

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [223]



"Spit in it Seven Times; It is Good for It!"

Insights into Jerusalem Talmud Sotah 1:4
(Also Leviticus Rabbah 9:9)

Background to Our Story

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 fourth generation (139-163). According to the Talmud, his father was a descendant of the [Roman Emperor Nero](#) who had converted to Judaism. His wife [Bruriah](#) 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.

The Hammat Tiberias Synagogue



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

The Hammat Tiberias Synagogue is an ancient [synagogue](#) on the outskirts of [Tiberias](#), located near the hot springs just south of the city. The synagogue dates to 286 and 337 CE, when Tiberias was the seat of the [Sanhedrin](#). Two synagogue sites have been excavated at Hammat Tiberias. The first, uncovered in 1921 by Nachum Slouschz who was working under the sponsorship of the [Jewish Palestine Exploration Society](#), was a watershed event in the

history of [Israeli archaeology](#) as the first archaeological dig conducted under Jewish auspices.



A limestone [menorah](#) was uncovered there which is now on display at the [Israel Museum](#). The mosaic floor is made up of three panels featuring the zodiac, and Helios, the sun god. Women who symbolize the four seasons of nature appear in each corner.

The second synagogue site, excavated by Moshe Dothan, is noted for its elaborate [mosaic](#) floor. The synagogue, dated to the last half of the fourth century C.E., was named after an inscription that reads, in Greek, "Severus the pupil of the most illustrious patriarchs," an apparent reference to the leaders of the Jewish community.

In the center of one large mosaic is the Sun god, [Helios](#), sitting in his chariot holding the celestial sphere and a whip. Nine of the 12 signs of the [zodiac](#) survived intact. Another panel shows a Torah ark flanked by two the seven-branched menorahs and other Jewish ritual objects.

The Healing Power of Spitting

<http://www.jonathanlipnick.com/blog/can-spitting-be-a-religious-practice>

By Jonathan Lipnick

Saliva was widely regarded in the ancient world as a medicine for a variety of afflictions, from blindness to epilepsy to various skin disorders. Galen, the second century physician and surgeon from Pergamon, writes in his treatise *On the Natural Faculties*:

"And you may observe the extent of the alteration which occurs to food in the mouth if you will chew some corn and then apply it to an unripe [undigested] boil: you will see it rapidly transmuting- in fact entirely digesting- the boil, though it cannot do anything of the kind if you mix it with water. And do not let this surprise you; this phlegm [saliva] in the mouth is also a cure for lichens; it even rapidly destroys scorpions; while, as regards the animals which emit venom, some it kills at once, and others after an interval; to all of them in any case it does great damage. Now, the masticated food is all, firstly, soaked in and mixed up with this phlegm; and secondly, it is brought into contact with the actual skin of the mouth; thus it undergoes more change than the food which is wedged into the vacant spaces between the teeth." (3.7)

Pliny the Elder, the first century Roman polymath, writes in his *Natural History*:

The best of all safeguards against serpents is the saliva of a fasting human being. But our daily experience may teach us yet other values of its use. We spit on epileptics in a fit, that is, we throw back the infection. In a similar way we ward off witchcraft and the bad luck that follows meeting a person lame in the right leg.' (28.7.35)

There are three occurrences of Jesus healing by means of saliva in the gospels. In all three

passages, the verb used is πτύω, ptuo (or the corresponding noun πτύσμα), a wonderful example of onomatopoeia. Many contemporary Christians are uncomfortable with such passages because they make Jesus seem like a pagan magician. But the belief in the healing power of saliva seems to have been very deeply rooted in Jewish culture as well, as is seen in the following passages.

The Babylonian Talmud also contains several references to saliva (קִר) as medicine.

A long discussion in Shabbat 108b about what kinds of medicine are permitted on the Sabbath contains a tradition attributed to two sages, the father of Samuel and Levi:

"One man said it is forbidden to apply wine to the inside of the eye on the Sabbath, but upon the eye is permitted. The other said tasteless saliva even upon the eye is forbidden."

Apparently, saliva from the mouth of someone who had not yet eaten since waking up was considered a particularly effective ointment. And because it is a medicine par excellence, it cannot be used on the Sabbath in any fashion. It is interesting that in the minds of the sages, the saliva does not need to belong to a professional healer (e.g., shaman), but simply needs to be tasteless.

Few modern people today use saliva as a medicine, although it should be noted that recently science has demonstrated that saliva does in fact contain wound-healing proteins called [histatin](#)s. Many modern people, however, do believe that spitting will bring about good luck, or at least ward off bad luck. Baseball players have elaborate spitting rituals before they step into the batting box. Throughout the world, but especially in the Mediterranean Basin, people spit into the air three times to chase away the evil eye or the devil. This is the origin, for instance, of the phrase "tfu, tfu, tfu" that many Jews recite after announcing a piece of good news. Even Pliny talks about people in his day doing this, particularly boxers would spit in their glove to ensure that their punches would be strong. Perhaps this is the connection between good and bad spitting. Fundamentally, saliva is and was regarded as something undesirable, and the act of spitting seen as something vulgar. This is what provides its power to exorcise both demons and disease.

