

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [189]

What Are Your Deeds?

Insights into Babylonian Talmud Ta'anit 24a



Background to Our Story

Drought and Fasts

(From the Introduction to Tractate Ta'anit by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz)

In the Torah, there is almost no mention of specific fasts or of a commandment to fast. Yom Kippur is designated (Leviticus 16:29) as a day on which "you shall afflict your souls," a concept which among other things includes fasting. The purpose of fasting on Yom Kippur is to purify the soul, and as such it is different from the fasts described in tractate Ta'anit, though there are certain similarities between that fast and the other fasts, regarding their purpose and conception as well as their regulations.

The practice of fasting is based on the principle that nothing occurs in this world by accident. The causes that determine events are not only physical but spiritual. Good deeds are rewarded and evil is punished. Divine providence responds to men's actions, both those of individuals as well as those of the community or the nation as a whole.

Thus the calamities that occur to an individual or to the community all serve a purpose. They may be a warning that the community or the individual has sinned and that remorse and repentance are necessary, or they may be a punishment for sins that have been committed. Thus, whenever a person faces a calamity, he must immerse himself in prayer and repentance, must entreat divine forgiveness, and must offer supplications to elicit God's compassion so that He will avert or terminate the calamity.

The word ta'anit is associated with the idea of innui nefesh - afflicting the soul, which, as is explained in the Oral Law and the Books of the Prophets and Writings, includes abstention from eating and drinking, and, on the more severe public fasts, also prohibits wearing shoes, bathing, and engaging in sexual relations. But both the Prophets (see, for example, Isaiah, chapter 58, the prophetic portion read on the morning of Yom Kippur) and the Rabbinic sources emphasize that fasting and afflicting the soul are not ends in themselves.

They are the means by which a person can repent for his sins. Thus it is prayer, repentance, charity, remorse for sins committed in the past, and commitment to improved behavior in the future, which constitute the primary goals of fasting.

The most common calamity threatening the community, which should serve as an impetus for communal repentance, is the failure of rain. The Torah itself (Deuteronomy 11:17) sees periods of drought as a sign of God's anger, whether in the form of a warning or as a punishment. Drought is not merely a temporary or local affliction, but a calamity that can cause long-term and nationwide damage. More so than when he is faced with other types of calamity, man has almost no other way to help himself during periods of drought except by turning to God and praying for divine compassion.

Since the difficulties caused by the failure of rain grow more and more serious as the drought continues, the fasts decreed in times of drought become more and more severe with the passage of time. During periods of extended drought, the Rabbis decree three series of fasts, each series more severe than the preceding one.

The Rabbis enacted that the public fast—days that do not have a fixed date in the calendar are to be observed on Mondays and Thursdays, the days on which the Torah is read in public and on which the courts are in session. It stands to reason that there should be a certain degree of similarity between the customs associated with fasting and those of mourning, since fasts are decreed in response to unhappy events and are intended to avert the continuation or worsening of those events. The mourning customs prescribed on fast—days are a means of leading people to humble themselves and repent.

Judah the Prince



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judah_the_Prince

Judah the Prince (Hebrew: יהודה הנשיא, *Yehudah HaNasi*) or Judah I, also known as Rabbi or Rabbenu HaQadosh (Hebrew: רבנו הקדוש, "our Master, the holy one"), was a 2nd-century CE rabbi and chief redactor and editor of the Mishnah. He was a key leader of the Jewish community during the Roman occupation of Judea. According to the Talmud he was of the Davidic line, the royal line of King David, hence the title *nasi*, meaning *prince*. The title *nasi* was also used for presidents of the Sanhedrin.

Judah the Prince was born in 135 CE. According to the [Midrash](#), he came into the world on the same day that [Rabbi Akiva](#) died a [martyr's](#) death. The [Talmud](#) suggests that this was a result of Divine Providence: God had granted the Jewish people another leader of great stature to succeed Rabbi Akiva. His place of birth is unknown; nor is it recorded where his father, [Shimon ben Gamliel II](#), sought refuge with his family during the persecutions under [Hadrian](#). He is the only [tanna](#) known as Rabbeinu haQadosh, "our holy teacher" due to his deep piety.

