

From the Rabbi's Desk  
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## Stories with a Twist [241]

### Is There Anything Finer Than This?

#### Insights into Babylonian Talmud Avoda Zara 65a

Thanks to Rabbi Uri Romano for bringing this story to my attention



Hugh Hefner has died. Is he really going to a better place?

[www.independent.ie](http://www.independent.ie)

Hugh Marston Hefner (April 9, 1926 – September 27, 2017) was an American businessman, magazine publisher and playboy. He was the founder of and editor-in-chief of the magazine, which he founded in 1953.

#### Background to Our Story

##### Rava



[Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Volume 32. Avoda Zara – Horayot. Koren publishers Jerusalem](#)

Rava – רבא : Rava, one of the most important *amora'im* of the fourth generation in Babylonia, was the son of Rav Yosef bar Hama and a colleague of Abaye. Rava was born in the town of Mehoza, where he studied Torah under Rav Nahman bar Ya'akov and Rav Hisda. Rava considered Rav Yosef his primary teacher and would depart from his company by walking backward, a practice that caused multiple injuries to his heels. Upon Rav Yosef's death, Abaye was chosen to succeed Rav Yosef as head of the yeshiva of Pumbedita. Rava subsequently opened a new yeshiva in Mehoza.

##### Bar Sheshakh



[Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Volume 32. Avoda Zara – Horayot. Koren publishers Jerusalem](#)

Bar Sheshakh – בר שישך : Some scholars have suggested this might be a Persian title, but it appears to be a given name. The political structure in Persia, particularly in the Parthian

period, but in the Sassanid period to some extent as well, was a kind of feudal structure, in which the high nobility enjoyed almost complete liberty. At times, they became essentially independent rulers in their respective regions, and this explains how bar Sheshakh could claim that the fear of the government was not upon him.

### **It is Prohibited to Send a Gift to a Gentile on a Festival Day of Idol Worship**



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Volume 32. Avoda Zara – Horayot. Koren publishers Jerusalem

I know of him that he does not worship – It is prohibited to send a gift to a gentile on a festival day of idol worship unless one knows that the gentile does not recognize and worship idols, in accordance with the incident related in the Gemara involving Rav Yehuda and Avidarna, and the incident involving Rava and bar Sheshakh (Rambam *Sefer HaMadda, Hilkhot Avoda Zara 9:2; Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh De'a 148:5*).

### **The World to Come**

*Maimonides: Mishneh Torah - Laws of Repentance (c.1176 - c.1178 CE). Translated by Eliyahu Touger. Chapter 8*

#### **1**

The good that is hidden for the righteous is the life of the world to come. This will be life which is not accompanied by death and good which is not accompanied by evil. The Torah alludes to this in [the promise, [Deuteronomy 22:7](#)]: "So that good will be granted you and you will live long."

The oral tradition explains: "So that good will be granted you" - in the world that is entirely good; "and you will live long" - in the world which is endlessly long, the world to come. The reward of the righteous is that they will merit this pleasure and take part in this good. The retribution of the wicked is that they will not merit this life. Rather, they will be cut off and die.

Whoever does not merit this life is [truly] dead and will not live forever. Rather, he will be cut off in his wickedness and perish as a beast. This is the intent of the meaning of the term *karet* in the Torah as [[Numbers 15:31](#)] states: "That soul shall surely be cut off." [Based on the repetition of the verb,] the oral tradition explains: *hikaret* means to be cut off in this world and *tikaret*, to be cut off in the world to come. After these souls become separated from bodies in this world, they will not merit the life of the world to come. Rather, even in the world to come, they will be cut off.

#### **2**

In the world to come, there is no body or physical form, only the souls of the righteous alone, without a body, like the ministering angels. Since there is no physical form, there is neither eating, drinking, nor any of the other bodily functions of this world like sitting, standing, sleeping, death, sadness, laughter, and the like.

Thus, the Sages of the previous ages declared: "In the world to come, there is neither eating, drinking, nor sexual relations. Rather, the righteous will sit with their crowns on their heads and delight in the radiance of the Divine Presence."

From that statement, it is clear that there is no body, for there is no eating or drinking. [Consequently,] the statement, "the righteous sit," must be interpreted metaphorically, i.e., the righteous exist there without work or labor.

Similarly, the phrase, "their crowns on their heads," [is also a metaphor, implying] that they will possess the knowledge that they grasped which allowed them to merit the life of the

world to come. This will be their crown. A similar [usage of this metaphor was employed by] Solomon [[Song of Songs 3:11](#)]: "The crown with which his mother crowned him."

[Support for the concept that this does not refer to a physical crown can be brought from the prophecy, [Isaiah 51:11](#)]: "Eternal joy will be upon their heads." Joy is not a physical entity which can rest on a head. Similarly, the expression "crown" used by the Sages [refers to a spiritual concept], knowledge.

