

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist

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Even I can do that!

Insights into Genesis Rabbah 68:4

With appreciation to Rabbi Uriel Romano for bringing this story to my attention together with Tal Ilan's paper.



Background to Our Story

Genesis Rabbah (Bereishit Rabbah)

Composed in Talmudic Israel/Babylon (500 CE). Bereshith Rabbah (The Great Genesis) is a midrash comprising a collection of rabbinical homiletical interpretations of the Book of Genesis. It contains many simple explanations of words and sentences, often in Aramaic, suitable for the instruction of youth. It also contains varied haggadic expositions popular in the public lectures of the synagogues and schools. The tradition that Rabbi Hoshaiah is the author of Genesis Rabbah may be taken to mean that he began the work as numerous additions have been made over the subsequent years before it was redacted (4th-5th Century CE). The editor strung together various longer or shorter explanations and haggadic interpretations of the successive passages, sometimes anonymously, sometimes citing the author. Even then the text was probably not closed, for longer or shorter passages could always be added, the number of prefatory passages to a section be increased, and those existing be enlarged by accretion. It is divided into sections variably numbered between 97-101. This arrangement shows some similarity with the triennial reading of the Torah as was practiced in Israel.

Matrons in Ancient Rome

By [Emily Kittell-Queller](#)

Holding the title of "matron" in Ancient Rome was a sign of a certain status. A matron was a woman with a certain amount of distinction. She was freeborn and usually either married or a widow. There were some concrete markers of this status, especially in terms of

clothing. During the late Republic and throughout the time of the Empire a matron generally wore two tunics covered by a long dress known as a stola. When she went out she would add a palla, a mantle draped over the shoulders and sometimes over the head as well. Young girls, prostitutes, and those who had forfeited the title of matron (usually through being caught in adultery) were not permitted to wear either of these garments.

Though matrons were generally expected to occupy themselves with running their households, as a group they also granted various honors and responsibilities on certain occasions and could get their voices heard in ways other women could not.

Matrona and Rabbi Jose: An Alternative Interpretation

In: Tal Ilan: Matrona and Rabbi Jose: An Alternative Interpretation. Journal for the Study of Judaism, XXV, 1

What have we been able to learn from these seven traditions?

They have disclosed to us a teacher-student relationship between a Jewish sage and a woman who is groping through her first Biblical lessons, reading carefully and asking questions. Rabbi Jose, her mentor, is doing his best to keep his answers to her simple and within the scope of her academic achievements. Naturally, the questions involve those aspects in Scripture where the text is obscure, its meaning dubious or ambivalent. These stumbling blocks in Scripture have served as points of discussion in the Jewish academies, as well as targets for attacks on Judaism by heretical groups, or by gentiles and pagans. However, the answers which were given to these questions both within Jewish circles and to the outsider protagonists were usually more involved than those Rabbi Jose presented Matrona with, and, in the case of heretics and gentiles, also more violent. In addition, just as the questions were not recognized as being of particular interest to anyone spiritual group outside of Judaism, all of them save one are neither of any particular interest to a woman. The fact that it is, nevertheless, a woman who sets them, could suggest a historical kernel. We may, therefore, conclude that since there is strong evidence in the text that the woman could not be Roman (and Matrona is, therefore, a name rather than a title), since the Biblical text she is referring to is obviously in Hebrew and since her questions do not betray any particular spiritual background, it should not be considered outrageous to view this woman as Jewish.

Rabbi Jose ben Halafta



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

Jose ben Halafta or Yose ben Halafta (alt. Halpetha) (Hebrew: רבי יוסי בן חלפתא) was a Tanna of the fourth generation (2nd century CE). Jose was a student of Rabbi Akiva and was regarded as one of the foremost scholars of halakha and aggadah of his day. He was a teacher and mentor to, among other notables, Judah ha-Nasi and thus is prominently mentioned in the Mishnah, being the fifth most frequently mentioned sage in the Mishnah. Of the many Rabbi Yose's in the Talmud, Yose Ben Halafta is the one who is simply referred to as Rabbi Yose.

