

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist

[208]

"Is this Abba Tahnah the Pious?"

Insights into Ecclesiastes Rabbah 9:1 (7)

(With appreciation to Admiel Kossman for his beautiful insights)



Background to Our Story

Abba Tahnah the Pious



Carrying On Shabbat



<http://www.jewishtreats.org/>

The last of the 39 *melachot* (creative works prohibited on Shabbat) is that of carrying between a private and a public space. How is carrying a creative work?

The 39 *melachot* are all based on the activities that were needed to build the Tabernacle in the wilderness. Carrying objects from place to place was one such activity. Carrying a heavy wooden beam certainly is laborious, but equally prohibited is carrying a book from one house to the next, which might not feel like labor at all.

The Biblical prohibition of carrying is only from a private domain into a public domain (and vice versa) or carrying 4 cubits in a public domain (about 6 feet). Within a private house, a person may carry objects in any part of the house. In fact, as long as one's property is completely fenced, one may also carry things outdoors (within the fence) because the fence firmly proclaims the extent and boundaries of private property.

What one may not do is to carry an object from a private domain into the public domain - the sidewalk, an unfenced yard, etc - even if one's goal is to bring the object to another private domain.

This law applies to all things. And carrying does not only mean having something in one's hands, but also in one's pockets or over one's shoulders, as well as pushing an object (such as a stroller).

Why then, do we see so many people wheeling small children and carrying diaper bags on Shabbat? Those who live within an *eiruv*, a rabbinically constructed boundary that creates a private domain out of a large public area, do not have to worry about the prohibition of carrying. What the specifications of an *eiruv* are and how it is created -- will have to wait for a future Treat.

Ecclesiastes 9:7

Go, eat your bread in gladness, and drink your wine with joy, for God has already approved what you do.

Malachi 3:20

But for you who revere My name a sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings; and you will break out leaping, like calves released from the stall.

The Text: Ecclesiastes Rabbah 9:1 (7)

אבא תחנה חסידא נכנס לעירו ערב שבת עם חשיכה, וחבילתו מונחת לו על כתפו ומצא מוכה שחין אחד מוטל בפרשת דרכים, אמר ליה ר' עשה עמי צדקה והכניסני לעיר, אמר אם אני מניח חבילתי מהיכן אתפרנס אני וביתי, ואם אני מניח את מוכה שחין אני מתחייב בנפשי, מה עשה המליך יצר טוב על יצר רע והכניסו למוכת /למוכה/ שחין לעיר, ובא ונטל את חבילתו ונכנס עם דמדומי חמה, והיו הכל תמהין ואומרים זה הוא אבא תחנה חסידא, אף הוא הרהר בלבו ואמר תאמר שמא חללתי את השבת באותה שעה הזריח הקב"ה את החמה דכתיב (מלאכי ג') וזרחה לכם יראי שמי שמש צדקה

Abba Tahnah the pious entered his town on the eve of the Sabbath at nightfall, with his bundle on his shoulder, when he found a person afflicted with boils lying by the crossroad.

He [the sick man] said to him: "My Master, act charitably with me and bring me into the city".

He [Abba Tahnah] wondered "if I were to lay down my load, what livelihood would there be for me and for my family? But if I were to leave the man sick with boils, my life would be forfeit (before God)."

What did he do? He imposed his Good Inclination upon his Evil Inclination. He brought the one afflicted with boils into the city, and he went (back), took his bundle, and entered the city at sunset.

All were aghast, and asked, "Is this Abba Tahnah the pious?" He too, thought to himself and said: "Perhaps I desecrated the Sabbath?"

At that moment the Holy One, blessed be He, caused the sun to shine (once again, thereby turning the Sabbath back into the weekday), as it is written (Malachi's 3:20): "*But for you who revere My name a sun of righteousness shall rise*".

At that moment he [Abba Tahnah] thought to himself and said: "Perhaps I will not receive my wages?" (because of the miracle that had been performed for him, he had exhausted his merits).

A Heavenly voice went forth and said to him "Go, eat your bread in gladness, and drink your wine with joy, for your action was long ago approved by God' (Ecclesiastes 9:7) – your reward has been received".





Explaining the Story


What is the sequence of events in the story?


Comprehension and Analysis Questions


Extra Bonus  Why was a man afflicted with boils lying by the crossroad?


 Why is Abba Tahnah entering his town¹ with a bundle on his shoulder² on the eve of Shabbat³? In your answer, please address each of the underlined phrases.

Bonus  What is Abba Tahnah's dilemma in our story? Please explain all the elements of the dilemma.


 What was Abba Tahnah's good inclination?


Extra Bonus  What was Abba Tahnah's evil inclination (the one he subdued)?


 Why is everybody aghast in Abba Tahnah's town?


 What is Abba Tahnah's concerned about as he entered his town at sunset?

Bonus  What isn't Abba Tahnah's concerned about?

 Why did God make the sun shine again?

 "At that moment he thought to himself and said: 'Perhaps I will not receive my wages?'" To which wages is Abba Tahnah referring to?

Bonus  After doing some reasonable research I couldn't find any biographical information about Abba Tahnah the Pious. Assuming that no biographical information about Abba Tahnah the Pious is available, why do you think this is the case?

Bonus  Why do people in Abba Tahnah's town call him Abba Tahnah the Pious?

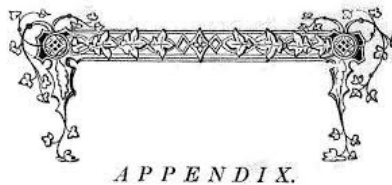
Bonus  Why does the author of our story call him Abba Tahnah the Pious?



"Piety" versus Piety and the pious choice of Abba Tahnah the Pious.

EPILOGUE

Much like the man afflicted with boils in our story, Abba Tahnah too is at a crossroad: If he takes care of the afflicted man and doesn't come back for his bundle his family will suffer, and if he comes back for his bundle, his reputation will suffer. Abba Tahnah subdues his evil inclination and chooses true piety over formal "piety." God's open miracle serves more as a reminder for the reader than as a reward for Abba Tahnah: the piety that God desires is a piety of righteousness and loving-kindness.



1)

Isaiah 58:5-9

⁵ *Is such the fast I desire,
A day for men to starve their bodies?
Is it bowing the head like a bulrush
And lying in sackcloth and ashes?
Do you call that a fast,
A day when the Lord is favorable?*

⁶ *No, this is the fast I desire:
To unlock the fetters of wickedness,
And untie the cords of the yoke
To let the oppressed go free;
To break off every yoke.*

⁷ *It is to share your bread with the hungry,
And to take the wretched poor into your home;
When you see the naked, to clothe him,
And not to ignore your own kin.*

⁸ *Then shall your light burst through like the dawn
And your healing spring up quickly;
Your Vindicator shall march before you,
The Presence of the Lord shall be your rear guard.*

⁹ *Then, when you call, the Lord will answer;
When you cry, He will say: Here I am.*

2)

The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:23-37) (NIV)

²⁵ On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

²⁶ “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?”

²⁷ He answered, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

²⁸ “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

²⁹ But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

³⁰ In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹ A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. ³² So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. ³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii^[c] and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

³⁶ “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

³⁷ The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”

Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

3)

Kosman, Admiel: Abba Tahnah the Pious and the People of His Town: Entering the Sabbath with Weekday Clothes. In: Kosman, Admiel: Men’s World: Reading Masculinity in Jewish Stories in a Spiritual Context. Ergon Verlag. Würzburg. 2009.