What is meant by the expression, "delight in the radiance of the Divine Presence"? That they will comprehend the truth of Godliness which they cannot grasp while in a dark and humble body.

### 3

The term "soul" when used in this context does not refer to the soul which needs the body, but rather to "the form of the soul," the knowledge which it comprehends according to its power. Similarly, it comprehends abstract concepts and other matters. This is "the form" whose nature we described in the fourth chapter of *Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah*. This is the soul referred to in this context.

Since this life is not accompanied by death - for death is an event associated with the body alone and, in that realm, there is no body - it is called "the bond of life," as [[I Samuel 25:29](#)] states: "And the soul of my master will be bound up in the bond of life." This is the reward above which there is no higher reward and the good beyond which there can be [other] good. This was [the good] desired by all the prophets.

### 4

How many metaphoric terms have been used to refer to [the world to come]! "The mountain of God" [[Psalms 24:3](#)], "His holy place" [*ibid.*], "the holy path" [[Isaiah 35:8](#)], "the courtyards of God" [[Psalms 65:5](#), 92:14], "the pleasantness of God" [*ibid.* 27:4], "the tent of God" [*ibid.* 15:1], "the palace of God" [*ibid.* 5:8], "the house of God" [*ibid.* 27:4], "the gate of God" [*ibid.* 118:20].

The Sages referred to this good which is prepared for the righteous with the metaphor: "the feast." Generally, it is referred to with the term "the world to come."

### 5

The retribution beyond which there is no greater retribution is that the soul will be cut off and not merit this life as [[Numbers 15:31](#)] states: "This soul shall surely be cut off. His sin shall remain upon him."

This refers to the obliteration of the soul which was referred to by the prophets with the following metaphoric terms: "the pit of destruction" [[Psalms 55:24](#)], "obliteration" [*ibid.* 88:12], "the bonfire" [[Isaiah 30:33](#)], "the leech" [[Proverbs 30:15](#)]. All the synonyms for nullification and destruction are used to refer to it for it is the [ultimate] nullification after which there is no renewal and the [ultimate] loss which can never be recovered.

### 6

Lest you think lightly of this good, [the world to come], imagining that the reward for the mitzvot and for a person [following] completely the paths of truth is for him to eat and drink good foods, have intercourse with beautiful forms, wear garments of linen and lace, dwell in ivory palaces, use utensils of gold and silver, or other similar ideas, as conceived by the foolish, decadent Arabs, who are flooded with lewdness.

In contrast, the sages and men of knowledge know that all these matters are vain and empty things, without any purpose. They are only considered of great benefit to us in this world because we possess a body and a physical form. All these matters are the needs of the body. The soul only desires them and lusts for them because of the needs of the body,

so that its desires will be fulfilled and its health maintained. In a situation, where there is no body, all of these matters will be nullified.

There is no way in this world to grasp and comprehend the ultimate good which the soul will experience in the world to come.

We only know bodily good and that is what we desire. However, that [ultimate] good is overwhelmingly great and cannot be compared to the good of this world except in a metaphoric sense.

In truth, there is no way to compare the good of the soul in the world to come to the bodily goods of this world. Rather, that good is infinitely great, with no comparison or likeness. This is alluded to by David's statement [[Psalms 31:20](#)]: "How great is the good that You have hidden for those who fear You."

## 7

How very much did David desire the life of the world to come as implied by [[Psalms 27:13](#)]: "Had I not believed that I would see the goodness of God in the land of the living!"

The Sages of the previous generations have already informed us that man does not have the potential to appreciate the good of the world to come in a full sense nor can anyone know its greatness, beauty, and power except God, alone.

All the beneficence which the prophets promised Israel in their visions are only physical concerns which Israel will appreciate in the Messianic age when dominion [over the world] will return to Israel. However, the good of the life of the world to come has no comparison or likeness, nor was it described by the prophets, lest with such a description, they diminish it.

This [was implied] by [Isaiah's (64:3)] statement: "No eye has ever seen, O God, except for You, what You will do for those who wait for You;" i.e. the good which was not perceived by the vision of a prophet and is perceived by God alone, this was created by God for those who wait for Him.

The Sages declared: "All the prophets only prophesied about the Messianic Age. However, regarding the world to come - 'No eye has ever seen, O God, except for You.'

## 8

The Sages did not use the expression "the world to come" with the intention of implying that [this realm] does not exist at present or that the present realm will be destroyed and then, that realm will come into being.

The matter is not so. Rather, [the world to come] exists and is present as implied by [[Psalms 31:20](#)]: "How great is the good] that You have hidden... which You have made...." It is only called the world to come because that life comes to a man after life in this world in which we exist, as souls [encloded] in bodies. This [realm of existence] is presented to all men at first.

