

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [19]

Go and I Will Show You Your Daughter! (Insights into Babylonian Talmud Berachot 18b) Revised, November 2, 2020

Background to Our Story

Dinar (Denarius)

The Roman currency system included the denarius (plural: *denarii*) after 211 BC, a small silver coin, and it was the most common coin produced for circulation. It is problematic to give even rough comparative values for money from before the 20th century, due to vastly different types of products and of the impossibility of making an accurate price index based on vastly different spending proportions. Its purchasing power in terms of bread has been estimated at US\$20, from 2004, in the first century. Classical historians regularly say that in the late Roman Republic and early Roman Empire the daily wage for an unskilled laborer and common soldier was 1 denarius without tax, or about US\$20 in bread.

Scolding Wife



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.

Sleeping in the Cemetery

A necromancer - that is someone who starves himself, then goes to cemetery and spends the night there in order that the "spirit of uncleanness" might visit them and enable them to find out the future or other hidden matters (Sanhedrin 65b), since the dead were supposed to dwell in an unclean place. According to Jewish tradition, necromancy will be punished by God and not by man.

Conversing Spirits – Artscroll Tractate Berachos. 18b₂

18. [Maharsha explains that the נַפֵּשׁ, the lowest part of the soul, remains with the body after death; the נְשָׁמָה, the most elevated part of the soul, separates from the body after death and ascends to higher realms. The Gemara here speaks of רוּחַ, *spirit*; רוּחַ is that part of the soul that is intermediate between נַפֵּשׁ and נְשָׁמָה and which sometimes remains with the dead body and sometimes roams free and ascends to higher realms where the נְשָׁמָה is found.]

Hearing behind the Curtain (Pargod)

Pargod in the Talmud designates a celestial curtain supposed to divide the inner or higher court of the heavens from the outer and more accessible celestial precincts. From behind this curtain or screen were heard voices that imparted information to the supplicant (Mechilta. to Exodus 19:9)

Rosh Hashanah as a Day of Judgment

Rabbinic literature and the liturgy itself describe Rosh Hashanah as "the day of judgment" (*Yom ha-Din*) and "the day of remembrance" (*Yom ha-Zikkaron*). Some midrashic descriptions depict God as sitting upon a throne, while books containing the deeds of all humanity are opened for review, and each person passing in front of Him for evaluation of his or her deeds.

It is written in the Talmud, in the tractate on Rosh Hashanah that three books of account are opened on Rosh Hashanah, wherein the fate of the wicked, the righteous, and those of an intermediate class are recorded. The names of the

righteous are immediately inscribed in the book of life, and they are sealed "to live." The middle class are allowed a respite of ten days till Yom Kippur, to repent and become righteous; the wicked are "blotted out of the book of the living"

Shrouds

Jewish tradition recognizes the democracy of death. It therefore demands that all Jews be buried in the same type of garment -- a simple white shroud. Wealthy or poor, all are equal before God, and that which determines their reward is not what they wear, but what they are. Almost 2,000 years ago, Rabbi Gamaliel instituted this practice so that the poor would not be shamed and the wealthy would not vie with each other in displaying the costliness of their burial clothes.

The clothes to be worn should be appropriate for one who is shortly to stand in judgment before God Almighty, Master of the universe and Creator of man. Therefore, they should be simple, handmade, perfectly clean, and white. These shrouds symbolize purity, simplicity, and dignity.

A Mat of Reeds



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Berachot, Volume 1. Koren publishers Jerusalem Page 124

Mats are made from a variety of materials, the choicest being manufactured from the soft, inner portion of the reed, and the coarser, cheaper mats being manufactured from entire reeds tied together. Such mats were generally used as partitions or to cover roofs. There were also several different types of shrouds, and earlier generations were quite strict about burying the deceased in expensive fabrics, at times even beyond the means of the bereaved. Later, at the behest of Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, they would also bury them in less expensive fabrics. Only the poorest of families, however, would be reduced to burying their deceased in cheap mats made from reeds, which is why the girl's mother was ashamed when this information was made public.

First and Later Rainfalls - – Artscroll Tractate Berachos. 18b₂

23. Rainfall in the Land of Israel is generally limited to the winter season. The first of the winter rains is expected on the seventeenth of Cheshvan, the second on the twenty-third of the same month and the third on the first of Kislev (*Rashi*).

