

Stories with a Twist [221]

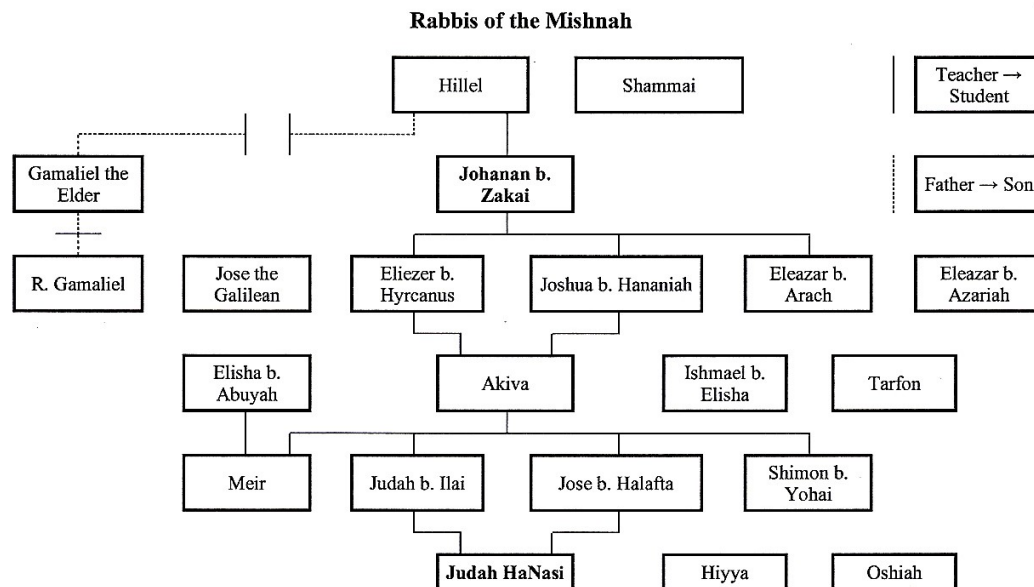


“...and I learned three things”

Insights into Babylonian Talmud Berachot 62a

Background to Our Story

Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Akiva, Ben Azzai, Rabbi Yehuda



Joshua ben Hananiah



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

Joshua ben Hananiah 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 b. Harkinas, relates (Yer. Yeb. 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 b. Zakkai

thus expressed himself concerning Joshua ben Hananiah: "Hail to thee who gave him birth" (Ab. ii. 8). According to another tradition (Ab. R. N. xiv.) Johanan b. Zakkai praised him in the words from Eccl. 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 (Eccl. R. iv. 14; B. B. 59a), to show that Joshua belonged to a family of scholars even to the third generation.

Rabbi Akiva



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

Akiba ben Joseph (ca.50–ca.135 AD) or simply Rabbi Akiva was a Judean tanna of the latter part of the 1st century and the beginning of the 2nd century (3rd tannaitic generation). He was a great authority in the matter of Jewish tradition, and one of the most central and essential contributors to the Mishnah and Midrash Halakha. He is referred to in the Talmud as "Rosh la-Chachomim" (Head of all the Sages). Although a full history of Akiba based upon authentic sources will probably never be written because of the absence of non-Jewish sources on his life, he is considered by many to be the godfather of rabbinical Judaism.

Simeon ben Azzai



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

Simeon ben Azzai or simply Ben Azzai was a distinguished tanna of the first third of the 2nd century. His full name was Simon ben Azzai, to which sometimes the title "Rabbi" is prefixed. But, in spite of his great learning, this title did not rightfully belong to him, for he remained all his life in the ranks of the "talmidim" or "talmide hakhamim" (pupils or disciples of the wise). Ben Azzai and Ben Zoma were considered in the tannaitic school-tradition as the highest representatives of this degree in the hierarchy of learning. (Tosef., Kid. iii.9; Bab. Kid. 49b; Ber. Kid. 57b; Yer. Ma'as. Sh. ii.53d; Bab. Sanh. 17b).

