

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [20]

"If it were I, I could not have restrained myself" (Insights into Babylonian Talmud Sukkah 52a)

Revised January 11, 2021



Background to Our Story

Abaye



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Sukka. Koren publishers Jerusalem Page 257

Abaye – אבאי: One of the outstanding Sages of the Talmud, Abaye was a fourth-generation Babylonian *amora*. Abaye was orphaned at the time of his birth and raised by his paternal uncle, Rabba. Some say that his real name was Nahmani or Kilil and that Abaye was just a nickname. The woman who assisted his uncle in raising him impressed upon him many life lessons that he quotes in her name. There are several incidents related in the Gemara that illustrate his intelligence even as a child, including some where his adoptive father, Rabba, tests his knowledge. Although Rabba was a priest and the head of his yeshiva, he lived in poverty, as did Abaye. Abaye was the primary student of Rabba and of Rav Yosef. After Rav Yosef's death, Abaye succeeded him as the head of the yeshiva in Pumbedita. He celebrated the study of Torah and would announce a holiday for the scholars whenever one of them completed a tractate. Growing up in his uncle's home he was aware of the difficulties of scholars who were without financial means. The Gemara in tractate *Berakhot* (35b) relates that he testified that many were successful following the path of Rabbi Yishmael, who instructed his students to plow, plant, and harvest in the appropriate time; only very few were successful following the path of Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai who taught that one should devote himself entirely to Torah and ignore worldly concerns. In addition to Abaye's prominence as a Torah scholar, he was known for his righteousness and his acts of kindness. Abaye's exchanges and halakhic arguments with his uncle and, even more so, with Rav Yosef, can be found throughout the Talmud. However, his disputes with his colleague Rava are especially significant. Their disputes, known as the discussions of Abaye and Rava, are examples of profound and edifying disputes and are among the foundations of the

Babylonian Talmud. In these disputes, with six exceptions, the *halakha* is ruled in accordance with the opinion of Rava.

Parasang



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Parasang is an ancient measure of distance originating in Persia. In today's measurements, three parasangs are approximately 12 km (7.5 miles).

Yichud



SICHOS in ENGLISH
The largest repository of the Teachings of Chabad-Lubavitch in English

Yichud is defined as the seclusion of a man with a woman. Such seclusion is prohibited even for a short while.

The Reason for the Prohibition of Yichud

The seclusion of a man and a woman is the first step towards a forbidden relationship; hence, the Torah forbids Yichud.

Even if a person is "absolutely sure" of him/herself, believing that "nothing will happen," there still exists a serious prohibition of Yichud. Furthermore, there is a rule: "There is no guarantee when it comes to *Arayos*." When a person places himself in a Yichud situation, the *Yetzer Hara* is extremely powerful, and no person can be absolutely sure that under such conditions he or she will withstand temptation.

Where is Yichud Prohibited?

Yichud is not only prohibited in a closed room or house, but Yichud also applies in any secluded area such as a quiet country spot, beach, park or forest. As long as the man and woman cannot be seen by other people and they are not afraid of intrusion, then Yichud applies.

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Sukkah 52a

פי הָא, דְּאַבְי שְׁמַעִיָּה לְהוּא גְבַרָא דְקָאָמַר לְהָיָא אֶתְתָא: נְקָדִים וְיִזְיִל בְּאוּרְתָא.
אָמַר: אִיזְיִל אֶפְרָשִׁינְהוּ מֵאִיסוּרָא. אִזְל בְּתַרְיִיָּהוּ תְלַתָּא פְרָסִי בְּאַגְמָא. פִּי הוּוּ פְרָשִׁי
מִהֲדָדִי שְׁמַעִינְהוּ דְקָא אָמַרִי: אוּרְתִין רְחִיקָא וְצוּוּתִין בְּסִימָא.

אָמַר אַבְי: אִי מֵאן דְסָנִי לִי הָוָה – לָא הָוָה מְצִי לְאוּקוּמִיָּה נְפִשִׁיָּה. אִזְל, תְּלָא נְפִשִׁיָּה
בְּעִיבּוּרָא דְדָשָׂא, וּמְצַטְעֵר. אֶתְתָא הָוּא סְבָא, תְּנָא לִיָּה: כָּל הַגְּדוֹל מִתְּבִירוּ יִצְרוּ גְדוֹל
הִימְנוּ.

Abaye once heard a certain man say to a certain woman: Let us rise early and go on the road.

Upon hearing this, Abaye said to himself: I will go and prevent them from violating the prohibition that they certainly intend to violate.

He went after them for a distance of three parasangs in a marsh among the reeds, while they walked on the road, and they did not engage in any wrongful activity.

When they were taking leave of each other, he heard that they were saying: We traveled a long distance together, and the company was pleasant company.

Abaye said: if instead of that man it had been one whom I hate, a euphemism for himself, he would not have been able to restrain himself from sinning. He went and leaned against the doorpost, thinking and feeling regret.

A certain Elder came and taught him: Anyone who is greater than another, his evil inclination is greater than his.



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

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Why did the man and the woman want to travel together?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Why did Abaye follow them?

Bonus ? Why didn't Abaye confront them before the couple started the trip?

? Why did Abaye follow them walking in a marsh?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Bonus ? Why do you think Abbye said to himself: "I will go and accompany them and prevent them from violating the prohibition"?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Bonus ? What is reproachable in Abaye's attitude at the beginning of our story?

Bonus ? What is commendable in Abaye's attitude at the end of our story?

Bonus ? According to some commentators, the "old man" was Elijah the Prophet, who came to comfort Abbaye. Why do you think Abbaye merited such comfort?

Extra Credit ? Did what happened to Abaye ever happen to you, thinking the worst about a person or situation and being pleasantly surprised? Can you share your experience? How did you react?

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

! בא ללמד ונמצא למד "He came to teach and found himself taught!"

The others out there are not as bad as you think they are, and you aren't as good as you think you are! – The lesson Abaye learned while trying to "help" others.



In our short story, Abaye, from a place of moral superiority wishes to prevent two individuals from sinning, being convinced that being left alone, they will transgress. At the end, not only does the couple behave properly, but Abaye understands that his own moral strength was shaky.

Abaye, though downtrodden and demoralized, learned an important double lesson from the experience: 1) the others out there are not as bad as you think they are, and 2) you aren't as good as you think you are; so always remain humble and train yourself to give others the benefit of the doubt.