Rabbi Jose ben Halafta is known for his commentary in the Haggadah

Of Jose's life only the following details are known: He was born at [Sepphoris](#); but his family was of [Babylonian-Jewish](#) origin. According to a genealogical chart found at [Jerusalem](#), he was a descendant of [Jonadab ben Rechab](#). He was one of [Rabbi Akiva](#)'s five principal pupils, called "the restorers of the Law," who were afterward ordained by [Judah ben Baba](#). He was, besides, a pupil of [Johanan ben Nuri](#), whose [halakhot](#) he transmitted and of [Eutolemus](#). It is very likely that he studied much under his father, [Halafta](#), whose authority he invokes in several instances. But his principal teacher was Akiva, whose system he followed in his

interpretation of the Law. After having been ordained in violation of a Roman edict, Jose fled to [Asia Minor](#), where he stayed till the edict was abrogated. Later he settled at [Usha](#), then the seat of the [Sanhedrin](#). As he remained silent when his fellow pupil [Simeon bar Yohai](#) once attacked the Roman government in his presence, he was forced by the Romans to return to Sepphoris, which he found in a decaying state. He established there a flourishing school; and it seems that he died there. Jose's great learning attracted so many pupils that the words "that which is altogether just shalt thou follow" were interpreted to mean in part "follow Jose to Sepphoris". He was highly extolled after his death. His pupil [Judah ha-Nasi](#) said: "The difference between Jose's generation and ours is like the difference between the Holy of Holies and the most profane."

Owing to Jose's fame as a saint, legend describes him as having met [Elijah](#). Jose, [complying with the levirate law](#), married the wife of his brother who had died childless; she bore him five sons: [Ishmael](#), [Eleazar](#), [Menahem](#), Halafta (who died in his lifetime), and [Eudemus](#).

He exemplified [Abtalion's](#) dictum, "Love the handicrafts," for he was a [tanner](#) by trade, and followed a craft then commonly held in contempt.

The Text: Genesis Rabbah 68:4

מטרונה שאלה את רבי יוסי בר הלפתא אמרה לו לכמה ימים ברא הקדוש ברוך הוא את עולמו, אמר לה לששת ימים, כדכתיב (שמות כ, יא): כי ששת ימים עשה ה' את השמים ואת הארץ. אמרה לו מה הוא עושה מאותה שעה ועד עכשו, אמר לה, הקדוש ברוך הוא יושב ומזוג וזוגים, בתו של פלוני לפלוני, אשתו של פלוני לפלוני, ממנו של פלוני לפלוני. אמרה ליה, ודא הוא אמנותיה, אף אני יכולה לעשות כן, כמה עבדים כמה שפחות יש לי, לשעה קלה אני יכולה לזנוג. אמר לה, אם קלה היא בעיניך, קשה היא לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא כקריעת ים סוף. הלה לו רבי יוסי בר הלפתא, מה עשתה נטלה אלף עבדים ואלף שפחות והעמידה אותן שורות שורות, אמרה פלן יסב לפלונית ופלונית תסב לפלוני, וזוגה אותן בלילה אחת. למחר אתון לגבה דין מוחיה פציעא, דין עינו שמטא, דין רגליה תבירא. אמרה להון מה לכון, דא אמרה לית אנא בעי לדיו, ודין אמר לית אנא בעי לדא. מיד שלחה והביאה את רבי יוסי בר הלפתא, אמרה לו לית אלוה פאלהכון, אמת היא תורתכון נאה ומשבחת יפה אמרת.

Matrona asked Rabbi Yosi ben Halafta: In how many days did God create the world?

He [Rabbi Yosi] said, In six, as it is said, *Since six days God made...* ([Exodus 20:11](#)).

And since then, she [Matrona] asked, what has God been doing?

He [Rabbi Yosi] said to her: God sits [on the Heavenly Throne] and makes matches: the daughter of this one to that one, the wife [i.e. widow] of this one to that one, the money of this one to that one."

She [Matrona] said to him [Rabbi Yosi]: And for merely this you believe in Him! Even I can do that. I have many slaves, both male and female. In no time at all, I can match them for marriage.

Rabbi Yosi [said]: Though this may be an easy thing for you to do, for God it is as difficult as splitting the Sea of Reeds. Whereupon, Rabbi Yosi took his leave.

What did she [Matrona] do? She lined up a thousand male and a thousand female slaves and paired them off before nightfall. The morning after, her estate resembled a battlefield. One slave had his head bashed in, another had lost an eye, while a third hobbled because of a broken leg.

She [Matrona] said to them: What do we have here? They each said to her: I don't want this one [with whom you matched me.]

Immediately, she [Matrona] summoned Rabbi Yosi and she brought him to her and said: Your God is not like our god, and your Torah is true, pleasing and praiseworthy. You spoke wisely.



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

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Why wasn't the Matrona impressed with Rabbi Yose's answer? Which answer do you think she expected?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Bonus ? Why did Rabbi Yose take his leave after replying to Matrona that making matches for God is as difficult as splitting the Sea of Reeds?

? What was Matrona's idea of matchmaking?

Bonus ? What was the problem in Matrona's notion of matchmaking?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

? How is Rabbi Yose's God (our God) different from Matrona's God?

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

! For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple....and wrong (Henry Louis Mencken) or When "*eeny, meeny, miny, moe*" doesn't work.

EPILOGUE