Ben Azzai is especially named as an eminent example of a "pupil who is worthy of the hora'ah," of the right of independent judgment in questions of religious law (Hor. 2b). Ben 'Azzai stood in close relation to the leaders of the school of Jabneh.

Chief among Ben Azzai's teachers was Joshua ben Hananiah, whose opinions he expounded (Parah i.1), proved to be correct (Yeb. iv.13), or defended against Akiva (Yoma ii.3; Ta'anit iv.4; Tosef., Sheb. ii.13). Akiba himself was not really Ben Azzai's teacher, although the latter occasionally calls him so, and once even regrets that he did not stand in closer relation as pupil to Akiba (Ned. 74b); and he expressed the same regret in regard to Ishmael ben Elisha (Hul. 71a). In his halakic opinions and Biblical exegesis, as well as in other sayings, Ben Azzai follows Akiva, and, from the tone in which he speaks of Akiva in the discourses that have been handed down, the Amoraim concluded that his relations with Akiva were both those of pupil and of colleague (Yer. B. B. ix.17b; Bab. ib. 158b; Yer. Sheq. iii.47b; Yer. R. H. i.56d).

Judah bar Ilai,



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

Judah bar Ilai was a 4th generation tanna of the 2nd Century and son of Rabbi Ilai I. Of the many Judahs in the Talmud, he is the one referred to simply as "Rabbi Judah" and is the most frequently mentioned sage in the Mishnah.

Judah bar Ilai was born at Usha in the Galilee. His teachers were his father, who had studied with Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva. He was ordained by Rabbi Judah ben Baba at a time

when the [Roman](#) government forbade ordination. Judah bar Ilai was forced to flee [Hadrian's](#) persecution.

Halakha (Jewish Law) on a "Sticky" Subject

- It is prohibited to defecate in an exposed place without barriers facing east-west, so as not to show contempt for the Divine Presence, which rests in the west, and because the Temple is located to the west. This *halakha* also applies outside of Eretz Yisrael, in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi Akiva (Rambam *Sefer Avoda, Hilkhot Beit Habebira* 7:9; *Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim* 3:5).
- One should not uncover himself while standing. One who needs to relieve himself should not expose himself while standing, but only after he sits, in the interest of modesty. (Rambam *Sefer HaMadda, Hilkhot De'ot* 5:6; *Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim* 3:2).
- One should not wipe himself with his right hand, but rather with his left, for the reasons enumerated in the Gemara (Rambam *Sefer HaMadda, Hilkhot De'ot* 5:6; *Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim* 3:10).

Right and Left



<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12757-right-and-left>

By: Joseph, Judah David Eisenstein

Biblical Data

The right side of things is recognized in many ways as better than the left. The south and north sides of the earth are distinguished as "yamin" (right) and "sem'ol" (left; Job xxiii. 9), the right being the sunnier, brighter side, and the left the bleak and dark side, ill-omened and unlucky, where evil generates. "Out of the north an evil shall break forth upon all the inhabitants of the land" (Jer. i. 14). The right side, or right limb, of a person receives special prominence; the place of honor is at his right. "Upon thy right hand did stand the queen" (Ps. xlv. 9). Solomon placed a seat of honor for his mother, the queen, on his right side (I Kings ii. 19). The right eye was the most important and most vital member of the body. Nahash the Ammonite, as a reproach upon all Israel, purposed putting out the right eye of all men in Jabesh-gilead (I Sam. xi. 2). The prophet predicted, "Wo to the idol shepherd that leaveth the flock! . . . his right eye shall be utterly darkened" (Zech. xi. 17). The priest in purifying the leper put some of the blood of the sacrifice on the tip of his right ear, the thumb of his right hand, and the great toe of his right foot; he also used his right finger to sprinkle the oil before the altar (Lev. xiv. 14, 16), and received as his share of the peace-offering the right shoulder (Lev. vii. 32).

In Jacob's Blessing.

