

From the Rabbi's Desk
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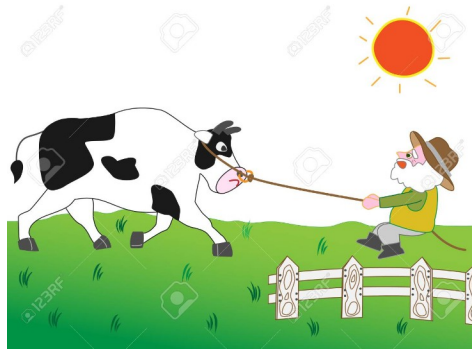
Stories with a Twist

[256]

"...but the Cow Would Not Budge from Her Place"

Insights into Pesikta Rabbati 14:2

With appreciation to Rabbi Uri Romano for reminding me of the story and for helping me with "the twist" and to Daniela Kogan for getting for me Braude's English translation of Pesikta Rabbati



Background to Our Story

Pesikta Rabbati



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

Pesikta Rabbati or P'siqta Rabbita (Hebrew: פסיקתא רבתי) is a collection of Aggadic Midrash (homilies) on the Pentateuchal and prophetic lessons, the special Sabbaths, etc. It was composed around 845 CE and probably called "rabbati" (the larger) to distinguish it from the earlier Pesikta.

Yohanan ben Torta



<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/johanan-ben-torta>

Yohanan ben Torta (first half of the second century), tanna, a contemporary of Akiva. Only one statement by him is known, in which he gives the reasons for the destruction of the Temple. "Why was Shiloh destroyed? Because of the contempt in which the sacred objects there were held. Why was the first Temple destroyed? Because of three evil things which prevailed then – idolatry, immorality, and bloodshed. But in the period of the Second Temple we know that they labored in Torah and were careful to give tithes; why then were they exiled? Because they loved wealth and hated one another. This is to teach thee that hatred of one's fellow men is considered by God as grave as idolatry, immorality, and bloodshed" (Tosefta Menahot 13:22, Tosefta. Yoma 9a, b). Yohanan b. Torta vigorously

opposed Akiva's acceptance of Bar Kokhba as the Messiah, saying to him, "Akiva! Grass shall grow from your jaws before the son of David appears" (Jerusalem Talmud Ta'anit 4:8, 68d). According to a late aggadah, Yohanan was a proselyte who became converted when he saw that the cow he bought from a Jew refused to work on the Sabbath (Pesikta Rabati Parah, 56b–57a). This, however, would appear to be merely a homiletical interpretation based on his name (torta, "cow") which, in fact, refers to his birthplace.

Bibliography:

Bacher, Tann.; Alon, Toledot, 2 (1957), 42.

Exodus 20:8-11

⁸ Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God: you shall not do any work — you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, or your cattle, or the stranger who is within your settlements. ¹¹ For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth and sea, and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day; therefore, the Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.

Exodus 23:12

¹² Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall cease from labor, in order that your ox and your ass may rest, and that your bondman and the stranger may be refreshed.



How does this source complements Exodus 20:8-11?

Exodus 34:21

²¹ Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall cease from labor; you shall cease from labor even at plowing time and harvest time.



How does this source complements Exodus 20:8-11?

The Text: Pesikta Rabati 14

אמרו רבותינו מעשה היה בישראל אחד שהיה לו פרה אחת חורשת נתמעטה ידו ומכרה לו לגוי אחד כיון שלקחה הגוי וחרשה (עמה) [עמו] ששת ימים של חול בשבת הוציאה שתחרוש עמו ורבצה לו תחת העול היה הולך ומכה אותה והיא אינה זזה ממקומה כיון שראה כן הלך ואמר לאותו ישראל שמכרה לו בא טול פרתך שמא צער יש בה שהרי כמה אני מכה אותה והיא אינה זזה ממקומה אותו ישראל הבין לומר בשביל של שבת והיתה למודה לנוח בשבת א"ל בא ואני מעמידה כיון שבא ואמר לה באזנה פרה פרה את יודעת כשהיית ברשותי היית חורשת ימי החול בשבת היית נינוח עכשיו שגרמו עונותי ואת ברשות גוי בבקשה ממך עמדי וחרשי ומיד עמדה וחרשה א"ל אותו הגוי אני מבקשך טול פרתך עד עכשיו אני בא ומיסב אחריך שתהא בא ומעמידה על אחת חוץ מזו ומזו (ואיני) [איני] מניחך עד שתאמר לי מה עשית לה באזנה אני נתיגעתי בה והכיתי אותה ולא עמדה התחיל אותו ישראל מפייסו ואומר לו לא כשוף ולא כשפים עשיתי אלא כך וכך הסתתי לה באזנה ועמדה וחרשה מיד נתיירא הגוי אמר ומה אם פרה שאין לה לא שיחה ולא דעת הכירה את בוראה ואני שייצרני יוצרי בדמותו ונתן בי דעת איני הולך ומכיר את בוראי מיד בא ונתגייר ולמד וזכה לתורה והיו קוראים שמו יוחנן בן תורתה ועד עכשיו רבותינו אומרים הלכה משמו ואם תמיה אתה שעל ידי פרה נתקרב אדם אחד לכנפי שכינה הרי על ידי פרה היא (טהרתו) [טהרתו] של כל ישראל ממה שקראו בענין זאת חקת התורה:

In Israel there was a certain man who owned a plowing heifer, but his wealth slipped out of his hand, and he had to sell her to a heathen.

