

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist

[206]

Should There Not Be a Distinction Between My Honor and Theirs?!

Insights into Babylonian Talmud Horayot 13b

Me > You

Background to Our Story

Simeon ben Gamliel II



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

Simeon (or Shimon) ben Gamliel II was a Tanna of the third generation and president of the Great Sanhedrin. Shimon was a youth in Betar when the Bar Kokhba revolt broke out, but when that fortress was taken by the Romans he managed to escape the massacre (Gittin 58a; Sotah 49b; Bava Kamma 83a; Yer. Ta'anit 24b). On the restoration of the college at Usha, Shimon was elected its president, this dignity being bestowed upon him not only because he was a descendant of the house of Hillel, but in recognition of his personal worth and influence. His traditional burial location is in Kfar Manda in the Lower Galilee.

There were many children in his family, one-half of whom were instructed in the [Torah](#), and the other half in [Greek philosophy](#) (Gittin 58a; Sotah 49b; Bava Kamma 83a;). According to the [Jewish Encyclopedia](#), Shimon himself seems to have been trained in Greek philosophy; this probably accounting for his declaring later that the Scriptures might be written only in the original text and in [Greek](#) (Meg. 9b; Yer. Meg. 71c¹). Shimon appears to have studied natural science as well, for some of his sayings betray a scientific knowledge of the nature of plants and animals, while others concern the anatomy of the human body and the means of avoiding or of curing disease.

During Shimon's patriarchate the Jews were harried by daily persecutions and oppressions. In regard to these Shimon observes: "Our forefathers knew suffering only from a distance, but we have been surrounded by it for so many days, years, and cycles that we are more justified than they in becoming impatient" (Cant. R. iii. 3). "Were we, as of yore, to inscribe upon a memorial scroll our sufferings and our occasional deliverances therefrom, we should not find room for all" (Shab. 13b).

Jewish internal affairs were more firmly organized by Shimon ben Gamaliel, and the patriarchate attained under him a degree of honor previously unknown. While formerly only two persons, the nasi and the ab bet din, presided over the college, Shimon established the

additional office of "hakam", with authority equal to that of the others, appointing R. Meir to the new office. In order, however, to distinguish between the dignity of the patriarchal office and that attaching to the offices of the ab bet din and the hakam, Shimon issued an order to the effect that the honors formerly bestowed alike upon the nasi and the ab bet din were henceforth to be reserved for the patriarch (nasi), while minor honors were to be accorded the ab bet din and the hakam.

Rabbi Meir



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

Rabbi Meir or Rabbi Meir Baal HaNes (Rabbi Meir the miracle maker) was a Jewish sage who lived in the time of the [Mishna](#). He was considered one of the greatest of the [Tannaim](#) of the third generation (139-163). According to the Talmud, his father was a descendant of the [Roman Emperor Nero](#) who had converted to Judaism. His wife [Bruria](#) is one of the few women cited in the [Gemara](#). He is the third most frequently mentioned sage in the Mishnah.

In the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Gittin p.4a, it says that all anonymous Mishnas are attributed to Rabbi Meir. This rule was required because, following an unsuccessful attempt to force the resignation of the head of the [Sanhedrin](#), Rabbi Meir's opinions were noted, but not in his name, rather as "Others say...".

"Meir" may have been a [sobriquet](#). Rabbi Meir's real name is thought to have been Nahori or Misha. The name Meir, meaning "Illuminator," was given to him because he enlightened the eyes of scholars and students in Torah study.

