

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist

[207]

"Now, Who Will Pray for Us?"

Insights into Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 37a



Background to Our Story

Rav Zeira



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

Ze'era or Zeira (Hebrew: רבי זירא) was a Jewish Talmudist, known as an amora, who lived in the Land of Israel, of the third generation. He was born in Babylonia, where he spent his early youth. He was a pupil of Ḥisda (Ber. 49a), of Huna (ib.), and of Judah b. Ezekiel in Pumbedita.

He associated also with other prominent teachers of the Babylonian school, as [Nahman b. Jacob](#) ([Yer. Ber.](#) 8c), [Hamnuna](#) ([Zeb.](#) 105b; [Ber.](#) 24b), and [Sheshet](#), who called him a great man ("gabra rabba"; 'Er. 66a). His love for the [Holy Land](#) led him to decide upon leaving his native country and emigrating to [Israel](#). This resolve, however, he kept secret from his teacher Judah, who disapproved of any emigration from Babylonia. Before leaving, he spied upon Judah while the latter was bathing, and the words which he then overheard he took with him as a valuable and instructive memento ([Shab.](#) 41a; [Ket.](#) 110b).

A favorable dream, in which he was told that his sins had been forgiven, encouraged him to undertake the journey to the Holy Land ([Ber.](#) 57a), and before starting he spent a hundred days in fasting, in order to forget the dialectic method of instruction of the Babylonian schools, that this might not handicap him in the Land of Israel ([B. M.](#) 85a). His journey took him through [Akrokonía](#), where he met [Hiyya b. Ashi](#) ([Ab. Zarah](#) 16b), and through [Sura](#) (ib.). When he reached the [River Jordan](#) he could not control his impatience, but passed through the water without removing his clothes. When jeered at by an unbeliever who stood

by, he answered, "Why should not I be impatient when I pursue a blessing which was denied even to [Moses](#) and [Aaron](#)?" (Yer. [Sheb.](#) 35c).

[Ze'era's arrival in the Land of Israel](#) and his first experiences there have been recorded in various anecdotes. He was small of stature and of dark complexion, for which reason [Assi](#) called him "Black Pot" ([Ab. Zarah](#) 16b), according to an expression current in [Babylonia](#) (comp. [Meg.](#) 14b; [Pes.](#) 88a; [Ber.](#) 50a); this name possibly also contained an allusion to his sputtering manner of speech. Perhaps with reference to a malformation of his legs, he was called "the little one with burned legs," or "the dark, burned one with the stubby legs" (comp. [Bacher, Ag. Pal. Amor.](#) iii. 7, note 2). But a different explanation of this is given in [Bava Metsia](#) 85a, where it is said that he fasted in order to merit protection from the fires of [Gehenna](#) and that he then tested himself every thirty days by sitting in the fire without coming to harm, until one day the sages distracted him (cast an eye upon him) and his legs were burned. Thus, these nicknames throw light upon Ze'era's ascetic piety ([B. M.](#) 85a).

In the Land of Israel he associated with all the prominent scholars. [Eleazar b. Pedat](#) was still living at the time ([Niddah](#) 48), and from him Ze'era received valuable instruction ([Yer. Ter.](#) 47d). His most intimate friends were [Assi](#) and [Hiyya b. Abba](#). In his interaction with Assi he was generally the one who asked questions, and on one occasion Assi made known his approval of one of Ze'era's questions by saying: "Right you are, Babylonian; you have understood it correctly" (Yer. [Shab.](#) 7c). Ze'era especially acknowledged the authority of [Ammi](#), the principal of the school at [Tiberias](#), and it is related that he asked Ammi to decide questions pertaining to religious law that had been addressed to himself (Yer. [Dem.](#) 25b; Yer. [Shab.](#) 8a; Yer. [Yeb.](#) 72d).

Ze'era was highly esteemed by [Abbahu](#), the rector at [Cæsarea](#), of whom he considered himself a pupil. He was ordained rabbi, a distinction usually denied to members of the Babylonian school, and though in the beginning he refused this honor (Yer. [Bik.](#) 65c), he later accepted it on learning of the atoning powers connected with the dignity ([Sanh.](#) 14a). Upon receiving [Semicha](#), his title changed from Rav to [Rabbi](#). His insignificant appearance was humorously referred to when at his ordination he was greeted with the words of a wedding-song: "Without rouge and without ornament, but withal a lovable gazel" ([Ket.](#) 17a).