Jacob showed the significance of using the right hand in blessing by placing it on the head of Ephraim, whose tribe was thereby destined to become the greater nation, though Manasseh was older in years (Gen. xlviii. 17-19). "Right" is a synonym for "goodness" and "brightness," and "left" for "badness," "awkwardness," and "clumsiness." "A wise man's heart is at his right hand; but a fool's heart at his left" (Eccl. x. 2). The right hand is associated with the idea of majesty: "Thy right hand, O Lord, is become glorious in power"

(Ex. xv. 6). Numerous other Biblical passages may be cited in illustration of this idea. The right hand was raised when an oath was administered or taken (Isa. lxii. 8), and sometimes both right and left hands (Dan. xii. 7). The signet was worn on the right hand (Jer. xxii. 24). Ezekiel, to expiate the sins of Israel, lay on his left side 390 days, and at the expiration of that term he lay forty days on his right side in penance for the sins of Judah; each day representing one year of their wickedness (Ezek. iv. 4-6). Rashi explains that Israel, or the Ten Tribes, were situated to the left of Judah, their capital city being Samaria: "Thine elder sister is Samaria, she and her daughters that dwell at thy left hand" (Ezek. xvi. 46).

The warrior held the bow in his left hand and the arrows in his right (Ezek. xxxix. 3). Ehud, the Benjamite judge, used his left hand to thrust the dagger into the body of Eglon, King of Moab, thereby avoiding suspicion and rendering parrying difficult (Judges iii. 16-21). The Benjamites were all excellent marksmen—"left-handed; every one could sling stones at an hair's breadth and not miss." The name "Ben Yamin" (= "son of the right hand") is probably a euphemism. Targum Jonathan, however, translates "itt̄er yad yemin" (left-handed) as "open-handed," that is, ambidextrous, as it is evident that the Benjamites were armed with bows and could use both the right hand and the left hand in shooting arrows from a bow (I Chron. xii. 2). Cant. ii. 6 refers to the lover: "His left hand is under my head, and his right hand doth embrace me."

"Yad" means the right hand and "zeroa'" the left hand when both terms occur in the same sentence in the Bible (Naz. 3b, and see Rashi *ad loc.*).

—In Rabbinical Literature:

In performing the Temple ceremonies, the general rule is that "every turn must be made to the right of the way (Yoma 15b). One of the priestly disqualifications is left-handedness (Maimonides, "Yad," Bi'at ha-Miḳdash, ix. 5). The officiating priest who is required to take a handful of flour in connection with the meal-offering or frankincense does it with his right hand (Zeb. i. 2). The table was put on the north side of the Tabernacle, or the Temple, and the candlestick on the south side, opposite the table, the table being thus to the right and the menorah to the left of the Shekinah, which rested on the west side; just as people usually place the lamp at the left to give free play to the right hand (Cant. R. ii. 17, with reference to Ex. xxvi. 35).

In Ceremonial.

[Halizah](#) is performed with the right hand on the right foot (Yeb. xii. 2), while some authorities in the case of a left-footed person require a separate ḥalīzah for the left foot (Shulḥan 'Aruḳ, Eben ha-'Ezer, 169, 25). The test of left-footedness is made by commanding the person to walk straight ahead and noting which foot he starts with ("Ginnat Weradim," responsum No. 9). The phylactery is placed on the left arm so that the right hand may wind the leather straps ("reḏu'ah"). R. Ashi says that in Ex. xiii. 16, the word "yadekah" (thy hand), with the superfluous "he," means "yad kehah" (the weak [*i.e.*, left] hand; Men. 37a). According to the cabalists, the reason for placing the phylacteries on the left arm is that it is nearer to the heart, which is bound to the service of God. A person who is left-handed may wear the phylactery on his right arm; but if ambidextrous, he must place it on the left (*ib.*).

The [Lulab](#) is held in the right hand and the Etrog in the left. A curious error appears to have been made regarding the supposed reference in the Midrash to the custom of holding the lulab in the right hand. Citing Ps. xvi. 11, "At thy right hand there are pleasures forevermore" ("neḏaḥ" = "triumph," "victory"), R. Abbahu explains that the lulab is referred to (Yalḳ., Ps. 670; comp. Ex. R. xviii. 5; Kohut, "Aruch Completum," i. 242, ii. 57). Nevertheless, the custom might be explained by supposing that the lulab is held in the right hand because it is more important than the etrog.