Nathan the Babylonian



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

Nathan the Babylonian (Hebrew: [רבי נתן הבבלי](#)), also known as Rabbi Nathan, was a tanna of the third generation (2nd century), the son of a Babylonian exilarch. For unknown reasons he left Babylonia, and his bright prospects there, to settle in the land of Israel, where he was made chief of the school at Usha (Hor. 13b; H. Grätz, Gesch. iv.185). Later he was entrusted by the patriarch Simeon ben Gamliel II to secure a reconciliation with R. Hananiah of Babylon, who had declared himself independent of the Sanhedrin of Judea and had established one in Babylon—a mission which Nathan, in company with R. Isaac, successfully executed (Grätz, l.c. pp. 188 et seq.). According to I. Halevy (in Dorot ha-Rishonim, p. 185), however, both Nathan and Isaac were still residents of Babylon.

Soon afterward dissensions occurred between Nathan and [R. Meir](#), on the one side, and the president, R. Simon, on the other, owing to an attempt by the latter to abolish the equality hitherto existing among all members of the school, by restricting the tokens of esteem shown by the community to other members of the school lower in distinction than the president. Nathan and Meir conspired to depose Simon and to usurp his authority themselves, but the plot came to his knowledge, and he caused the conspirators to be expelled from the school. The two knew, however, how to make their absence felt. They sent in slips on which were written puzzling [halakic](#) questions, so that a member of the school once exclaimed: "We are inside, and the learning is outside!" Both Nathan and Meir were ultimately readmitted on condition that the name of neither should thenceforth be mentioned in connection with his halakic decisions, but that a pseudonym should be used instead. In the case of Nathan this pseudonym was "some say"; in that of Meir, "others say" ([Hor. 13b](#)).

Nathan was a high [Talmudic](#) authority. Numerous [halakic](#) decisions and [haggadic](#) sayings of his are recorded. To him is attributed also the authorship of the treatise entitled [Abot de-Rabbi Natan](#), a kind of [tosefta](#) to the [Pirke Abot](#). He is said also to have been the author of the [baraita](#) Mem Ṭet Middot, no longer extant, on Haggadah and mathematics ([Z. Frankel](#), Darke ha-Mishnah, p. 191, Leipzig, 1859).

Nathan's chief opponent in halakic decisions was the patriarch R. [Judah I](#), whom, however, he is said to have assisted in the collaboration of the [Mishnah](#) ([B. M.](#) 86a, and [Rashi](#) ad loc.) and who held him in high esteem ([B. B.](#) 131a).

Nasi (Hebrew title)



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nasi_\(Hebrew_title\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nasi_(Hebrew_title))

Nāśī' (נָשִׂי') is a Hebrew title meaning "prince" in Biblical Hebrew, "Prince [of the Sanhedrin]" in Mishnaic Hebrew, or "president" in Modern Hebrew.

During the Second Commonwealth (c. 530 BCE - 70 CE), the nasi was the highest-ranking member and president of the Sanhedrin, or Assembly, including when it sat as a criminal court. The position was created in c. 191 BCE when the Sanhedrin lost confidence in the ability of the High Priest to serve as its head. The Romans recognized the nasi as Patriarch of the Jews, and required all Jews to pay him a tax for the upkeep of that office, which ranked highly in the Roman official hierarchy.

This position as patriarch or head of court was reestablished by the Romans after the Bar-Kokhba revolt in 135 CE. This made the nasi a power which both Jews and Romans respected. The Jewish community in Babylonia also recognized him. The nasi had controlled leadership and served as a political representative to the authorities while the religious leadership was led by Torah scholars. The nasi had the power to appoint and suspend communal leaders inside and outside of Israel. The Romans respected the nasi and gave extra land and let control of own self-supported taxes. Under Jewish law, the intercalary thirteenth month in the Hebrew calendar, Adar Bet, was announced by the nasi.

Gamaliel VI was the last nasi. He died in 425 CE, after which Emperor Theodosius II suppressed the office of the patriarchate. The patriarchal tax was diverted to the Roman treasury from 426.

The term nasi was later applied to those who held high offices in the Jewish community, and Jews who held prominence in the courts of non-Jewish rulers. Certain great figures from Jewish history have used the title, including Judah the Prince (Judah haNasi), the chief redactor of the Mishnah.