As soon as the heathen took possession of her, he plowed with her during the six days of the week. On the Sabbath he brought her out again to plow for him, but she lay down under the yoke. Though he kept beating the heifer, she would not budge from her place. Seeing this, he went to the Jew who had sold him the heifer, and said: "Come, take your heifer. Something's ailing her, for though I beat her again and again, she will not budge from her place."

The Jew understood that what the heathen was talking about had something to do with the Sabbath, the heifer having become accustomed to rest on the Sabbath. So he said to the heathen: "Come along, and I will get her up." When he came to the heifer, he spoke to her, [spoke right] into her ear: "Heifer, heifer, you know that when you were in my hands, you did plow six days in the week but were allowed to rest on the Sabbath. But my sins having brought it about that you are in the hands of a heathen, I beg you to stand up and plow."

At once she stood up and plowed.

The heathen then said to him: "I beseech you, take back your heifer! Will I have to come as I just have, and wait upon you, that you should appear and make her stand up? No matter what, I won't let you go until you tell me one thing: What was it you did put into her ear that made her stand up and plow? Because I wore myself out and even struck her, but still could not get her to stand up."

The Jew then proceeded to calm him down and said to him: "I used neither sorcery nor witchcraft. But I put it to her, thus and thus, into her ear, and she stood up and plowed."

Thereupon the heathen was awe-struck. He said: If a heifer which has no speech and no understanding could acknowledge her Creator, shall not I, whose Maker made me in His own image and put understanding into me— shall not I go and acknowledge my Creator?

At once he went and became a convert and studied and acquired Torah. They used to call him Johanan ben Torta ("son of a heifer"). And to this day our Masters quote law in his name.



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

Comprehension and Analysis Questions



? Why did the original owner of the cow sell it?

? Why didn't the cow budge on Shabbat?



Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Why did the new owner hit the cow?



Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Bonus ? Why did the new owner go back to see the original owner?



Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? What did the original owner of the cow whisper in the cow's ear?

Bonus ? Why did the new owner convert to Judaism, study Torah, and eventually become a great sage?

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

! Neither words nor convincing others is necessary when you live what you do intensely and with passion.

EPILOGUE

Passion generates passion. Neither words nor convincing others is necessary when you live what you do intensely and with passion. It sells by itself! When others witness how you live and breathe a particular idea, practice, ideology, or way of life, there is no need to preach it. When your entire experience bears testimony on the importance of your values in your life, others will see it and will wish to be part of it! In our story, the original owner of the cow lived Shabbat in a way that everything around him was transformed, including his cow. When Yohanan ben Torta encounters this passion –through his interaction with a non-budging cow- he exclaims (paraphrasing): I wish to be part of this project!

Translation by Rabbi Manes Kogan

There was once a Jew who owned a cow with which he plowed his field. Then it came to pass that [this Jew] became impoverished and sold it [his cow] to a gentile.

The gentile plowed with the cow throughout the six weekdays (from Sunday through Friday). When he took her out to the field to plow on Shabbat, she [the cow] kneeled under the yoke and refused to do any work. He [the gentile] hit her but she [the cow] would not budge from her place.

When he [the gentile] saw what happened, he came back to the Jew who sold him the cow: "Take back your cow! Perhaps there is something wrong with her. Regardless of how much I hit her, she doesn't budge from her place.

The Jew understood that Shabbat was the issue, that the cow was accustomed to rest on Shabbat.

He [the Jew] said to the cow's purchaser: Come and I will get her to stand.

When he [the Jew] arrived at the field, he spoke into the cow's ear: Cow, Cow! You know that when you were in my domain you worked during the weekdays and rested on Shabbat. But now that my sins have caused me to sell you and you are under the domain of a gentile, please, stand up and plow.

Immediately the cow stood up and started plowing.

The gentile said to the Jew: take your cow. Until now I wanted you to make her stand. Right now, I'm not letting you go until you tell me what bewitching thing you whispered in her ear. I got tired from hitting her and she didn't stand!

The Jew appeased the gentile: I didn't bewitch her. This is what I told her (that now she has a new owner) and she stood and started plowing.

Immediately, when this man heard this, he was shaken and amazed. He said to himself: "If this cow, which has neither language or understanding, recognizes her Creator, should not I, whom God created in His image and likeness and imbued me with understanding?"

Immediately he [the gentile] went and converted to Judaism and merited to study Torah. He became known as Yochanan ben Torta ("Yochanan son of the Cow") and until today, the Rabbis teach law in his name.