The Sotah Ordeal - Numbers Chapter 5:11-31 (JPS Translation)

¹¹ The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ¹² Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: If any man's wife has gone astray and broken faith with him ¹³ in that a man has had carnal relations with her unbeknown to her husband, and she keeps secret the fact that she has defiled herself without being forced, and there is no witness against her — ¹⁴ but a fit of jealousy comes over him and he is wrought up about the wife who has defiled herself; or if a fit of jealousy comes over one and he is wrought up about his wife although she has not defiled herself — ¹⁵ the man shall bring his wife to the priest. And he shall bring as an offering for her one-tenth of an *ephah* of barley flour. No oil shall be poured upon it and no frankincense shall be laid on it, for it is a meal offering of jealousy, a meal offering of remembrance which recalls wrongdoing.

¹⁶ The priest shall bring her forward and have her stand before the Lord. ¹⁷ The priest shall take sacral water in an earthen vessel and, taking some of the earth that is on the floor of the Tabernacle, the priest shall put it into the water. ¹⁸ After he has made the woman stand before the Lord, the priest shall bare the woman's head and place upon her hands the meal offering of remembrance, which is a meal offering of jealousy. And in the priest's hands shall be the water of bitterness that induces the spell. ¹⁹ The priest shall adjure the woman, saying to her, "If no man has lain with you, if you have not gone astray in defilement while married to your husband, be immune to harm from this water of bitterness that induces the spell. ²⁰ But if you have gone astray while married to your husband and have defiled yourself, if a man other than your husband has had carnal relations with you" — ²¹ here the priest shall administer the curse of adjuration to the woman, as the priest goes on to say to the woman — "may the Lord make you a curse and an imprecation among your people, as

the Lord causes your thigh to sag and your belly to distend; ²² may this water that induces the spell enter your body, causing the belly to distend and the thigh to sag." And the woman shall say, "Amen, amen!"

²³ The priest shall put these curses down in writing and rub it off into the water of bitterness. ²⁴ He is to make the woman drink the water of bitterness that induces the spell, so that the spell-inducing water may enter into her to bring on bitterness. ²⁵ Then the priest shall take from the woman's hand the meal offering of jealousy, elevate the meal offering before the Lord, and present it on the altar. ²⁶ The priest shall scoop out of the meal offering a token part of it and turn it into smoke on the altar. Last, he shall make the woman drink the water.

²⁷ Once he has made her drink the water — if she has defiled herself by breaking faith with her husband, the spell-inducing water shall enter into her to bring on bitterness, so that her belly shall distend and her thigh shall sag; and the woman shall become a curse among her people. ²⁸ But if the woman has not defiled herself and is pure, she shall be unharmed and able to retain seed.

²⁹ This is the ritual in cases of jealousy, when a woman goes astray while married to her husband and defiles herself, ³⁰ or when a fit of jealousy comes over a man and he is wrought up over his wife: the woman shall be made to stand before the Lord and the priest shall carry out all this ritual with her. ³¹ The man shall be clear of guilt; but that woman shall suffer for her guilt.

The Text: Jerusalem Talmud Sotah 1:4

Rabbi Meir used to preach in the synagogues of Hammat every Sabbath eve, and there was a woman there who used to listen to his voice.

One time he ran overtime, and the woman went home to find that the candle had gone out.

Her husband said to her: "Where have you been?"

She said: "Listening to the voice of the preacher."

He [the husband] said: "I swear that this woman shall not return to this house until she spits in the face of the preacher."

Rabbi Meir divined this through the Holy Spirit, and pretended to develop an eye ailment. He said, "Any woman who knows the incantation to recite over an eye, let her come and do it."

The woman's neighbors said to her, "Here is the time for you to return to your home. Pretend to recite an incantation, and spit in his eye."

She went, and he [Rabbi Meir] asked her if she knew the incantation for eye ailments. In her fear of him, she responded, "No."

He [Rabbi Meir] said, "Spit in it seven times; it is good for it."

When she had spat he said, "Go and tell your husband, 'You told me to spit once and I spat seven times.'"

His students said to the rabbi, "Is this how you disgrace the Torah? Had you told us, we would have brought him here and beat him until he took his wife back."

He [Rabbi Meir] responded to them, "Is Meir's honor greater than the honor of his Creator? For if Scripture says that the Holy Name, written in holiness, must be erased in the [ritual of the bitter] waters in order to restore peace between a man and his wife, does the same not apply to Meir's honor?"



Explaining the Story

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

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Why did the woman go to listen to Rabbi Meir on the eve of every Shabbat?

Extra Bonus ? What can we learn about the relationship between this husband and this wife from the opening lines of the story?

? Why is the husband upset?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

? Why does the wife tell the husband the truth about her whereabouts as opposed to a subterfuge?

? Why does the husband demand the woman spit on Rabbi Meir?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

? "I swear that this woman shall not return to this house until she spits in the face of the preacher." Why does the husband state his demand in the form of an oath?

? Where did the woman stay when her husband didn't allow her in the home? How long did the woman stay outside?

? Why do the neighbors advise the woman to go to see Rabbi Meir and pretend to recite an incantation?

? "She went, and he [Rabbi Meir] asked her if she knew the incantation for eye ailments. In her fear of him, she responded, 'No.'" Why was she fearful?

? Why are the students upset with Rabbi Meir?

? How do Rabbi Meir's students suggest to deal with the situation? What do you think about their suggestion?

Extra Bonus ? Why doesn't Rabbi Meir accept his students' suggestion?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Bonus ? Why is this a problematic story?

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

! The wisdom of Rabbi Meir: When fixing the problem is more important than upholding your honor!

EPILOGUE