Av Beit Din



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

Av Beit Din, Av Beis Din, or Abh Beyth Diyn (abbreviated: AB"D) ([Hebrew](#): אב בית דין, "Chief of the Court") was the second-highest-ranking member of the [Sanhedrin](#) during the [Second Commonwealth](#) period. The president, who bore the title [Nasi](#), was in a way the supervisor, but not a member of the court, which consisted of seventy members. The most learned and important of these seventy members was called Av Beit Din, a title similar to that of vice-president.

The Av Beit Din presided over the Sanhedrin in the absence of the [Nasi](#), and was the chief of the Sanhedrin when it sat as a criminal court. He sat with seven other judges while hearing a case.

Hakham



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

Hakham (or *chakam(i)*, *haham(i)*, *hacham(i)*; Hebrew: חכם *ḥāḳam*, "wise") is a term in Judaism, meaning a wise or skillful man; it often refers to someone who is a great Torah scholar. The word is generally used to designate a cultured and learned person: "He who says a wise thing is called a *hakham*, even if he be not a Jew" (Meg.16a). Hence in Talmudic-Midrashic literature wise and learned non-Jews are commonly called "hakme ummot ha-'olam" (the wise men of the nations). In Sephardic usage it is a synonym for "rabbi

"Hakham" as an official title is found as early as the first [Sanhedrin](#), after the reconstruction of that body, when the Hadrianic religious persecutions had ceased; in addition to the [nasi Simon ben Gamaliel](#), two other scholars stood at the head of the Sanhedrin, namely, [R. Nathan](#) as Ab Bet Din, and [R. Meïr](#) as hakham. Another hakham mentioned by name was Simon, the son of [Judah ha-Nasi I](#), who after the death of his father officiated as hakham with his elder brother, the nasi. Just what were the functions of the hakham is not clear. Rapoport's suggestion that he was the arbiter in matters of ritual prohibition and permission is highly improbable. [Zecharias Frankel](#) looks upon the hakham as a presiding officer whose duty it was to examine a case in question from all points of view, and, having summed up the results, to present the matter for discussion. It is more probable, however, that the office of hakham was created in order to secure a majority in cases of difference of opinion between the nasi and the [ab bet din](#) in the affairs of the Sanhedrin; one of the most eminent scholars was always chosen for the post. A [baraita](#) leads to the inference that the hakham was always the director of a school ("bet ha-midrash"), for in addition to the [Great Sanhedrin](#), which later came to take the place of an academy, there were also private academies under the direction of eminent scholars. The origin of the office of hakham is as doubtful as its duration.

Sitting on Mats and Studying



Tractate Uktzin



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

Uktzim (Hebrew: עוקצים *Uq'sim*, "Stems") is the last volume (or "tractate") of the Order of Tohorot in the Mishnah. It is the last tractate in the Mishnah. It consists of three chapters. Uktzim describes the various forms of tumah having to do with fruits' and vegetables' external parts such as stems and peels.

Resentment



Bitter indignation at having been treated unfairly.

Resentment



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

Resentment can result from a variety of situations, involving a perceived wrongdoing from an individual, which are often sparked by expressions of injustice or humiliation. Common sources of resentment include publicly humiliating incidents such as accepting negative treatment without voicing any protest, an object of regular discrimination or prejudice, envy/jealousy, feeling used or taken advantage of by others, and having achievements go unrecognized, while others succeed without working as hard. Resentment can also be generated by dyadic interactions, such as emotional rejection or denial by another person, deliberate embarrassment or belittling by another person, or ignorance, putting down, or scorn by another person.

The Text: Babylonian Talmud, Horayot 13b

The Rabbis taught in a Baraita:

When the Nasi enters the study hall, all people stand out of respect, and they may not sit until he says to them "sit."

When the Av Beit Din enters the study hall, [the scholars] make for him one row here and one parallel row there, and they remain standing until he passes through the rows and sits in his place.

