

ZFrom the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [193]

What Does [God] Pray?

Insights into Babylonian Talmud Berachot 7a

Background to Our Story

Isaiah 56:7

I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in My house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on My altar; for My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

God's Attributes



Beyond the Letter of the Law



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

The letter of the law versus the spirit of the law is an idiomatic antithesis. When one obeys the letter of the law but not the spirit, one is obeying the literal interpretation of the words (the "letter") of the law, but not necessarily the *intent* of those who wrote the law. Conversely, when one obeys the spirit of the law but not the letter, one is doing what the authors of the law intended, though not necessarily adhering to the literal wording.

"Law" originally referred to legislative statute, but in the idiom may refer to any kind of rule. Intentionally following the letter of the law but not the spirit may be accomplished through exploiting technicalities, loopholes, and ambiguous language.

Ishmael ben Elisha ha-Kohen



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ishmael_ben_Elisha_ha-Kohen

Ishmael ben Elisha ha-Kohen (Hebrew: רבי ישמעאל בן אלישע כהן גדול, "*Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha Kohen Gadol*", lit. "Rabbi Ishmael ben (son of) Elisha [the] Kohen Gadol (High priest)"; sometimes in short Ishmael ha-Kohen, lit. "*Ishmael the Priest*") was one of the prominent leaders of the first generation of the Tannaim. His father served as Kohen Gadol in the Second Temple of Jerusalem as well. Ishmael ha-Kohen was also one of the Ten Martyrs, and was executed along with Shimon ben Gamliel.

The tomb of Ishmael ben Elisha ha-Kohen is located in the Druze village of Sajur in the Upper Galilee

Holy of Holies



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

The Holy of Holies (Tiberian Hebrew: קֹדֶשׁ הַקֳּדָשִׁים *Qódeš HaqQōdāšîm*) is a term in the Hebrew Bible which refers to the inner sanctuary of the Tabernacle where God dwelt and later the Temple in Jerusalem where the Ark of the Covenant was kept during the First Temple, which could be entered only by the High Priest on Yom Kippur after sanctifying himself. The Ark of the Covenant is said to have contained the Ten Commandments, which were given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai. It is currently thought to be located under the Dome of the Rock.



Akatriel-Yah



<http://www.pantheon.org/articles/a/akatriel-yah.html>

A super-angelic figure mentioned in Talmud Ber. 7. In this passage he is seen sitting on the Throne of God and the voice of God speaks through him. This enigmatic passage has been subject to much interpretation; some scholars regard Akatriel to be yet another name for Metatron, while others theorize that perhaps Akatriel is the personification of God's Glory. Extra-Talmudic texts only deepen the confusion. One angel-adjuring text includes Akatriel in a list of seven angels. On the other hand, a Cairo Geniza fragment clearly regards Akatriel-Yah to be a name of God. (By Rabbi Geoffrey W. Dennis)

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Berachot 7a

תַּנְיָא, אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹסֵי: מִנֵּן
פַּעַם אַחַת נִכְנַסְתִּי לְהַקְטִיר קְטוֹרֶת
לִפְנֵי וְלִפְנֵים, וְרָאִיתִי אֶבְתְּרֵי אֵל יְהוָה
ה' צְבָאוֹת שֶׁהוּא יוֹשֵׁב עַל פְּסַא
רַם וְנִשְׂא, וְאָמַר לִי: "יִשְׁמַעְאֵל בְּנִי,
בְּרַכְנִי!" - אָמַרְתִּי לוֹ: "יְהִי רְצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ
שִׂיכְבְּשׁוּ רַחֲמֶיךָ אֶת בַּעֲסָךְ, וַיְגִלּוּ
רַחֲמֶיךָ עַל מְדוּתֶיךָ, וְתִתְנַהֵג עִם בְּנֶיךָ
בְּמִדַּת הַרְחָמִים, וְתִפְגַּס לָהֶם לִפְנֵים
מִשׁוֹרֵת הַדִּין", וְנִעֲנַע לִי בְּרֵאשׁוֹ.
וְקָמְשָׁמַע לָן שְׁלֵא תְהֵא בְּרַבַּת הַדִּיּוֹט
קָלָה בְּעֵינֶיךָ.

אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן מִשּׁוּם רַבִּי יוֹסֵי: מִנֵּן
שֶׁהַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מִתְפַּלֵּל? -
שָׁנְאָאֵמַר: "וְהִבִּיאוּתִים אֵל הַר קְדוֹשִׁי
וְשִׁמְחָתִים בְּבֵית תְּפִלָּתִי", "תְּפִלְתְּם"
לֹא נֵאמַר אֶלָּא "תְּפִלְתִּי", מִכָּאן
שֶׁהַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מִתְפַּלֵּל.

