

From the Rabbi's Desk
Rabbi Manes Kogan
Hillcrest Jewish Center
183-02 Union Turnpike, Flushing, NY 11366
rabbikogan@hillcrestjc.org

**Stories with a Twist
[239]**

**To Bestow Honor Upon Raba bar Hana
Since Rav Was a Great Expert
(Two Reasons - Two Twists)**

Insights into Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 5a



Background to Our Story

Nasi



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Sanhedrin Part 1. Koren publishers Jerusalem

Nasi: Initially the position of the Nasi, the president of the Sanhedrin, was significant only relative to the proceedings of the Sanhedrin. Then, as the Hasmonean dynasty entered a period of decline, the position of Nasi became that of leader of the Jewish community, whose authority was not subject to the approval of the Roman authorities or Herod. The office's power increased during the Great Revolt, as the Nasi Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel was one of the revolt's official leaders, and its power grew even stronger after the revolt was crushed. After the revolt, when Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai renewed the Sanhedrin at Yavne, the position of Nasi was the highest office recognized by the Jewish people, and there was no other independent institution of Jewish leadership. This position, which was passed down from father to son in the family of Hillel for about one hundred years, took on the trappings of an inherited position of sovereignty. Since the Nesi'im of the house of Hillel were also indirectly connected to the House of David, the position carried an aura of royalty. Furthermore, the authority of the Nesi'im over the Jews was recognized by the Roman authorities, although in most cases they were not granted governmental powers. As such, the authority of the Nasi in Eretz Yisrael was not enforced, but rather willingly accepted by the people who wanted to live under even a limited Jewish rule.

Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi (also known as "Rabbi")



Rabbi closed the tannaitic period with his arrangement of the Mishna. The son of Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel II, and a seventh-generation descendant of Hillel the Elder, Rabbi Yehuda lived in 135–220 CE during the fifth, and last, generation of tanna'im. According to tradition, Rabbi Yehuda was born on the day of Rabbi Akiva's death, leading people to later proclaim: "the sun sets, and the sun rises" (Ecclesiastes 1:5). Indeed, Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi was a successor to Rabbi Akiva, who had begun to assemble the statements of the Oral Law into a format that later became the Mishna. During his youth, Rabbi Yehuda studied under the five great students of Rabbi Akiva: Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yehuda bar Elai, Rabbi Yosei, Rabbi Shimon, and Rabbi Elazar. In addition, he learned Torah from his father Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel. In an effort to collect all the statements of the previous generations, Rabbi Yehuda moved from yeshiva to yeshiva, obtaining most of his knowledge from Rabbi Ya'akov bar Krashai. The wide breadth of his learning and his position as Nasi, to which he was appointed at age thirty upon his father's death, gave him the standing to undertake the greatest Torah enterprise of the era, the compilation of the Mishna. Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi surrounded himself with the most prominent Sages of his time, who assisted him in establishing the accuracy of the corpus he wanted to produce. Fortunately for him, the relative political calm of the time, and his favorable relationship with the Roman government, permitted the development of such an ambitious project. Due to his position as head of the community, the Mishna of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi was universally accepted, and earlier and other collections of halakha were set aside. This phenomenon unified the nation, as all of the Jewish people began to study the identical corpus of Oral Law. Due to poor health in his later years, Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi moved to Tzipori. His students were the Sages of the first generation of amora'im, including Rabbi Yoĥanan, Rabbi Ĥiyya, bar Kappara and Rav. The Gemara reports (Gittin 59a) that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi was the first individual since Moses to have such a broad mastery of Torah, and his great scholarship led him to be referred to in the Talmud as simply: Rabbi, or: Our holy Rabbi.

Rabbi Hiyya



Rabbi Hiyya ben Abba, who was from the city of Kafri, Babylonia, was among the last of the tanna'im and was a disciple-colleague of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi. Rabbi Ĥiyya descended from a family of distinguished lineage that traced its ancestry back to King David and produced many Sages. While he was still in Babylonia, Rabbi Ĥiyya was considered a Torah luminary. When he ascended with his family from Babylonia to Eretz Yisrael, some, engaging in hyperbole, said that the Torah was about to be forgotten in Eretz Yisrael until he came from Babylonia and reestablished it. When he came to Eretz Yisrael, he became a disciple and a colleague of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, with whom he had a very close relationship. He was especially close with Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi's son Shimon, who was also his business partner. All of the students of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi were Rabbi Ĥiyya's colleagues, and he was close with the tanna Rabbi Shimon ben Ĥalafta. The younger disciples of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, e.g., Rabbi Ĥanina, Rabbi Oshaya, Rabbi Yannai, and others, studied Torah from Rabbi Ĥiyya and were, to a certain degree, his disciples as well. His brothers' sons, Rabba bar bar Ĥana, and above all, the great amora, Rav, were his primary disciples. In addition to his prominence as a Torah scholar, Rabbi Ĥiyya was outstanding in his piety, as reflected in several anecdotes throughout the Talmud. Rabbi Ĥiyya also appears as a central figure in the Zohar. He was buried in Tiberias and his two sons were later buried alongside him.