### **The Text: Babylonian Talmud Avoda Zara 65a**

רַבָּא אָמַר לִיה קוֹרְפָנָא לְבַר שֵׁישֶׁף בְּיוֹם אֵידָם, אָמַר: יִדְעָנָא בֵּיה דְּלֹא פְּלַח לְעִבּוּדָה זָרָה. אֲזַל אֲשַׁפְחִיה דִּיתִיב עַד צְוֹאֲרִיה בְּוֹרְדָא וְקִימָן זִוְנוֹת עֲרוּמוֹת קַמִּיה, אָמַר לִיה: אֵית לְכוּ פְּהֵאֵי גְּוֹנָא לְעֵלְמָא דְאַתִּי? אָמַר לִיה: דִּידָן עֲדִיפָא טְפִי מֵהֵאֵי. אָמַר לִיה: טְפִי מֵהֵאֵי מִי הָוָה? אָמַר לִיה: אַתּוֹן אֵיפָא עֲלִיכּוֹ אֵימְתָא דְמַלְכוּתָא, אֲנִן לֹא תִיְהוּי עֲלֹן אֵימְתָא דְמַלְכוּתָא. אָמַר לִיה: אֲנָא מִיְהָא מֵאֵי אֵימְתָא דְמַלְכוּתָא אֵיפָא עֲלִי? עַד דִּיתְבִּי אַתָּא הֵהוּא פְּרִיסְתָקָא דְמַלְפָא, אָמַר לִיה: קוּם, דְקַבְעִי לָךְ מַלְפָא!

כִּי נָפִיק וְאָזִיל, אָמַר לִיה: עֵינָא דְבַעֵי לְמִיחָזֵי לְכוּ בִישׁוּתָא תִּפְקַע, אָמַר לִיה רַבָּא:  
אָמַר, פְּקַע עֵינֵיה דְּבַר שִׁישְׁךְ

Rava brought a gift to a minister named bar Sheshakh on their festival day.  
Rava said: I know of him that he does not worship idols.

Rava went to him and found him sitting up to his neck in rose water, and naked prostitutes were standing before him. Bar Sheshakh said to him [to Rava]: Do you have anything like this in the World to Come?

Rava said to him [to bar Sheshakh]: Ours is better than this.

Bar Sheshakh said to him [to Rava]: Is there anything finer than this?

Rava said to him [to bar Sheshakh]: You have the fear of the government upon you; we will not have the fear of the government upon us.

Bar Sheshakh said to him [to Rava]: As for me, in any event, what fear of the government is there upon me?

While they were sitting, a certain royal officer [*peristaka*] came and said to bar Sheshakh: Rise, as the king requires you to appear before him.

As he [bar Sheshakh]: was going out, he said to Rava: May any eye that wishes to see evil upon you burst. Rava said to him [to bar Sheshakh]: Amen. And then bar Sheshakh's eye burst.



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

### Comprehension and Analysis Questions

**?** Why did Rava bring a gift to bar Sheshakh?

**Bonus ?** Why did Rava chose to bring a gift to bar Sheshakh on *his* festival day?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

**?** Why was bar Sheshakh sitting up to his neck in rose water, with naked prostitutes standing before him?

**Bonus ?** "Do you have anything like this in the World to Come?" What was the objective of bar Sheshakh's question?

**Bonus ?** "You have the fear of the government upon you; we will not have the fear of the government upon us." Why did Rava chose the lack of fear of government to describe to bar Sheshakh the superiority of the World to Come, instead of sharing with him all the information contained in Maimonides' Laws of Repentance, Chapter 8?

**Bonus ?** Why did Bar Sheshakh said to Rava: As for me, in any event, what fear of the government is there upon me?

**?** What did the episode of the royal officer summoning bar Sheshakh teach him (and all of us)?

**Bonus ?** When bar Sheshakh's eye bursts, we learn that he actually wished to see evil upon Rava. Why did Sheshakh's pronounce the curse that came back to haunt him?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

**?** Why did bar Sheshakh wish to see evil upon Rava?

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

**!** Care-free? Worry-free? Stress-free? Not in this life!

## **EPILOGUE**

Rava, the leader of the Jewish community in Babylon living under the Sassanid rule, brings a gift to bar Sheshakh, a pagan hedonist local ruler. We don't know the nature of the gift but we can guess that it is a bribe to mollify bar Sheshakh and find favor in his eyes.

Bar Sheshakh, who sees himself as a care-free individual, taunts Rava - "Is there anything finer than this?"- but learns the hard way, that anxiety is inherent to the human condition. Nobody who has something to lose; a loved one, financial stability, honor, the functionality of the body, or the free use of his or her time; will ever be care-free. As long as we live, anxiety will be part and parcel of our earthly lives.