מאי מצלי?

אָמַר רַב זוּטְרָא בַר טוֹבִיָּה אָמַר רַב:
"יְהִי רְצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶי שִׂיכְבְּשׁוּ רַחֲמֵי אֶת
בַּעֲסִי, וַיְגִלּוּ רַחֲמֵי עַל מְדוּתִי, וְאֶתְנַהֵג
עִם בְּנֵי בְּמִדַּת רַחֲמִים, וְאֶפְגַּס לָהֶם
לִפְנֵים מִשׁוֹרֵת הַדִּין".

Rabbi Yohanan said in the name of Rabbi Yosei: From where is it derived that the Holy One, Blessed be He, prays? As it is stated (Isaiah 56:7): "*I will bring them to My holy mountain, and make them joyful in the house of My prayer*". The verse does not say the house of their prayer, but rather, "the house of My Prayer." From here we see that the Holy One, Blessed be He, prays.

The Gemara asks: What does God pray?

Rav Zutra bar Tovia said that Rav said:

May it be My will that My mercy will overcome My anger, and may My mercy prevail over My other attributes, and may I conduct Myself toward My children with the attribute of mercy, and may I enter before them beyond the letter of the law.

Similarly, it was taught in a *baraita* that Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha, the High Priest, said: Once, on Yom Kippur, I entered the innermost sanctum, the Holy of Holies,

to offer incense, and I saw Akatriel Ya, the Lord of Hosts, one of the names of God expressing His ultimate authority, seated upon a high and exalted throne.

And He [God] said to me: "Yishmael, My son, bless Me."

I said to Him; "May it be Your will that Your mercy overcome Your anger, and may Your mercy prevail over Your other attributes, and may You act toward Your children with the attribute of mercy, and may You enter before them beyond the letter of the law."

[The Holy One, Blessed be He] nodded His head and accepted the blessing.

This event teaches us that you should not take the blessing of an ordinary person lightly.



Explaining the Structure of the Story

What is the sequence of events in the story?

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? How does Rabbi Yohanan (in the name of Rabbi Yosei) learn that God prays?

? To whom does God pray?

? What do you think about this idea of God praying (to Himself)?

? What is God's prayer, according to Rav Zutra? How is each of the elements in God's prayer different from each other?

? Why did the author of our story write that Yishmael ben Elisha saw *Akatrael-Ya* and not God?

? Why did God ask for a blessing from Yishmael ben Elisha?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Why did Yishmael ben Elisha bless God?

Bonus ? Why did Yishmael ben Elisha bless God with this particular blessing?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

? Why did God accept the blessing from Yishmael ben Elisha?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

“The Twist” – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from the Text

! • God knows what He is lacking (so to speak). Do you?

! • If God can accept a blessing (advice, suggestions, input, help) from an ordinary person, so can you accept a blessing (advice, suggestions, input, help) from everybody, regardless of their level or position.

Along the same lines, Rabbi Yoḥanan said in the name of^B Rabbi Yosei: From where is it derived that the Holy One, Blessed be He, prays? As it is stated: “I will bring them to My holy mountain, and make them joyful in the house of My prayer” (Isaiah 56:7). The verse does not say the house of their prayer, but rather, “the house of My prayer”; from here we see that the Holy One, Blessed be He, prays.^N

The Gemara asks: What does God pray? To whom does God pray?

Rav Zutra bar Tovia said that Rav said:

God says: May it be My will that My mercy will overcome My anger towards Israel for their transgressions, and may My mercy prevail over My other attributes through which Israel is punished, and may I conduct myself toward My children, Israel, with the attribute of mercy, and may I enter before them beyond the letter of the law.

Similarly, it was taught in a *baraita* that Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha, the High Priest, said: Once, on Yom Kippur, I entered the innermost sanctum, the Holy of Holies, to offer incense, and in a vision I saw Akatriel Ya, the Lord of Hosts, one of the names of God expressing His ultimate authority, seated upon a high and exalted throne (see Isaiah 6).

And He said to me: Yishmael, My son, bless Me.^N

I said to Him the prayer that God prays: “May it be Your will that Your mercy overcome Your anger, and may Your mercy prevail over Your other attributes, and may You act toward Your children with the attribute of mercy, and may You enter before them beyond the letter of the law.”

The Holy One, Blessed be He, nodded His head and accepted the blessing. This event teaches us that you should not take the blessing of an ordinary person lightly. If God asked for and accepted a man’s blessing, all the more so that a man must value the blessing of another man.