With regard to Ze'era's private vocation, the only facts known are that he once traded in linen, and that he asked [Abbahu](#) how far he might go in improving the outward appearance of his goods without rendering himself liable in the slightest degree to a charge of fraud ([Yer. B. M.](#) 9d). Information regarding his family relations is also very scanty; it is asserted that he became an orphan at an early age (Yer. [Pe'ah](#) 15c), and that his wedding was celebrated during the [Feast of Tabernacles](#) ([Suk.](#) 25b), and he had one son, Ahabah or Ahava, who has become well known through various [haggadic](#) maxims (comp. [Bacher, l.c.](#) iii. 651-659). He was known for his [longevity](#).

Ze'era occupies a prominent place in the [Halakah](#) as well as in the [Aggadah](#); with regard to the former he is especially distinguished for the correctness and knowledge with which he transmits older maxims. Among his haggadic sayings the following may be mentioned as throwing light upon his high moral standpoint:

He who has never sinned is worthy of reward only if he has withstood temptation to do so. (Yer. [Kid.](#) 61d)

One should never promise a child anything which one does not intend to give it, because this would accustom the child to untruthfulness. ([Suk.](#) 46b)

On account of his lofty morals and piety Ze'era was honored with the name "the pious Babylonian." Among his neighbors were several people known for their wickedness, but Ze'era treated them with kindness in order to lead them to moral reformation. When he

died, these people said, "Hitherto Ze'era has prayed for us, but who will pray for us now?" This reflection so moved their hearts that they really were led to do penance ([Sanh. 37a](#)). That Ze'era enjoyed the respect of his contemporaries is evidenced by the comment upon his death written by an elegist: "Babylonia gave him birth; Palestine had the pleasure of rearing him; 'Wo is me,' says Tiberias, for she has lost her precious jewel" ([M. K. 75b](#)).

The Text: Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 37a

Some thugs lived in the neighborhood of Rabbi Ze'eira, who nevertheless befriended them, so that they would repent, but the other Rabbis objected to this association.

When Rabbi Ze'eira died, they [the thugs] said: "Until now we had 'the little man with burnt legs' who prayed for us. Now, who will pray for us?"


They [the thugs] felt remorse in their hearts and they repented.



Explaining the Story

What is the sequence of events in the story?

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

Bonus  How did Rabbi Ze'eira end in the same neighborhood with the thugs?

Answer 1 _____


Answer 2 _____

 Why did Rabbi Ze'eira befriend the thugs?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

 Why does Rabbi Ze'eira want the thugs to repent?

Bonus  How do we know that Rabbi Ze'eira's friendship with thugs was genuine despite his "agenda"?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

? Why did the Rabbis object to Rabbi Ze'eira association with the thugs?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

? Why do the thugs call Rabbi Ze'eira "the little man with burnt legs"?

Bonus ? Rabbi Ze'eira prayed for the thugs. What do you think he was praying for?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

Bonus ? The thugs seem affected by Rabbi Ze'eira's passing. Why?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Bonus ? Why did the thugs repent?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Bonus ? Why didn't the thugs repent while Rabbi Ze'eira was alive?

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

! Holding tight and letting go: The two sides of unconditional love! (a posthumous lesson by Rabbi Ze'eira).

EPILOGUE

How to love and how to effect change? These seem to be the two questions our miniature story is trying to address. Rabbi Ze'eira's love is unconditional, which doesn't preclude expectations (Rabbi Ze'eira believes being a thug is bad, not only for the society but for the thugs themselves, and wants the thugs to repent). Rabbi Ze'eira befriends the thugs and develops a relationship with them, despite the objection of his colleagues, who frown on him. Rabbi Ze'eira dies thinking that he failed to effect change. Our story, however, seems to imply that Rabbi Ze'eira's absence is what the thugs needed to change ("Until now we had 'the little man with burnt legs' who prayed for us. Now, who will pray for us?"). In his unconditional love, Rabbi Ze'eira "did the job" for the thugs in feeling "for them" the need for change. Now that he is gone, they finally feel the void that leads to action and change, in a posthumous tribute to their master and friend.