When a Sage enters the study hall, one scholar stands and one scholar sits until (the Sage) sits in his place.

Sons of sages and disciples of sages, when the public needs them, may tread upon the heads of people to perform their assignments.

If [a scholar] left the study hall for the need to relieve himself, he may reenter and sit in his place (even though he lacks the stature to justify his stepping over his colleagues to return to his place, the involuntary nature of the exit permits his doing so).

Regarding the sons of Torah scholars, specifically those sons whose fathers are appointed a leader over the community, when they have the intellectual maturity to understand the Sages discourses, they may enter the study hall and sit

in front of their fathers with their backs to the people. When they do not have the intellectual maturity to understand discourses, they may enter the study hall and sit in front of their fathers with their faces to the people. Rabbi Elazar the son of Rabbi Tzadok says: Also at a wedding feast we make them attachments to the elders (we sit them at the elders' side for their father's honor).

....

Rabbi Yochanan said: This halachah (the above law) was taught in the days of Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel. At that time Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel was the Nasi, Rabbi Meir was the greatest sage of his generation and Rabbi Natan was the Av Beit Din.

When Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel would enter there, the study hall, everyone stood up before him. When Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Natan would enter, everyone stood up before them as well.

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said to himself: Should there not be a distinction between my honor and theirs?! He thereupon instituted the laws contained in this Baraita, whereupon the Nasi is accorded more honor than Av Beit Din, and the Av Beit Din more honor than the sage.

Now, on that day of the issuance of the Baraita, Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Natan were not there in the study hall. When they came on the following day they saw that [the scholars] did not stand up before them in the usual manner. They exclaimed: What is the meaning of this?! [The Scholars] told them: Thus Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel instituted.

Rabbi Meir thereupon said to Rabbi Natan: I am a Sage and you are an Av Beit Din. Let us initiate something against Rabban Shimon like that which he did to us. Now, what should we do to him? Let us say to him, "expound for us Tractate Uktzin," for he does not have it fully mastered. And since he has not learned it well enough to teach it, we shall say to him: Inasmuch as Scripture states (Psalms 106:2), *who shall utter the mighty acts of God, (who) can declare all of his*

praise? Which we understand to mean: For whom is it fitting to utter the mighty acts of God in public Torah discourse? Only one who can declare all His praise – Scripture thereby excludes you, Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, who have not mastered the Talmud in its entirety, for you are deficient in the final tractate, Uktzin. And with this argument, concluded Rabbi Meir, we shall remove [Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel] from office, and I shall become Av Beit Din and you Nasi.

It just so happened that Rabbi Yaakov ben Karshi overheard [Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Natan]) plotting against Rabban Shimon. He said to himself: Perhaps, Heaven forbid, this matter will lead to Rabban Shimon's disgrace. He therefore went and sat behind Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel's upper chamber and elucidated Tractate Uktzin aloud and then recited and reviewed it, recited and reviewed it all within Rabban Shimon's earshot.

Alerted by this unusual signal, [Rabban Shimon] said to himself: What is transpiring before us? Perhaps, Heaven forbid, there is something mischievous afoot in the study hall! He [Rabban Shimon] thereupon put his mind to the task and recited it over and over until he had mastered it (tractate Uktzin).

On the following day [Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Natan] said to him [to Rabban Gamliel]: Come, master, and teach us Uktzin!

[Rabban Shimon] thereupon commenced and discoursed on the tractate. After he finished he said to them: If I had not learned, you would have shamed me. He thereupon instructed and had them [Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Natan] expelled from the study hall.

From outside, [Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Natan] would write down questions on a tablet and throw it there, into the study hall, for the scholars' consideration. A question that was answered by the scholars was answered; and as for those that were not answered, [Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Natan] wrote down the answers and threw the tablet inside.

Eventually Rabbi Yose said to [his colleagues] in the study hall: “The Torah is on the outside and we are within?!”

