

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [18]

What do you think—Shimon ben Shetach is a Barbarian? (Insights into Yerushalmi Bava Metzia 2:5)

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Background to Our Story

Simeon ben Shetach



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

Simeon ben Shetach, or Shimon ben Shetach or Shatach (Hebrew: שמעון בן שטח), *circa* 140-60 BCE, was a Pharisee scholar and Nasi of the Sanhedrin during the reigns of Alexander Jannæus (c. 103-76 BCE) and his successor, Queen Salome Alexandra (c. 76-67 BCE), who was Simeon's sister. He was therefore closely connected with the court, enjoying, at least initially, the favor of Alexander.

Although a rabbi by profession, the omission of such an epithet when referred to in rabbinic literature is said to attest to his greatness as a rabbinic Sage, ranking with Hillel.

The Shim'on ben Shatah Street in the center of Jerusalem carries his name.

During the reign of Alexander the Sanhedrin consisted almost entirely of Sadducees; nevertheless Simeon succeeded in ousting some of the Sadducean members and in replacing them with Pharisees. Having accomplished this, Simeon recalled from Alexandria, Egypt the Pharisees who had been compelled to seek refuge there during the reign of Alexander Jannæus, among these fugitives being Joshua ben Perachya, the former Nasi. Joshua was elected president anew, and Simeon assumed the office of vice-president. Upon the death of Joshua, Simeon became president and Judah ben Tabbai vice-president. The attitude of Alexander Jannæus toward the Pharisees, however, soon underwent a change; and they were again compelled to flee, even Simeon himself being obliged to go into hiding. About this time certain Parthian envoys came to Alexander's court and were invited to the king's table, where they noticed the absence of Simeon, by whose wisdom they had profited at previous visits. Upon the king's assurance that he would do the fugitive no harm, the queen caused her brother to return to the court. Upon his

reappearance Simeon took his place between the royal couple with a show of self-consciousness which surprised the king; whereupon Simeon remarked, "The wisdom which I serve grants me equal rank with kings."

During Simeon ben Shetach's tenure as head of the Sanhedrin, the court ceased to exact fines in monetary suits (Hebrew: *dinei mamonot*) as prescribed in the Law of Moses. It was also during his tenure that he enacted the rule of conduct that an [Israelite] king is not to judge, neither are men to judge him, because of an incident that occurred with one of King Janneus' servants who had committed murder.

After Simeon returned, he enjoyed the king's favor. Upon the king's death, Queen Alexandra succeeded to the rulership; and Simeon and his party, the Pharisees, obtained great influence. Together with his colleague, Judah ben Tabbai, Simeon began to supersede the Sadducean teachings and to re-establish the authority of the Pharisaic interpretation of the Torah. He is therefore called "the restorer of the Law," who "has given back to the crown of learning its former brightness". Simeon discarded the penal code which the Sadducees had introduced as a supplement to the biblical code; and almost all the teachings and principles introduced by him are aimed against the Sadducean interpretation of the Law. Of Simeon's enactments two were of especial importance. One consisted in the restriction of divorces, which were then of frequent occurrence. Simeon arranged that the husband might use the prescribed marriage gift ("ketubah") in his business, but that his entire fortune should be held liable for it. Inasmuch as a husband of small means could ill afford to withdraw a sum of money from his business, Simeon's ruling tended to check hasty divorces. The other important act referred to the instruction of the young.

Up to Simeon's time there were no schools in Judea, and the instruction of children was, according to biblical precepts, left to their fathers. Simeon ordered that yeshivot be established in the larger cities in which the young might receive instruction in the Holy Scriptures as well as in the traditional knowledge of the Law.

Simeon ben Shetach or Shimon ben Shetach (c. 120-40 BCE) was a Pharisee scholar and Nasi of the Sanhedrin during the reigns of Alexander Jannæus (c. 103-76 BCE) and his successor, Queen Alexandra Salome (c. 76-67 BCE), who was Simeon's sister.^[1] He was therefore closely connected with the court, enjoying, at least initially, the favor of Alexander.

The world was desolate until Shimon ben Shetach restored the Torah to its place of grandeur. (Kiddushin 66a)

ביבי בר גוזלון - Bar Gozlon (Play on words)

Returning Lost Objects



Returning lost objects" is one of the 613 mitzvot in the Torah. At the most basic level, this means that if we find a bundle of money lying in the street, we are required to seek out the owner and return it.