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Berachot 18b

מעשה בקסיד אחד שנתן דינר לעני בערב ראש השנה בשני בצורת והקניטתו אשתו והלך וילך בבית הקברות. ושמע שתי רוחות שמספרות זו לזו, אמרה תדא לתברתה: תברתי, בואי ונשוט בעולם ונשמע מאחורי הפרגוד מה פורענות בא לעולם. אמרה לה תברתה: איני יכולה שאני קבורה במחצלת של קנים, אלא לכי את ומה שאת שומעת אמרי לי. הלכה היא ושטה ובאה. ואמרה לה תברתה: תברתי, מה שמעת מאחורי הפרגוד? אמרה לה: שמעתי, שכל הזרע ברביעה ראשונה ברד מלקה אותו.

הלך הוא וזרע ברביעה שניה. של כל העולם פולו – לקה, שלו – לא לקה.

לשנה האחרת הלך וילך בבית הקברות, ושמע אותן שתי רוחות שמספרות זו עם זו. אמרה תדא לתברתה: בואי ונשוט בעולם ונשמע מאחורי הפרגוד מה פורענות בא לעולם. אמרה לה: תברתי,

לא כִּף אִמְרָתִי לָךְ: אֵינִי יְכוּלָה שְׂאֵנִי קְבוּרָה בְּמַחְצָלַת שֶׁל קְנִיִּים? אֵלֶּא לְכִי אִתָּךְ וּמָה שְׂאֵתָ שׁוֹמֵעַת בּוֹאֵי וְאִמְרֵי לִי. הִלְכָה וְשָׂטָה וּבָאָה.

וְאִמְרָה לָהּ תְּבַרְתֶּהּ: תְּבַרְתִּי, מָה שְׂמַעְתָּ מֵאַחֲרֵי הַפָּרְגוּד? אִמְרָה לָהּ: שְׂמַעְתִּי, שֶׁכֵּל הַזּוֹרֵעַ בְּרַבִּיעָה שְׂנִיָּה שֶׁדָּפוֹן מִלְּקָה אוֹתוֹ. הִלֵּךְ וְנָרַע בְּרַבִּיעָה רִאשׁוֹנָה. שֶׁל כָּל הָעוֹלָם כּוּלוֹ – נִשְׁדָּף, וְשָׁלוֹ לֹא נִשְׁדָּף.

אִמְרָה לוֹ אִשְׁתּוֹ: מִפְּנֵי מָה אֲשַׁתְּקַד שֶׁל כָּל הָעוֹלָם כּוּלוֹ לָקָה וְשָׁלָף לֹא לָקָה, וְעַכְשָׁיו שֶׁל כָּל הָעוֹלָם כּוּלוֹ נִשְׁדָּף וְשָׁלָף לֹא נִשְׁדָּף? סָח לָהּ כָּל הַדְּבָרִים הֵלְלוּ.

אִמְרוּ: לֹא הָיוּ יָמִים מוֹעֲטִים עַד שֶׁנִּפְלָה קְטֹטָה בֵּין אִשְׁתּוֹ שֶׁל אוֹתוֹ חֲסִיד וּבֵין אִמָּה שֶׁל אוֹתָהּ רִיבָה. אִמְרָה לָהּ: לְכִי וְאַרְאֶךָ בַּתָּךְ שֶׁהִיא קְבוּרָה בְּמַחְצָלַת שֶׁל קְנִיִּים.

לְשָׁנָה הָאַחֲרֵת הִלֵּךְ וְלָן בְּבֵית הַקְּבָרוֹת וְשָׁמַע אוֹתָן רוֹחוֹת שֶׁמְסַפְרוֹת זֶה עִם זֶה. אִמְרָה לָהּ: תְּבַרְתִּי, בּוֹאֵי וְנִשְׁוֹט בְּעוֹלָם וְנִשְׁמַע מֵאַחֲרֵי הַפָּרְגוּד מָה פּוֹרְעָנוֹת בָּא לְעוֹלָם.

