

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [199]

Of What Did You Suspect Me?

(Two Stories for the Price of One)

Insights into Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 127b



Background to Our Story

Redeeming Captives (Pidyon Shvuyim)



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

Pidyon Shvuyim (Hebrew: פְּדִיּוֹן שְׁבוּיִים, literally: Redemption of Captives) is a religious duty in Judaism to bring about the release of a fellow Jew captured by slave dealers or robbers, or imprisoned unjustly by the authorities. The release of the prisoner is typically secured by a ransom paid by the Jewish community. It is considered an important commandment in Jewish law.

The Talmud calls *pidyon shvuyim* a "mitzvah rabbah", a great mitzvah, as captivity is viewed as even worse than starvation and death (Bava Batra 8b).

Maimonides writes: "The redeeming of captives takes precedence over supporting the poor or clothing them. There is no greater mitzvah than redeeming captives for the problems of the captive include being hungry, thirsty, unclothed, and they are in danger of their lives too. Ignoring the need to redeem captives goes against these Torah laws: "Do not harden your heart or shut your hand against your needy fellow" (Devarim 15:7); "Do not stand idly by while your neighbor's blood is shed" (Vayikra 19:16). And misses out on the following mitzvot: "You must surely open your hand to him or her" (Devarim 15:8); "...Love your neighbor as yourself" (Vayikra 19:18); "Rescue those who are drawn to death" (Proverbs 24:11) and there is no mitzvah greater than the redeeming of captives." (Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Matanot Aniyim 8:10-11)

The Shulchan Aruch adds: "Every moment that one delays in freeing captives, in cases where it is possible to expedite their freedom, is considered to be tantamount to murder." (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 252:3)

? Why do you think captivity is viewed as even worse than starvation and death?

Seminal Emission (Keri)



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

Keri (קרי) is a Hebrew term which literally means "happenstance", "frivolity" or "contrariness" and has come to mean "seminal emission". The term is generally used in Jewish law to refer specifically to the regulations and rituals concerning the emission of semen, whether by nocturnal emission, or by sexual activity. By extension, a man is said to be a *ba'al keri* (בעל קרי) ("one who has had a seminal emission") after he has ejaculated without yet completing the associated ritual cleansing requirements.

Mikveh



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



Mikveh or mikvah (Hebrew: מקוה / מִקְוֶה, is a bath used for the purpose of ritual immersion in Judaism. In the Hebrew Bible, the word is employed in its broader sense but generally means a collection of water. Several biblical regulations specify that full immersion in water is required to regain ritual purity after ritually impure incidents have occurred. A person was required to be ritually pure in order to enter the Temple. In addition, a convert to Judaism is required to immerse in a mikveh as part of his/her conversion, and a woman is required to immerse in a mikveh after her menstrual period or childbirth before she and her husband can resume marital relations. In this context, "purity" and "impurity" are imperfect translations of the Hebrew "tahara" and "tumah", respectively, in that the negative connotation of the word impurity is not intended; rather being "impure" is indicative of being in a state in which certain things are prohibited (as relevant) until one has become "pure" again by immersion in a mikveh.

Joshua ben Hananiah (Rabbi Yehohua)



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

Joshua ben Hananiah (Hebrew: יהושע בן חנניה d. 131 CE) was a leading tanna of the first half-century following the destruction of the Temple. He was of Levitical descent (Ma'as. Sh. v. 9), and served in the sanctuary as a member of the class of singers (Arakhin 11b). His mother intended him for a life of study, and, as an older contemporary, Dosa ben Harkinas, relates (Jerusalem Talmud Yevamot 3a), she carried the child in his cradle into the

synagogue, so that his ears might become accustomed to the sounds of the words of the Torah. It was probably with reference to his pious mother that Johanan ben Zakai thus expressed himself concerning Joshua ben Hananiah: "Hail to thee who gave him birth" (Pirkei Avot ii. 8). According to another tradition (Avot of Rabbi Natan xiv.) Johanan ben Zakai praised him in the words from Ecclesiastes iv. 12: "And a threefold cord is not quickly broken." Perhaps he meant that in Joshua the three branches of traditional learning, Midrash, Halakah, and Aggadah, were united in a firm whole; or possibly he used the passage in the sense in which it was employed later (Ecclesiastes Rabbah iv. 14; Bava Batra 59a), to show that Joshua belonged to a family of scholars even to the third generation. He is the seventh most frequently mentioned sage in the Mishnah.

Matronita

"Matronita" — from the Latin *matrona*, a woman of high social and moral status — is a term appearing dozens of times in the Talmud to refer to a woman who engages in discussions with the rabbinic sages.

During the years of Rabbi Yehoshua and his colleagues, in the years preceding and following the destruction of the Temple, many women from the Roman upper class expressed strong interest in Judaism. Several actually converted. Those who remained gentiles attempted to provide assistance to the Jewish Sages. It is related on several occasions that the Sages took advantage of the counsel of these women and of their ability to serve as intermediaries between them and the Roman authorities.

