30

¹ King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, whose height was sixty cubits and its breadth six cubits. He set it up on the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon. ² Then King Nebuchadnezzar sent to gather the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces to come to the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. ³ Then the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces gathered for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. And they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up. ⁴ And the herald proclaimed aloud, "You are commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, ⁵ that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. ⁶ And whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace." ⁷ Therefore, as soon as all the peoples heard the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, all the peoples, nations, and languages fell down and worshiped the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. ⁸ Therefore at that time certain Chaldeans came forward and maliciously accused the Jews. ⁹ They declared to King Nebuchadnezzar, "O king, live forever! ¹⁰ You, O king, have made a decree, that every man who hears the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, shall fall down and worship the golden image. ¹¹ And whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast into a burning fiery furnace. ¹² There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These men, O king, pay no attention to you; they do not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up."

¹³ Then Nebuchadnezzar in furious rage commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought. So they brought these men before the

king. ¹⁴ *Nebuchadnezzar answered and said to them, "Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up? ¹⁵ Now if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, well and good. [c] But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?"*

¹⁶ *Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. ¹⁷ If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. ¹⁸ But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up."*

¹⁹ Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with fury, and the expression of his face was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. He ordered the furnace heated seven times more than it was usually heated. ²⁰ And he ordered some of the mighty men of his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace. ²¹ Then these men were bound in their cloaks, their tunics, their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the burning fiery furnace. ²² Because the king's order was urgent and the furnace overheated, the flame of the fire killed those men who took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. ²³ And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell bound into the burning fiery furnace.

²⁴ Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste. He declared to his counselors, "Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?" They answered and said to the king, "True, O king." ²⁵ He answered and said, "But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods."

²⁶ Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the burning fiery furnace; he declared, "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out, and come here!" Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out from the fire. ²⁷ And the satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the king's counselors gathered together and saw that the fire had not had any power over the bodies of those men. The hair of their heads was not singed, their cloaks were not harmed, and no smell of fire had come upon them. ²⁸ Nebuchadnezzar answered and said, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside the king's command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God. ²⁹ Therefore I make a decree: Any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins, for there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way." ³⁰ Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the province of Babylon.

The Eight Degrees of Charity of Maimonides: Hilchot Mat'not Ani'im 10: 7-14

There are eight levels of *tzedaka*, each greater than the next.

1) The greatest level, above which there is no other, is to strengthen the name of another Jew by giving him a present or loan, or making a partnership with him, or finding him a job in order to strengthen his hand until he needs no longer [beg from] people. For it is said, "You shall strengthen the stranger and the dweller in your midst and live with him," {Leviticus XXV:35} that is to say, strengthen him until he needs no longer fall [upon the mercy of the community] or be in need.

2) Below this is the one who gives *tzedaka* to the poor, but does not know to whom he gives, nor does the recipient know his benefactor. For this is performing a *mitzva* for the sake of Heaven. This is like the Secret [Anonymous] Office in the Temple. There the righteous gave secretly, and the good poor drew sustenance anonymously. This is much like giving *tzedaka* through a *tzedaka* box. One should not put into the box unless he knows that the one responsible for the box is faithful and wise and a proper leader like Rabbi Hananya ben Teradyon.

3) Below this is one who knows to whom he gives, but the recipient does not know his benefactor. The greatest sages used to walk about in secret and put coins into the doors of the poor. It is worthy and truly good to do this if those who are responsible for collecting *tzedaka* are not trustworthy.

4) Below this is one who does not know to whom he gives, but the poor person does know his benefactor. The greatest sages used to pack coins into their scarves and roll them up over their backs, and the poor would come and pick [the coins out of the scarves] so that they would not be ashamed.

5) Below this is one who gives to the poor person before being asked.

6) Below this is one who gives to the poor person after being asked.

7) Below this is one who gives to the poor person gladly and with a smile.

8) Below this is one who gives to the poor person unwillingly.

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Ketuvot 67b

מֵר עוֹקְבָא הָוּה עֲנִיא בְּשִׁיבּוֹתִיהָ, דְּהָוה רְגִיל כָּל יוֹמָא דְשָׂדֵי לִיה אַרְבַּעָה זוּזֵי בְּצִינּוּרָא דְדָשָׂא יוֹם אֶחָד אָמַר: רַ אִיזִיל אִיחֲזִי מֵאֵן קַעְבִּיד בִּי הָהוּא טִיבוּתָא. הָהוּא יוֹמָא נִגְהָא לִיה לְמֵר עוֹקְבָא לְבֵי מִדְרָשָׁא, אֲתִיָּא דְבִנְתָהוּ בְּקַדְדִּיהָ: פִּינּוֹן דְתַזְוִיהָ דְקָא מִצְלִי לִיה לְדָשָׂא – נִפְקַ בְּתַרְיִיהוּ. רְהוּט מִקְמִיָּה, עֲוִילִי לְהָהוּא אֲתוּנָא דְהָוה גְּרוּפָה נוּרָא, הָוּה קָא מִיקְלִינּוֹן פְּרַעִיהָ דְמֵר עוֹקְבָא. אָמְרָה לִיה דְבִיתָהוּ: שְׁקוּל פְּרַעִיךְ אוֹתִיב אֶכְרַעֲאִי. תְּלַשׁ דְעַתִּיהָ. אָמְרָה לִיה: אָנָּא שְׁכִיחְנָא בְּגוּיָה דְבִיתָא, וּמִקְרָבָא אֶהְנִיטִי.

Mar Ukva had a pauper in his neighborhood, and every day he [Mar Ukva] was accustomed to place four dinars for him into the slot adjacent to the hinge of the door.

One day [the poor person] said; “I will go and see who is doing this service for me.” That day Mar Ukva was delayed in the study hall and his wife came with him to distribute the charity.

When the people in the poor man’s house saw that someone was turning the door, the pauper went out after them. Mar Ukva and his wife ran away from him, and they entered a certain furnace whose fire was already raked over and tempered but was still burning. Mar Ukva’s legs were being singed

and his wife said to him: "Raise your legs and set them on my legs, which are not burned."

[Mar Ukva] became distraught.

She [Mar Ukva's wife] said to him [to Mar Ukva]; "I am normally found inside the house, and my assistance is ready and immediate."

Comprehension Questions

? Why did Mar Ukva throw the coins into the poor's door-socket as opposed to giving him the money personally?

? Why was Mar Ukva late at the house of study?

? Why did Mar Ukva and his wife run away from the poor?

? Why did Mar Ukva and his wife enter into a furnace?

Analysis Questions

Bonus ? Why were Mar Ukva's feet singed but not his wife's feet?

? Why was Mar Ukva upset?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? In which way is Mar Ukva's wife's way of caring for the needy higher than her husband's?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Why didn't Mar Ukva's wife's pattern of behavior make it into Maimonides' list?

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

! When it comes to help others nothing is greater than personal involvement.

EPILOGUE

Mar Ukva is not only a great Torah scholar but a kind and generous person. He is familiar with the "proper" way of giving, especially the law that forbids

embarrassing the recipient of charity. One day, in the process of distributing charity, Mar Ukva is faced with a "critical" situation and discovers that his wife's simple daily actions are higher in God's esteem than his own high standards. Mar Ukva is distraught and the story leaves the reader to interpret why. Is it because he realizes his way of giving was not the highest possible one, or is it because he is jealous of his wife who is on a higher level than him when it comes to kindness and compassion? While we don't know the answer to this question from our story, it is clear that the author wants us to focus –and probably emulate– Mrs. Ukva's less regulated and sophisticated way of caring for the other.