Upon the restoration of order in the Land of Israel, [Usha](#) became the seat of the academy and Judah spent his youth there. His father presumably gave him the same education that he himself had received, including [Greek](#) language. This knowledge of Greek enabled him to become the Jews' intermediary with the Roman authorities. He favored Greek as the language of the country over [Syriac \(Aramaic\)](#). It is said that in Judah's house, only Hebrew was spoken, and even the maids spoke it.

"During Rabbi's career, not only did the scope of rabbinic jurisdiction increase, but the power of the central rabbinic office increased as well. In contrast with his predecessors, Rabbi assumed the responsibilities of a communal functionary by appointing and deposing local leaders and by checking the family purity of Jews in a distant locale. Similarly, he made unprecedented efforts to create a more popular halakhic system. In this vein, he permitted the use of produce immediately following the end of the sabbatical year, the

import of produce into the Holy Land, and the acquisition of land from a *sikarikon*. Thus, while Rabbi strengthened his ties with the wealthy, he also broadened his power base by becoming a more popular figurehead."

According to the Talmud (Avodah Zarah 10a-b), Judah haNasi was very wealthy and greatly revered in Rome. He had a close friendship with "Antoninus", possibly the [Emperor Antoninus Pius](#), though it is more likely his famous friendship was with Emperor [Marcus Aurelius](#) Antoninus who would consult Judah on various worldly and spiritual matters.

The Talmud records the tradition that Judah haNasi was buried in the [necropolis](#) of [Beit She'arim](#), in the [Lower Galilee](#).

Abba Arika



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abba_Arika

Abba Arikha (175–247) (Talmudic Aramaic: אבא אריכא; born: Abba bar Aybo, Hebrew: רב אבא בר איבו) was a Jewish Talmudist who was born and lived in Kafri, Sassanid Babylonia, known as an amora (commentator on the Oral Law) of the 3rd century who established at Sura the systematic study of the rabbinic traditions, which, using the Mishnah as text, led to the compilation of the Talmud. With him began the long period of ascendancy of the great academies of Babylonia (Oesterley & Box 1920), around the year 220. He is commonly known simply as Rav (or Rab, Hebrew: רב).

His surname, Arikha (English, "Long"—that is, "Tall"; it occurs only once—Hullin 137b), he owed to his height, which, according to a reliable record, exceeded that of his contemporaries. Others, reading Arekha, consider it an honorary title, "Lecturer" (Weiss, Dor, iii. 147; Jastrow, Dictionary under the word). In the traditional literature he is referred to almost exclusively as Rav, "the Master", (both his contemporaries and posterity recognizing in him a master), just as his teacher, [Judah I](#), was known simply as Rabbi. He is called Rabbi Abba only in the [tannaitic](#) literature (for instance, Tosefta, Beitzah 1:7), where a number of his sayings are preserved. He occupies a middle position between the Tannaim and the Amoraim, and is accorded the right, rarely conceded to one who is only an 'amora, of disputing the opinion of a tanna (Bava Batra 42a and elsewhere).

Rav was a descendant of a distinguished Babylonian family which claimed to trace its origin to [Shimei](#), brother of [King David](#) (Sanhedrin 5a; Ketubot 62b). His father, Aibo, was a brother of [Chiyya](#), who lived in [Palestine](#), and was a highly esteemed scholar in the collegiate circle of the patriarch Judah I. From his associations in the house of his uncle, and later as his uncle's disciple and as a member of the academy at [Sepphoris](#), Rav acquired such an extraordinary knowledge of traditional lore as to make him its foremost exponent in his native land. While Judah I was still living, Rav, having been duly ordained as teacher—though not without certain restrictions (Sanhedrin 5a)—returned to [Babylonia](#), where he at once began a career that was destined to mark an epoch in the development of Babylonian Judaism.