The Torah adds a deeper dimension: "You shall not hide yourself from it." This precludes the option of pretending not to see it and going along our merry way.

Deuteronomy 23:1-3

¹ If you see your fellow's ox or sheep gone astray, do not ignore it; you must take it back to your fellow. ² If your fellow does not live near you or you do not know who he is, you shall bring it home and it shall remain with you until your fellow claims it; then you shall give it back to him. ³ You shall do the same with his ass; you shall do the same with his garment; and so too shall you do with anything that your fellow loses and you find: you must not remain indifferent.

Returning the Item of a Non-Jew - by Rabbi Doniel Neustadt



Although the basic halachah does not require returning the item of a non-Jew [or even of a Jew who can be halachically classified as a rasha le'hachis, intentionally and deliberately wicked, it is proper to do so in order to sanctify Hashem's Name - kiddush Hashem. If failing to return the item may cause a desecration of Hashem's Name the finder must return it.

The Text: Yerushalmi Bava Metzia 2:5

שמעון בן שטח הוה עסיק בהדא כיתנא אמרין ליה תלמידוי ר' ארפי מינד ואנן זבנין לך חדא חמר ולית את לעי סוגין. ואזלון זבנון ליה חדא חמר מחד סירקאי ותלי ביה חדא מרגלי. אתון לגביה אמרין ליה מן כדון לית את צריך לעי תובן.

אמר לון למה

אמרין ליה זבנינן לך חד חמר מחד סירקאי ותלי ביה חדא מרגלי.

אמר לון וידע בה מרה

אמרין ליה לא

א"ל לון איזל חזר.

לא כן אמר רב הונא ביבי בר גוזלון בשם רב התיבון קומי רבי אפילו כמאן דמר גזילו של עכו"ם אסור כל עמא מודיי שאבידתו מותרת.

מה אתון סברין שמעון בן שטח ברברין הוה. בעי הוה שמעון בן שטח משמע בריך אלההון דיהודאי מאגר כל הדין עלמא.

Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach supported himself by making linen cloth.

His students said to him: Rabbi, desist from this work and we will purchase for you a donkey and you won't have to work so hard (you can make a living by transporting things for others).

They [Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach's students] went, bought a donkey from an Arab, and found that it had hanging from its neck a precious

jewel. They brought the donkey and the jewel to Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach and said to him: From now, you will no longer have to work at all!

He [Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach] said to them: Why?

They [Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach's students] said to him: We bought a donkey from an Arab, and it has a jewel hanging from its neck.

He [Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach] said to them: Did the owner know that this was the case?

They [Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach's students] said to him: No.

He [Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach] said to them: go and return it.

The Gemarah comments: But didn't Rav Huna say in the yeshiva of Bar Gozlon in the name of Rav Hativan, in the presence of Rabbi (Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi) that even according to the opinion that it is prohibited to steal from an idolater, everyone agrees that a finder can keep the idolater's lost object?

(It was replied to the one who asked): What do you think—Shimon ben Shetach is a barbarian? Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach considered hearing a non-Jew say, "Blessed is the God of the Jews" as more valuable than all of the wealth possible to acquire in this world.



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

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? If the students want to help Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach, why don't they help him with money?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Bonus ? How do we know that Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach doesn't enjoy his daily work?

? Why was a precious jewel hanging from the neck of the donkey?

? Why does Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach inquire from his students if the Arab knew a jewel was hanging from the donkey's neck?

Bonus ? If Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach values so much hearing a non-Jew say "Blessed is the God of the Jews," why does he instruct his students to return the jewel instead of returning it himself?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Why do the later students explain the halachah of returning a lost object to a non-Jew?

? Do you think Shimon ben Shetach was familiar with such halachah?

? Why do the students trace the halachah all the way back to Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi, the editor of the Mishnah?

? Explain the expression: "Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach considered hearing a non-Jew say, 'Blessed is the God of the Jews' as more valuable than all of the wealth possible to acquire in this world."

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

! "You can be right, and still be wrong!" or "When playing by the rules makes you a jerk!"

! Being a mensch: The simplest yet a difficult way to sanctifying God's name in this world!

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