Rabbah bar Hana

Rabbah bar Hana (Abba bar Hana in the Jerusalem Talmud) Babylonian amora of the 1st generation. In Babylon Rabbah studied under his uncle, Ḥiyya, whom he subsequently accompanied to Erez Israel. Before they left to return to Babylon, Ḥiyya asked the nasi to give Rabbah permission to decide matters of ritual law, monetary cases, and defects in a firstborn animal which could render its slaughter permissible. Little is known of Rabbah's personal life, other than that he traded in wine and that his wife died before him. His only known pupil was Hananel. Rabbah b. Ḥana is frequently confused with [Rabbah bar Bar Hana](#) who, some believe, was his son. They can be distinguished only by context and chronology.

Abba Arikha



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

Abba Arikha (175–247) (Talmudic Aramaic: אבא אריכא; born: *Abba bar Aybo*) was a Jewish Talmudist who was born and lived in Kafri, Sassanid Babylonia, known as an amora (commentator on the Oral Law) of the 3rd century who established at Sura the systematic study of the rabbinic traditions, which, using the *Mishnah* as text, led to the compilation of the *Talmud*. With him began the long period of ascendancy of the great academies of Babylonia, around the year 220. He is commonly known simply as Rav (Hebrew: רב)

In the traditional literature he is referred to almost exclusively as Rav, "the Master", (both his contemporaries and posterity recognizing in him a master), just as his teacher, Judah I, was known simply as Rabbi. He is called Rabbi Abba only in the *tannaitic* literature (for instance, *Tosefta*, *Beitzah* 1:7), where a number of his sayings are preserved. He occupies a middle position between the *Tannaim* and the *Amoraim*, and is accorded the right, rarely conceded to one who is only an 'amora, of disputing the opinion of a *tanna* (*Bava Batra* 42a and elsewhere).

Rav was a descendant of a distinguished Babylonian family which claimed to trace its origin to Shimei, brother of King David (*Sanhedrin* 5a; *Ketubot* 62b). His father, Aibo, was a brother of Chiyya, who lived in Palestine, and was a highly esteemed scholar in the collegiate circle of the patriarch Judah I. From his associations in the house of his uncle, and later as his uncle's disciple and as a member of the academy at Sepphoris, Rav acquired such an extraordinary knowledge of traditional lore as to make him its foremost exponent in his native land. While Judah I was still living, Rav, having been duly ordained as teacher—though not without certain restrictions (*Sanhedrin* 5a)—returned to Babylonia, where he at once began a career that was destined to mark an epoch in the development of Babylonian Judaism.

The Aleinu prayer first appeared in the manuscript of the Rosh Hashana liturgy by Rav. He included it in the Rosh Hashana mussaf service as a prologue to the Kingship portion of the Amidah. For that reason, some attribute to Rav the authorship, or at least the revising, of Aleinu.

Male Firstborn Animal



[Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Sanhedrin Part 1. Koren publishers Jerusalem](#)

The male firstborn of a kosher animal is sanctified at birth, both inside and outside of Eretz Yisrael, and this halakha also applies nowadays. As long as the animal remains unblemished it is forbidden to receive any benefit from it. Nowadays, it must be left alone until it develops a blemish, and it may then be slaughtered on the basis of authorization by an expert who rules that the blemish is permanent and would have disqualified the animal from being offered in the Temple. At that point it is the property of the priest to whom it was given, but it may be eaten in any place by any person, if the priest shares it (Rambam Sefer Korbanot, Hilkhot Bekhorot 3:1; Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh De'a 306:1, 5).

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 5a

מאי רשותא? פי הנה נחית רבה בר
חנה לבבל, אמר ליה רבי תניא לרבי:
בן אחי יורד לבבל, יורה? יורה. ידין?
ידין. יתיר בכורות? יתיר.