The [Aleinu](#) prayer first appeared in the manuscript of the [Rosh Hashana](#) liturgy by Rav. He included it in the Rosh Hashana [mussaf](#) service as a prologue to the Kingship portion of the [Amidah](#). For that reason some attribute to Rav the authorship, or at least the revising, of Aleinu.

In the annals of the Babylonian schools the year of his arrival is recorded as the starting-point in the chronology of the Talmudic age. It was the 530th year of the Seleucidan and the 219th year of the common era. As the scene of his activity, Rav first chose Nehardea, where the exilarch appointed him agoranomos, or market-master, and Rabbi Shela made him lecturer (amora) of his college (Jerusalem Talmud Bava Batra v. 15a; Yoma, 20b). Then

he removed to Sura, on the Euphrates, where he established a school of his own, which soon became the intellectual center of the Babylonian Jews. As a renowned teacher of the Law and with hosts of disciples, who came from all sections of the Jewish world, Rav lived and worked in Sura until his death. Samuel, another disciple of Judah I, at the same time brought to the academy at Nehardea a high degree of prosperity; in fact, it was at the school of Rav that Jewish learning in Babylonia found its permanent home and center. Rav's activity made Babylonia independent of Palestine, and gave it that predominant position which it was destined to occupy for several centuries.

Wine for Kiddush and Havdalah



<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kiddush>

Kiddush (Hebrew: קידוש), literally, "sanctification," is a blessing recited over wine or grape juice to sanctify the Shabbat and Jewish holidays.



<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Havdalah>



Havdalah (Hebrew: הַבְּדֻלָּה, meaning 'separation') is a Jewish religious ceremony that marks the symbolic end of Shabbat and Jewish holidays, and ushers in the new week. The ritual involves lighting a special havdalah candle with several wicks, blessing a cup of wine and smelling sweet spices.^[1] Shabbat ends on Saturday night after the appearance of three stars in the sky.^[2] Some communities delay the Havdalah in order to prolong Shabbat.

Ilfa

An Amora of the second generation in the Land of Israel. Child friend of Rabbi Yochanan.

The Prayer Leader (Sheliach Tzibur)



<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hazzan>



The person leading the congregation in public [prayers](#) is called the [shaliach tzipbur](#) ([Hebrew](#) for "[emissary](#) of the congregation"), a ḥazzān or cantor. [Jewish law](#) restricts the role to adult Jews. In theory, any lay person can be a sheliach tzipbur; most synagogue-attending Jews will serve in this role every now and again. In practice, those with the best voice and the most knowledge of the prayers serve much more often.

There are many rules relating to how a cantor should lead services, but the idea of a cantor as a paid professional does not exist in classical rabbinic sources. [Jewish prayer services](#) are collected in a prayerbook known as the [siddur](#).

Even in the oldest times the chief qualifications demanded of the hazzan, in addition to knowledge of Biblical and liturgical literature as well as the prayer motifs (known as "steiger"), were a pleasant voice and an artistic delivery; for the sake of these, many faults were willingly overlooked. The hazzan was required to possess a pleasing appearance, to be married, and to have a flowing beard. Sometimes, according to Isaac of [Vienna](#) (13th century), a young hazzan having only a slight growth of beard was tolerated. [Maimonides](#) decided that the hazzan who recited the prayers on an ordinary [Sabbath](#) and on week-days need not possess an appearance pleasing to everybody; he might even have a reputation not wholly spotless, provided he was living a life morally free from reproach at the time of his appointment.

But all these moderations of the rule disappeared on holidays; then an especially worthy hazzan was demanded, one whose life was absolutely irreproachable, who was generally popular, and who was endowed with an expressive delivery. Even a person who had once litigated in a non-Jewish court, instead of to a Jewish court, in a disputed question could not act as hazzan on those days, unless he had previously done penance. However many authorities were lenient in this regard and as long as a cantor was "merutzeh l'kehal" desired by the congregation, he was permitted to lead the prayers even on the holiest of days.