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said to them: We shall allow them to enter the study hall. Nevertheless, we shall penalize them, in that no Torah teaching shall be stated in their names. Henceforth, they referred to Rabbi Meir as “Others” (as in “Others say”), and to Rabi Natan as “There are [those who] say”.

Subsequently, from Heaven they showed Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Natan] the following message in their dreams: Go, appease Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel. Rabbi Natan went but Rabbi Meir did not go. He [Rabbi Meir] said: The contents of dreams are meaningless.

When Rabbi Natan went to attempt appeasement, Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said to him: Granted that your father’s golden belt (Rabbi Natan’s father was the head of the Jewish community in Babylonia) helped you to become Av Beit Din, but shall we make you also Nasi?!?



Explaining the Story

What is the sequence of events in the story?

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Our story reflects a hierarchy based on a combination of knowledge, ancestry and leadership role. Do you believe hierarchy is necessary for the learning experience to be successful? Why? Why not?

? Why did everybody stand when Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Natan would enter the study hall?

? What changes did Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel make in the original procedure? Why?

Bonus ? Why did Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel make changes in the original procedure?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

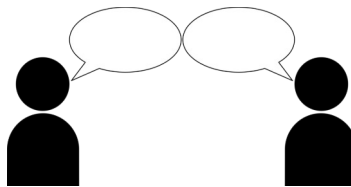
Answer 3 _____

Bonus ? Why were Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Natan upset when they entered the study hall the day after Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel made the changes in the original procedure?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Bonus ? What do you think were Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Natan's thoughts when they found out about Rabbi Shimon's reforms?



Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Bonus ? Who do you think was more upset with the changes in the procedure, Rabbi Meir or Rabbi Natan? Justify your answer from the story.

Bonus ? How do we know that Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Natan were not interested in democratizing the learning system?

Bonus ? Why do you think Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel wasn't familiar with Tractate Uktzin?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Bonus ? Why didn't Rabbi Yaakov ben Karshi tell Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel about the plot of Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Natan?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Bonus ? How do we know from our story that Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel was a scholar in his own right?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? When did Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel find out that Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Natan were plotting against him?

? Why did Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel expel Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Natan from the study hall?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

? Why did Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Natan remain studying from the outside as opposed to going home or "opening" their own academy?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

? Why did Rabbi Yose request to bring back Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Natan?

? Why did Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel acquiesce to Rabbi Yose's request?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Bonus ? Why did Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel punish Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Natan with anonymity?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Bonus ? Why did they indicate from Heaven to Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Natan that they should appease Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel?

Bonus ? Why did Rabbi Natan go and appease Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel?

Bonus ? Why didn't Rabbi Meir go and appease Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel?

Bonus ? Why didn't Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel respond to Rabbi Natan the way he did when the latter went to appease him??

! Two wrongs don't make a right!

! The resiliency of resentment.

EPILOGUE

Our sad story doesn't have a happy ending.

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel believes there must be a distinction between the honor conferred to him, the Nasi, and the one conferred to Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Natan, the two great sages, second in command. Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Natan, who were not present on the day the reform in procedure was discussed, are taken by surprise ("What is this?!") and feel slighted. Anger and resentment take the best of them and they plot to publicly shame Rabban Shimon and demote him. Rabbi Yaakov ben Karshi (the voice of reason in our story) knows that **"two wrongs don't make a right"** and, in a subtle way, warns Rabban Shimon. Rabban Shimon expels Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Natan, creating a situation where "the Torah is on the outside." Inside, nobody learns the way they should; outside, more resentment is brewing. Rabban Shimon, under pressure, acquiesces to bring back Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Natan. God - "they showed Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Natan in their dreams"- wishes to put an end to the nonsense but the damage is done. **The resilient**

resentment is deeply rooted in all the participants. Rabbi Meir refuses to appease Rabban Shimon, and Rabbi Natan, the moderate among the plotters, is welcome with rebuff by the Patriarch.

At the end of the day, false pride, anger, resentment, and the inability to cope with unwelcoming situations, creates a situation where everybody loses.