פי הנה נחית רב לבבל, אמר ליה רבי
תניא לרבי: בן אחותי יורד לבבל,
יורה? יורה. ידין? ידין. יתיר בכורות?
אל יתיר.

"יתיר בכורות?" "אל יתיר". מאי טעמא?
אילימא משום דלא חפיים, הא קא
אמרינן דחפיים טובא! אלא, משום דלא
בקייע במומי.

והאמר רב: שמונה עשר חדשים גדלתי
אצל רועה בהמה לידע איזה מום קבוע
ואיזה מום עובר! אלא, לחלק לו כבוד
לרבה בר חנה.

ואיבעית אימא: משום הא גופיה, דרב
בקייע במומי טפי, ושרי מומי דלא ידעי
אינשי, ואמרי: "פי האי גוונא שרא רב",
ואתו למשרי מום עובר.

When Rabba bar Hana descended to Babylonia, his uncle Rabbi Ḥiyya said to Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi: My brother's son is descending to Babylonia. May he teach people and issue rulings with regard to what is prohibited and what is permitted? Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi said to him: He may teach. Rabbi Ḥiyya then asked: May he also adjudicate cases of monetary law? Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi said to him: He may adjudicate. Rabbi Ḥiyya continued: May he declare a firstborn animal permitted? Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi said to him: He may declare such an animal permitted.

When Rav, who was also Rabbi Ḥiyya's nephew, descended to Babylonia, Rabbi Ḥiyya said to Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi: My sister's son is descending to Babylonia. May he teach people and issue rulings with regard to what is prohibited and what is permitted? Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi said to him: He may teach. Rabbi Ḥiyya then asked: May he also adjudicate cases of monetary law? Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi responded: He may adjudicate. Rabbi Ḥiyya continued: May he declare a firstborn animal

permitted? Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi said to him: He may not declare such an animal permitted.

.....

The Gemara had related that Rabbi H̄iyya asked Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi: May Rav declare a firstborn animal permitted, and that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi had responded: He may not declare such an animal permitted. What is the reason that he denied him this permission?

If we say that it was because Rav was not wise, but we already said that he [Rav] was exceedingly wise. Rather, it must be that it was because, although he was quite knowledgeable about the halakha, he was not an expert with regard to blemishes, meaning that he lacked the practical expertise to apply the halakha to actual cases. But didn't Rav say: I apprenticed with a shepherd for eighteen months in order to be able to know which blemish is a permanent blemish, and which is a temporary blemish? Evidently, he had a high level of practical expertise in this matter.

Rather, it was in order to bestow honor upon Rabba bar H̄ana. Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi wanted to ensure that Rabba bar H̄ana would be treated with respect, so he made sure that there was an area of halakha with regard to which the people would not be able to consult with Rav and would need to consult with Rabba bar H̄ana instead.

And if you wish, say instead: It is due to this fact itself: Since Rav was a great expert with regard to blemishes, he would permit blemishes that average people do not know about. And as a result, they would erroneously say with regard to a different blemish: In a case like this Rav declared the animal permitted, and they would come to erroneously permit an animal with a temporary blemish, believing it to be identical to the blemish that Rav had declared permitted. Due to this concern, Rav was denied the authority to declare firstborn animals permitted on the basis of a blemish.



Explaining the Story (What is the sequence of events that take place in the story?)

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Why did Rabbi Hiyya seek Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi's authorization for his nephews Rabba bar Hana and Rav to teach, to adjudicate cases of monetary law and to declare a firstborn animal permitted?

Bonus ? Why didn't Rabba bar Hana and Rav seek the authorization for themselves directly from Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Extra Bonus ? What is the reason Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi gives not to allow Rav to declare a firstborn animal permitted?

Bonus ? Why didn't Rabbi Hiyya or Rav inquire from Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi as to the reason for his decision to deny Rav the permission to declare a firstborn animal permitted?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Why do the Sages of later generation strive to understand why Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi denied Rav the permission to declare a firstborn animal permitted?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Extra Bonus ? The Sages give two answers for Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi's denial of the permission to Rav.

1) To bestow honor upon Rabba bar Hana. Rabbi made sure that there was an area of halakha with regard to which the people would not be able to consult with Rav and would need to consult with Rabba bar Hana instead.

2) Since Rav was a great expert with regard to blemishes, he would permit blemishes that average people do not know about, and they would come to erroneously permit an animal with a temporary blemish, believing it to be identical to the blemish that Rav had declared permitted.

What do these two answers have in common?

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

! *This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine!* Or "Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi as a coach"

! Being overqualified for the job: when more is less.

EPILOGUE