Today, a hazzan, particularly in more formal (usually not Orthodox) synagogues, is likely to have academic credentials, most often a degree in music or in sacred music, sometimes a degree in music education or in Jewish religious education or a related discipline. The doctor of music degree is sometimes awarded to honour a hazzan.

He Makes the Wind Blow and the Rain Fall

גבורות
 אַתָּה גָּבוֹר לְעוֹלָם, אֲדֹנָי
 מַחְיֵה מֵתִים אַתָּה, רַב לְהוֹשִׁיעַ

The phrase מְשִׁיב הַרְיָח is said from שמחת תורה until פסח. In Israel the phrase מוֹרִיד הַטֶּל is said from פסח until שבועות עצרת. See laws 129–131.

בְּחֹרֶף: מְשִׁיב הַרְיָח וּמוֹרִיד הַגֶּשֶׁם / בְּאָרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּקִיץ: מוֹרִיד הַטֶּל

מְכַלְכֵּל חַיִּים בְּחַסֵּד, מַחְיֵה מֵתִים בְּרַחֲמִים רַבִּים
 סוֹמֵךְ נוֹפְלִים, וְרוֹפֵא חוֹלִים, וּמַתִּיר אֲסוּרִים
 וּמְקַיֵּם אֲמוּנָתוֹ לִישְׁנֵי עָפָר.
 מִי כְמוֹךָ, בַּעַל גְּבוּרֹת
 וּמִי דוֹמֶה לָךְ
 מֶלֶךְ, יִמְרִית וּמַחְיֵה וּמַצְמִיחַ יְשׁוּעָה.

*בעשרת ימי תשובה: מִי כְמוֹךָ אֵב הַרְחֵמִים
 זֹכֵר יְצוּרֵינוּ לְחַיִּים בְּרַחֲמִים.*

וְנֶאֱמַן אַתָּה לְהַחְיֹת מֵתִים.
 בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה, מַחְיֵה הַמֵּתִים.

DIVINE MIGHT

אַתָּה גָּבוֹר You are eternally mighty, LORD.
 You give life to the dead and have great power to save.

The phrase "He makes the wind blow and the rain fall" is said from Simhat Torah until Pesah. In Israel the phrase "He causes the dew to fall" is said from Pesah until Shemini Atzeret. See laws 129–131.

*In fall & winter: He makes the wind blow and the rain fall.
 In Israel, in spring & summer: He causes the dew to fall.*

He sustains the living with loving-kindness,
 and with great compassion revives the dead.
 He supports the fallen, heals the sick,
 sets captives free,
 and keeps His faith with those who sleep in the dust.
 Who is like You, Master of might,
 and to whom can You be compared,
 O King who brings death and gives life,
 and makes salvation grow?

*Between Rosh HaShana & Yom Kippur: Who is like You, compassionate Father,
 who remembers His creatures in compassion, for life?*

Faithful are You to revive the dead.
 Blessed are You, LORD, who revives the dead.

רַב אִיקְלַע לְהַהוּא אֶתְרָא. גְּזַר תַּעֲנִיתָא,
וְלֹא אֶתָּא מִיטְרָא. נַחֲתִית קַמֵּיה שְׁלִיחָא
דְּצַבּוּרָא. אָמַר: מְשִׁיב הַרוּחַ, וּנְשִׁיב זִיקָא.
אָמַר: מוֹרִיד הַגֶּשֶׁם, וְאֶתָּא מִיטְרָא. אָמַר
לֵיה: מַאי עוֹבְדִיךָ? אָמַר לֵיה: מִיְקָרִי דְרִדְקִי
אֲנָא, וּמְקָרִינָא לְבָנֵי עַנְיֵי כְּבָנֵי עֵתִירִי. וְכֹל
דְּלֹא אֶפְשָׁר לֵיה, לָא שְׁקָלִינָא מִיְמֵיה מִיָּדִי.
וְאֵית לִי פִירָא דְכוּוֹרִי, וְכֹל מֵאן דְּפָשַׁע,
מְשַׁחְדִּינָא לֵיה מִיְנַיְהוּ, וּמְסַדְרִינָא לֵיה,
וּמְפִיִּסִינָא לֵיה, עַד דְּאֶתִּי וְקָרִי.

