

From the Rabbi's Desk
Rabbi Manes Kogan
Hillcrest Jewish Center
183-02 Union Turnpike, Flushing, NY 11366
rabbikogan@hillcrestjc.org

Stories with a Twist [16]

Rav Papa and Rav Shimi bar Ashi (Insights into Babylonian Talmud Taanit 9b)



Background of Our Story

Tahanun



<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tachanun>

Tachanun or *Tahanun* (Hebrew: תחנון "Supplication"), also called *nefillat apayim* ("falling on the face") is part of Judaism's morning (*Shacharit*) and afternoon (*Mincha*) services, after the recitation of the Amidah, the central part of the daily Jewish prayer services. It is omitted on Shabbat, Jewish holidays and several other occasions (*e.g.*, in the presence of a groom in the week after his marriage). Most traditions recite a longer prayer on Mondays and Thursdays.

The source of the supplicatory prayer (*Tahanun*) is in Daniel (9:3) and I Kings (8:54), where the verses indicate that prayer should always be followed by supplication. Based on this, Talmudic sages developed the habit of adding a personal appeal to God following the set prayers (some examples are listed in the Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 16b). In the fourteenth century, these spontaneous supplications were standardized and turned into the prayer of Tachanun.

The custom of bending over and resting the face on the left hand is suggested by the first line of the text which includes the words "*nip'lah na b'yad Adonai*" ("let us fall into the hands of God"). It is also reminiscent of the Daily Sacrifice brought in the Temple, which was laid on its left side to be slaughtered. A person's arm should be covered with a sleeve, tallit, or other covering. This posture, developed in the post-Talmudic period, is symbolic of Temple practice, in which people knelt down until their faces touched the ground to show humility and submission to God. The pose was also used by Moses and Joshua, who fell on their faces before God after the sin of the Golden Calf. Because of this practice, Tahanun is also known as *nefilat apayim* ("falling on the face"). Because Joshua fell on his face before the Ark, one only puts one's head down when praying in front of an Ark containing a Torah scroll. Otherwise, it is proper to sit with the head up.

Rav Papa



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

He was a student of Rava and Abaye. After the death of his teachers he founded a school at Naresh (or Nareš), a city near Sura, in which he officiated as "resh metivta," his friend and associate, Rav Huna ben Joshua, acting as "resh kallah" (356-375).

Papa's father seems to have been wealthy and to have enabled his son to devote himself to study. Papa inherited some property from his father; and he also amassed great wealth by brewing beer, an occupation in which he was an expert. He likewise engaged in extensive and successful business undertakings, and his teacher Rava once said of him: "Happy is the righteous man who is as prosperous on earth as only the wicked usually are!" However, Rava also accused Papa and his friend Huna of being exploitative in business: "You would take the coats from people's backs". Papa sold his beer at a higher price than ordinary because he gave the buyer credit, although this practice was regarded as a kind of usury. In addition, other scholars were known to criticize him for his reluctance to aid the poor. He was, however, known for his honesty in business: he once returned a field he had purchased upon learning that the seller regretted the sale.

He is known to have married two wives. One was the daughter of a kohen, and he attributed his wealth to this marriage. The second was the daughter of Abba Sura'ah (=of Sura). They do not seem to have lived happily together, for she prided herself on the nobility of her ancestry as contrasted with his own. He therefore said, referring to his own experience: "Be circumspect and not hasty in marrying, and take a wife from a class of society lower than your own". Several of his children married prominent figures in Jewish Babylonian society.

He was obese, and once noted that he could break a bench simply by sitting on it.

It is reported that once a non-Jew owed him money, and tried to avoid payment by inventing a blood libel that Papa had killed the non-Jew's son, placing a dead baby under a blanket and encouraging Papa to sit on the blanket. According to one version of the story, Papa figured out the plot and refused to sit on the blanket; according to other versions he did sit on the blanket, and then was either forced to flee the country, or to pay a steep fine.

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Ta'anit 9b

רב שימי בר אשי הוה שכיח קמיה דרב פפא. הוה מקשי ליה טובא. יומא חד, חזייה דנפל על אפיה. שמעיה דאמר: רחמנא ליצלן מפיסופא דשימי. קביל עליה שתיקותא, ותו לא אקשי ליה.

Rav Shimi bar Ashi was often found before Rav Pappa and would raise many objections against the opinions of Rav Pappa.

One day Rav Shimi bar Ashi saw Rav Pappa fall on his face after prayer. He heard him say: May the Merciful One save me from the embarrassment of Shimi.

As a result, Rav Shimi bar Ashi resolved to be silent and not to raise any further objections.



Explaining the Story - What's going on in our story? (Explain the sequence of events)

Comprehension Questions

? Why did Rav Papa pray: "May the Merciful One save me from the embarrassment of Shimi"?

Analysis Questions

? How did it happen that Rav Shimi didn't realize until this moment that Rav Papa was so upset?

? Why didn't Rav Papa confront Rav Shimi?

? How long do you think lasted Rav Papa's ordeal?

? What do you think about Rav Shimi's reaction to Rav Papa's payer?

? What do you think was Rav Papa's reaction to Rav Shimi's silence?

"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from These Texts

A few Possible Twists!

1. Be ready or move on! (for the Rav Papas),
2. "Learn how to 'read' people and situations!" or "When you could be right, and still being wrong!" (for the Rav Shimis).
3. Speak your mind and re-negotiate! (for the Rav Papas and the Rav Shimis).

And my favorite one!

4. You can choose to accept the other with his/her limitations as a sign of love!

epiloguE