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## Stories with a Twist

[243]

### **The Lessons of a Maidservant** Insights into Babylonian Talmud Megilah 18b and Jerusalem Talmud Megilah 2:2, 19a

With Appreciation to Rabbi Uri Romano for putting this class together and teaching it



## 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 Yoĥanan 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”)**



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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 Yehuda HaNasi's Maidservant**

Her exact identity is unknown but she is mentioned in many stories in both the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmud. She is presented as a pious and knowledge woman.

### **Purslane**



Purslane is a succulent annual trailing plant that grows in many countries because it thrives in poor soil. It can be eaten as a cooked vegetable and is great to use in salads, soups, stews or any dish you wish to sprinkle it over. Purslane is antibacterial, antiscorbutic, depurative, diuretic and febrifuge. The leaves are a very rich source of omega-3 fatty acids which prevents heart attacks and strengthens the immune system.

### **Mishnah, Megilah 2:1-2**

1. If someone read the *Megillah* out of sequence; he has not fulfilled his obligation. If he read it by heart, or if he read it in *Targum* or in any other language, he has not fulfilled his obligation. However, we may read it for those who speak a foreign language in a foreign language. One who speaks a foreign language and heard it [read in Hebrew that was written] in Assyrian [script] has fulfilled his obligation.

2. If one read it **סְרוּגִין** - at intervals, discontinuously, or while half asleep, he has fulfilled his obligation. If one was writing it, expounding upon it, or correcting it, provided he had intent, he fulfilled his obligation; if not, he did not fulfill his obligation.

If it was written with orpiment, vermilion, gum, or ferrous sulfate, or on paper, or on unfinished parchment, he did not fulfill his obligation, unless it is written in Assyrian [script] on parchment and with ink.

### **The Text (1<sup>st</sup> version): Jerusalem Talmud Megilah 2:2, 19a**

אמר ר' חגי סירוגים וחלוגות ומי גדול בחכמה או בשנים איצורת לחברייא אמרין  
ניסוק נישאול לבית ר'ם סלקין מישאול ואמרום  
יצאת שפחה משל בית רבי אמרה להם היכנסו לשנים  
אמרון ייעול פלן קמי ייעול פלון קמי שרון עלין קטעין קטעין אמרה להם למה אתם  
נכנסין סירוגין סירוגין  
חד רבי הוה טעון פרחינין ונפלין מיניה אמרה ליה ר' נתפזרו חלוגיך אמרה לה אתייא  
מטאטא ואייתת אלבינה

Rabbi Chagay said: [the Sages didn't know the meaning of] *Serugin*, *haluglugot*, *metateh*, and who is greater, one who is wiser or one who is older. They said to each other: Let's go and ask the house of Rabbi [Yehuda the Prince]. They went to ask.

The maidservant of the house of Rabbi came out and said: The older ones should enter first.

They [the Sages] said: this should go first, this should go first, and they started to enter one after the other and she [the maidservant of the house of Rabbi] said to them: Why are you entering *serugin*, *serugin*?

One of the rabbis was carrying purslane and it fell to the floor. She said to him: your *haluglugot* are all over the floor.

She [the maidservant of the house of Rabbi] said I will bring a *matate*, and she brought a broom.

### **The Text (2<sup>nd</sup> version): Babylonian Talmud Megilah 18b**

קראה סירוגין יצא וכו': לא הוו ידעי רבנן מאי סירוגין שמעוה לאמתא דבי רבי דקאמרה להו לרבנן דהוי עיילי פסקי פסקי לבי רבי עד מתי אתם נכנסין סירוגין סירוגין

לא הוו ידעי רבנן מאי חלוגלוגות שמעוה לאמתא דבי רבי דאמרה ליה להווא גברא דהוה קא מבדר פרפחיני עד מתי אתה מפזר חלוגלוגך

לא הוו ידעי רבנן מאי (משלי ד, ח) סלסלה ותרוממך שמעוה לאמתא דבי רבי דהוות אמרה להווא גברא דהוה מהפך במזייה אמרה ליה עד מתי אתה מסלסל בשערך

לא הוו ידעי רבנן מאי (תהלים נה, כג) השלך על ה' יהבך אמר רבה בר בר חנה זימנא חדא הוה אזילנא בהדי ההוא טייעא וקא דרינא טונא ואמר לי שקול יהביך ושדי אגמלאי

לא הוו ידעי רבנן מאי (ישעיהו יד, כג) וטאטאתיה במטאטא השמד שמעוה לאמתא דבי רבי דהוות אמרה לחברתה שקולי טאטיתא וטאטי ביתא

If f one read it *serugin* he has fulfilled his obligation.

The Sages did not know the meaning of *serugin*. They heard the maidservant of Rabbi's household, saying to the rabbis on seeing them enter at intervals: How long are you going to come in *serugin serugin*?!

The Sages did not know the meaning of *haluglugot*. One day they heard the maidservant of the household of Rabbi, on seeing a man peeling purslane, say to him: How long will you be peeling your *haluglugot*?

The Sages did not know the meaning of "*Salseleah* and she will exalt you" (Proverbs 4:8). One day they heard the maidservant of the house of Rabbi say to a man who was curling his hair, she said to him: How long will you be *mesalsei* with your hair?

The Sages did not know the meaning of “Cast upon the Lord your *yehav*” (Psalms 55:23). Rabbah bar Bar Hanah said: One day I was travelling with a certain Arab and was carrying a load, and he [the Arab] said to me: Lift up your *yehav* and put it on [one of] the camels.

The Sages did not know the meaning of “And *ta’atimah bemetateh* of destruction” (Isaiah 14:23). They heard the maidservant of Rabbi’s household say to her friend: Take the broom *ta’atimah* and sweep (*ta’ate*) the house.



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

### **Comprehension and Analysis Questions**

**?** Why did the Sages go to the House of Rabbi [which Rabbi?] to inquire about the meaning of some words?

**?** Did the Sages get to see Rabbi? If not, why?

**?** How did the maidservant of Rabbi [which Rabbi] know the meaning of all the words?

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

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

**?** Why didn’t the Sages know the meanings?

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

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

**?** What is the difference between both versions of our story?

**?** What is the general idea our story (both versions) is trying to present?

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

- ! • Stick around smart people and you will learn a lot!
- ! • Everybody could become your teacher.
- ! • Don't judge people's knowledge from their social position.
- ! • You do not only learn in a classroom.
- ! • You can teach without knowing you are teaching!

## EPILOGUE