רַבִּי גְּזַר תַּעֲנִיתָא, וְלֹא אֶתָּא מִיטְרָא. נַחֲתִית
קַמֵּיה אִילְפָא, (וְאָמַרִי לָהּ רַבִּי אִילְפִי).
אָמַר: מְשִׁיב הַרוּחַ, וּנְשִׁיב זִיקָא. מוֹרִיד
הַגֶּשֶׁם, וְאֶתָּא מִיטְרָא. אָמַר לֵיה: מַאי
עוֹבְדִיךָ? אָמַר לֵיה: דֵּיִירָנָא בְּקוּסְטָא
דְּחִיקָא דְלִית בֵּיה חֲמָרָא לְקִידוּשָׁא
וְאֶבְדְּלָתָא. טְרַחְנָא וְאֶתִּינָא חֲמָרָא
לְקִידוּשָׁא וְאֶבְדְּלָתָא, וּמְפִיקָנָא לְהוּ יְדֵי
חוֹבְתֵיהוּ.

Rabbi [Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi] once decreed a communal fast but the rain did not come.

Ilfa went down before him to lead the communal prayer (and some say that it was Rabbi Ilfa who assumed the role of prayer leader).

As soon as he recited the words: "Who causes the wind to blow," the wind began to blow. And then, when he continued: "Who causes the rain to fall," the rain came.

He [Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi] said to him [to Ilfa]: What are your good deeds that you perform?"

He [Ilfa] said to him: "I live in a remote and impoverished place where there is no wine readily available, over which to recite Kiddush and Havdalah. I make an effort and bring wine for Kiddush and Havdalah, bringing the members of the community at large to fulfill their obligation.

Rav happened to come to a certain place that was experiencing a prolonged drought. He decreed a communal fast, but the rain did not come.

After Rav's prayers proved to be ineffective the prayer leader (a different prayer leader) went down before him to lead the communal prayer. As soon as he recited the words: "Who causes the wind to blow," the wind began to blow. And then, when he continued: "Who causes the rain to fall," the rain came.

He [Rav] said to him [to the prayer leader]: What are your good deeds that you perform?"

He [the prayer leader] said to him [to Rav]: I am a teacher of young children, and I teach the children of the poor just like the children of the rich. Whoever is unable to pay, I do not take anything from him. I also have a fishpond, and whoever is lazy, I bribe him with them [with the fish], and I prepare [the fish] for him, and I appease him until he comes and studies.



Explaining the Structure of the Story

What is the sequence of events in the story?

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Why did Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi decree a fast?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Why didn't rain come?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Why did Ilfa go down to lead the prayers?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Bonus ? Why did Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi ask Ilfa what his deeds were when the latter was successful in bringing rain? What do you think went through Rabbi Yehudah's mind?

? What were Ilfa's deeds?

Bonus ? Why didn't Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi know about Ilfa's deeds before this episode?

? Why did Rav decree a fast when he arrived at a certain place?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Why didn't rain come?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Who was the prayer leader who went down to lead the communal prayer before Rav?

Bonus ? Why did Rav ask the prayer leader what his deeds were when the latter was successful in bringing rain? What do you think went through Rav's mind?

? What were the prayer leader's deeds?

Bonus ? What do Ilfa and the prayer leader have in common?

Extra Bonus ? "*Ilfa went down before him to lead the communal prayer (and some say that it was Rabbi Ilfa who assumed the role of prayer leader).*" We see that there is a version of our story that calls Ilfa, "Rabbi Ilfa." Which version do you think is the original one? Why?

"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from the Text
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! "What are your deeds?" – The question you will be asked in Heaven!