Tefillin



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



Tefillin (תפילין) also called phylacteries (/fiˈlæktəriːz/ from Ancient Greek φυλακτήριον *phylacterion*, form of *phylássein*, φυλάσσειν meaning "to guard, protect") are a set of small black leather boxes containing scrolls of parchment inscribed with verses from the Torah, which are worn by observant Jews during weekday morning prayers. Although "tefillin" is technically the plural form (the singular being "tefillah"), it is loosely used as a singular as well.^[1] The arm-tefillin, or *shel yad*, is placed on the upper arm, and the strap wrapped around the arm/hand, hand and fingers; while the head-tefillin, or *shel rosh*, is placed above the forehead. The Torah commands that they should be worn to serve as a "sign" and "remembrance" that God brought the children of Israel out of Egypt.

Yichud



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

In Jewish religious law (halakha), the laws of yichud (Hebrew: איסור ייחוד *issur yichud*, prohibition of seclusion) is the prohibition of seclusion in a private area of a man and a woman who are not married to each other. Such seclusion is prohibited in order to prevent the two from being tempted or having the opportunity to commit adulterous or promiscuous acts. A person who is present in order to prevent yichud is called a shomer.

The laws of yichud are typically followed by Orthodox Jews. Adherents of Conservative and Reform Judaism do not generally abide by the laws of yichud.



The term "yichud" also refers to a ritual during an Ashkenazi Jewish wedding in which the newly married couple spends a period secluded in a room by themselves. In earlier historical periods, as early as the Talmudic era, the marriage would be consummated at this time, but that practice is no longer current.

Pirkei Avot 6:1

Joshua the son of Perachia and Nitai the Arbelite received (the Oral Torah) from them (Yossei the son of Yoezer of Tzreidah, and Yossei the son of Yochanan of Jerusalem). Joshua the son of Perachia would say: Assume for yourself a master, acquire for yourself a friend, and judge every man to the side of merit.

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 127b

Story 1

There was an incident involving a certain pious man who redeemed a young Jewish woman from captivity. At the inn he had her lie beneath his feet.

The next day, he descended, and immersed in a ritual bath to purify himself before Torah study and prayer, and taught his students.

And he [the pious man] said to his students: When I had her lie beneath my feet, of what did you suspect me?

They [the students] said to him: We said: Perhaps there is a student among us whose conduct is not established before the rabbi.

He [the pious man] said to them [to the students]: When I descended and immersed, of what did you suspect of me?

They [the students] answered: Perhaps due to the exertion of travel, an emission befell the rabbi.

He [the pious man] said to them [to the students]: I swear by the Temple service that it was so. And you, just as you judged me favorably, so may God judge you favorably.

Story 2

Once there was a certain matter needed by Torah scholars. They wanted to discuss an issue with a certain matron whose company was kept by all the prominent people of Rome. They [the Torah scholars] said: Who will go? Rabbi Yehoshua said to them: I shall go.

Rabbi Yehoshua and his students went to her. When he arrived with his students at the entrance of her house, he removed his tefillin at a distance of four cubits from the door, and entered, and locked the door before them. After he emerged, he descended and immersed in a ritual bath, and taught his students.

And he said to his students: When I removed the tefillin, of what did you suspect me?

They [the students] said to him [to Rabbi Yehoshua]: We said: The rabbi must hold that sacred items may not enter a place of impurity.

He [Rabbi Yehoshua] asked: When I locked the door, of what did you suspect me?

They [the students] said to him [to Rabbi Yehoshua]: We said: Perhaps there is a discreet royal matter between him and her and should not be revealed.

He [Rabbi Yehoshua] asked: When I descended and immersed, of what did you suspect me?

They [the students] said to him [to Rabbi Yehoshua]: We said: Perhaps a bit of spittle sprayed from her mouth onto the rabbi's clothes. The Sages decreed that the legal status of a gentile is like that of a *zav*; their bodily fluids transmit ritual impurity.

He [Rabbi Yehoshua] said to them: I swear by the Temple service that it was so. And you, just as you judged me favorably, so may God judge you favorably.



Explaining the Structure of the Story

What is the sequence of events in the story?

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? The pious man and Rabbi Yehoshua are worried that they may be suspected of what?

Bonus ? Why are the pious man and Rabbi Yehoshua worried about their reputation?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Why did the pious man have the captive woman lie beneath his feet?

? Why did the pious man immerse himself in the mikveh?

? Why did Rabbi Yehoshua remove his tefilin before entering the house of the matron?

? Why did Rabbi Yehoshua lock the door before his students?

? Why did Rabbi Yehoshua immerse himself in the mikveh?

Bonus ? Why did the pious man and Rabbi Yehoshua swear by the Temple service?

Bonus ? Why did the students of the pious man and Rabbi Yehoshua judge their teachers favorably?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

Bonus ? *"...just as you judged favorably, so may God judge you favorably." How can you make this blessing applicable to your own life even if you don't believe in blessings?*

Bonus ? *How is "judging others favorably" different from giving others "the benefit of the doubt"?*

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



Judging others favorably: a gift that comes back!