אִמְרָה לָהּ: תְּבַרְתִּי, הַנִּיחִינִי, דְּבָרִים שֶׁבִּינֵי לְבִינֵךְ כְּבָר נִשְׁמָעוּ בֵּין הַחַיִּים.

There was an incident involving a pious man who gave a poor man a dinar on the eve of Rosh HaShana during drought years, and his wife scolded him. And he went and slept in the cemetery. That night he heard two spirits conversing with each other. One said to the other: My friend, let us roam the world and hear from behind the heavenly curtain [*pargod*], which separates the Divine Presence from the world, what calamity will befall the world. The other spirit said to her: I cannot go with you, as I am buried in a mat of reeds, but you go, and tell me what you hear. She went, and roamed, and came back. The other spirit said: My friend, what did you hear from behind the heavenly curtain? She replied: I heard that anyone who sows during the first rainy season of this year, hail will fall and strike his crops.

Hearing this, the pious man went and sowed his seeds during the second rainy season. Ultimately, the crops of the entire world were stricken by hail and his crops were not stricken.

The following year, on the eve of Rosh HaShana, the same pious man went and slept in the cemetery, and again he heard the two spirits conversing with each other. One said to the other: Let us roam the world and hear

from behind the heavenly curtain what calamity will befall the world. She said to her: My friend, have I not already told you that I cannot, as I am buried in a mat of reeds? Rather, you go, and tell me what you hear. She went, and roamed, and returned. The other spirit said to her: My friend, what did you hear from behind the curtain? She said to her: I heard that those who sow during the second rainy season blight will strike his crops.

That pious man went and sowed during the first rainy season. The crops of the entire world were blighted and his crops were not blighted.

The pious man's wife said to him: Why is it that last year, the crops of the entire world were stricken and yours were not stricken, and now this year, the crops of the entire world were blighted and yours were not blighted?

He [the pious man] related to her the entire story.

They said: It was not even a few days later that a quarrel fell between the pious man's wife and the mother of the young woman who was buried there.

The pious man's wife said to her scornfully: Go and I will show you your daughter, who is buried in a mat of reeds.

The following year, he again went and slept in the cemetery, and heard the same spirits conversing with each other. One said to the other: My friend, let us roam the world and hear from behind the heavenly curtain what calamity will befall the world. She said to her: My friend, leave me alone, as words that we have exchanged between us have already been heard among the living.



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

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Why did the pious man give a poor man a dinar on the eve of Rosh Hashanah during drought years?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

? Why did his wife scold him?

? Why did the pious man spend the night in the cemetery on Rosh Hashanah's eve the first year?

? Why were the spirits conversing (in the context of our story)?

? Why was one of the spirits buried in a mat of reeds?

? Why is it important to know that this story happened during Rosh Hashanah's Eve?

? Why did the pious man spend the night in the cemetery on Rosh Hashanah's eve the following year?

Bonus ? Why did a quarrel break out between the wife of the pious man and the mother of the dead child?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Bonus ? Why do you think the wife of the pious man said, "Go and I will show you your daughter, who is buried in a mat of reeds" to the mother of the dead child?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Bonus ? Why did the quarrel stop after the "remarks" of the wife of the pious man?

Bonus ? The following year (after the quarrel) the spirit of the poor child doesn't want to wander about the world and to hear from behind the curtain anymore. Why?

More Analysis Questions

? Why was the pious man privileged to gain access to such useful information about the world future climatic conditions at the cemetery?

? Why wasn't the pious man privileged to gain access to such useful information about the world future climatic conditions after his wife's quarrel with the mother of the dead child?

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

! Sometimes being smart and assertive becomes an ethical imperative.



In our story, not too different from Pushkin's poem *The Tale of the Fisherman and the Fish*, we encounter a pious but fearful man and his not-so-pious scolding wife. Like in Pushkin's poem, here too the man and his wife end up losing their source of information and hence their source to a more prosperous future.

While in *The Tale of the Fisherman and the Fish*, the wife's greed and the husband's fearfulness are the cause of their misery, in our story it is the heartlessness of the wife, backed by the husband's lack of assertiveness, which ultimately causes pain not only to others but also to themselves.

Our story teaches us that while we are not responsible for the actions of others around us, if we aid those who behave poorly or fail to protest their actions, we become their accomplices and ultimately will be affected by their fate.