Commenting on the passage "I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing by him on his right hand and on his left" (I Kings xxii. 19), the Midrash,

asks, "Is there a right and left above?" and answers, "But there were defenders on the right and accusers on the left" (Tan., Ex. xvii.).

In Angelology.

The angel Michael, on the right, is more in favor of Israel than Gabriel, who is on the left. Samael (from "sem'ol"="left") is on the left, outside, as the antagonist of Israel (see Kohut, "Ueber die Jüdische Angelologie," pp. 30, 57). The "yezer-tob" (angel whose influence is toward the good) is on the right side, and the "yezer ha-ra' " (angel whose influence is toward wickedness) is on the left of every person.

Etiquette commands that the most prominent person sit or walk in the center, the next in rank at his right hand, and the third in rank on the left ('Er. 54b). The bride is placed on the right side of the groom, under the canopy. In the lavatory the left hand is used to keep the right free from uncleanness (Ber. 49a).

In the Cabala right and left fill important symbolic rôles, as the "siṭra di-yemina" (right side) and "siṭra di-sem'ala" (left side). According to the Zohar, Eve represented the left side of Adam and she was bound up in the flame of the Law ([see Fire](#)). The Torah is the right and the oral law the left (Zohar, Bereshit, p. 48b). This world is the right, and the world to come the left. It is curious that in Cabala the left side represents a higher and more developed state. It is said that Alexander the Great found a country where all the inhabitants were left-handed, and that they endeavored to convince him that greater honor is due to the left hand because it is nearer the heart; hence in greeting they shook hands with the left hand ("Erke ha-Kinnuyim," s.v. שמאל).

Isaac Baer Levinsohn translated into classical Hebrew Benjamin Franklin's "A Petition from the Left Hand," complaining of discrimination on the part of the teachers and claiming equal rights with his sister, the right hand ("Shorashe Lebanon," pp. 257-258, Wilna, 1841)

The Text: Babylonia Talmud Berachot 62a

Rabbi Akiva said: I once entered the bathroom after my teacher Rabbi Yehoshua, and I learned three things from observing his behavior: I learned that one should not defecate while facing east and west, but rather while facing north and south; I learned that one should not uncover himself while standing, but while sitting, in the interest of modesty; and I learned that one should not wipe with his right hand, but with his left.

Ben Azzai, a student of Rabbi Akiva, said to him: You were impertinent to your teacher to that extent?

He [Rabbi Akiva] replied: It is Torah, and I must learn.

Ben Azzai said: I once entered the bathroom after my teacher Rabbi Akiva, and I learned three things from observing his behavior: I learned that one should not defecate while facing east and west, but rather while facing north and south; I learned that one should not uncover himself while standing, but while sitting, in

the interest of modesty; and I learned that one should not wipe with his right hand, but with his left.

Rabbi Yehuda said to him: You were impertinent to your teacher to that extent?

He [Ben Azzai] replied: It is Torah, and I must learn.



Explaining the Story

What is the sequence of events that take place in the story?

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Why did Rabbi Akiva follow his teacher into the bathroom?

? What are the three things Rabbi Akiva learned from his teacher in the bathroom?

? How are the three teachings "Torah teachings"?

? Why did Ben Azzai call Rabbi Akiva impertinent? Do you agree with Ben Azzai?

Extra Bonus ? Rabbi Akiva replied to Ben Azzai: "It is Torah, and I must learn." Why couldn't Rabbi Akiva learn what he wanted to learn by asking his teacher?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Extra Bonus ? the second half of our story is a repetition word by word of the first half, the only exception being the names of the Sages (in the second half, Rabbi Akiva, who was the student in the first half becomes the teacher and Ben Azzai becomes the student.) Why does the Talmud repeat the story?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Extra Bonus ? Rabbi Akiva had shared with Ben Azzai what he had learned from Rabbi Yehoshua in the bathroom. Why does Ben Azzai need to follow Rabbi Akiva into the bathroom?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

“The Twist” – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from the Text



EPILOGUE