

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [267]

Shall the Offspring Stumble by Means of the Very Matter Which Concerned that Righteous Man?

(Insights into Babylonian Talmud Bava Kamma 50a & Yevamot
121b)



Background to Our Story

Nehunya the Digger of Pits

Mishna Shekalim 5:1

These were the officers in the Temple:

Yohanan the son of Pinchas was over the seals.

Ahiyah over the libations.

Mattiyah the son of Shmuel over the lots.

Petahiah over the bird-offering. (Petahiah was Mordecai. Why was his name called Petahiah? Because he 'opened' matters and expounded them, and he understood the seventy tongues).

The son of Ahijah over the sickness of the bowels.

Nehuniah, the digger of ditches.

Gevini, the crier.

The son of Gever over the locking of the gates.

The son of Bevai over the strips [for lighting the menorah].

The son of Arza over the cymbal.

Hugras the son of Levi over the song.

The house of Garmu over the making of the showbread.

The house of Avtinas over the preparing of the frankincense.

Elazar over the curtains.

And Pinchas over the priestly vestments.

Nechunya administered the digging of reservoirs to ensure a plentiful water supply for the pilgrims (*Rav; Yer.*) [Nechunya is mentioned twice in the Talmud (*Bava Kamma 50a; Yevamos 121b*) where it is indicated that he lived in the late Second Temple era. However, this does not contradict the view that the administrators mentioned here belong to the early Second Temple era because, as already pointed out, all the administrators would assume the first administrator's name. In the, story related in the Talmud, Nechunya figures as the supplier of water, so he is mentioned by his official name. (Artsroll Commentary to Mishnah Shekalim 5:1)

Hanina ben Dosa



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hanina_ben_Dosa



Hanina ben Dosa (1st century, CE) (Hebrew: חנינא בן דוסא) was a scholar and miracle-worker, and the pupil of Johanan ben Zakkai (*Berakhot*, 34b). He is buried in the City of Arraba.

While he is reckoned among the Tannaim and is quoted in connection with a school and its disciples, no halachot and but few aggadot are preserved as from him (Baraita of R. Eliezer xxix., xxxi.; Midr. Mishle x. 2). He is "remembered more for his conduct than for his halakhic teachings. There are no laws quoted in his name." His popularity, however, which he enjoyed throughout his life, and which rendered him immortal among the mystics, rests not on his scholarship, but on his saintliness and thaumaturgic powers. From the several maxims attributed to him it may be seen that he was a member of the ancient Hasidim: "Whosoever's fear of sin precedes his wisdom, his wisdom will endure; but where wisdom precedes fear of sin, wisdom will not endure"; "Where a man's works are greater than his learning, his learning will stand; but where his learning is greater than his works, his learning will not stand"; "Whosoever earns the good-will of humanity is loved of God; but who is not beloved of man is not beloved of God" (*Avoth*, iii. 9, 10; *Avot of Rabbi Natan*, xxii. 1 [ed. Schechter, p. 35a]). There are, also, other teachings which betray his Hasidic schooling. Hanina, like all the ancient Hasidim, prayed much, and by his prayers he is said to have effected many miracles.

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Bava Kamma 50a

תנו רבנן: חפר ופתח ומסר לרבים – פטור, חפר ופתח ולא מסר לרבים – חייב. וכן מנהגו של נחוניא חופר בורות שיחין ומערות, שהיה חופר ופותח ומסר לרבים, וכששמעו חכמים בדבר, אמרו: קיים זה הלכה זו. הלכה זו ותו לא? אלא אימא: אף הלכה זו.

תנו רבנן: מעשה בבתו של נחוניא חופר שיחין שנפלה לבור גדול, באו והודיעו את רבי תנאי בן דוסא.

שעה ראשונה – אמר להם: שלום, שנייה – אמר להם: שלום, שלישית – אמר להם: עלתה.

אמרו לה: מי העלך? אמרה להם: זכר של רחלים נודמו לי וזמן אחד מנהיגו.

אמרו לו: נביא אתה? אמר להם: לא נביא אנכי ולא בן נביא אנכי, אלא כד אמרתי: דבר שאותו צדיק מצטער בו יפשל בו זרעו?

אמר רבי אחא: אף על פי כן מת בנו בצמא, שנאמר "וסביביו נשערה מאד", מלמד שהקדוש ברוך הוא מדקדק עם סביביו אפילו כחוט השערה. רבי נחוניא אמר, מהכא: "אל נערץ בסוד קדשים רבה ונורא על כל סביביו".

The Context

The Sages taught: If someone dug or opened a well and transferred it to the public for their use, he is exempt from damage caused by the well. If he dug or opened a well and did not transfer it to the public, he is liable.

And this was the practice of Neḥunya the digger of pits, ditches, and caves, who would dig, open, and transfer them to the public so that there would be wells of water for public use. When the Sages heard about the matter, they said: This individual has fulfilled this *halakha*. The Gemara asks: Only this *halakha* and no more? Rather, say: He fulfilled even this *halakha*.

The Story

The Sages taught: An incident occurred involving the daughter of Neḥunya the ditch-digger, where she fell into a large cistern. They came and informed Rabbi Ḥanina ben Dosa so that he would pray on her behalf.

When the first hour had passed from the time of her fall, he said to them: She is at peace and unharmed. After the second hour, he said to them: She is at peace. After

the third hour, he said to them: She has ascended from the well, and indeed this was the case.

They said to her: Who brought you up out of the well? She said to them: A male sheep, i.e., a ram, happened to come to me, and a certain old man was leading it, and he pulled me out.

They said to Rabbi Hânina ben Dosa: Are you a prophet? How did you know she had ascended? Rabbi Hânina ben Dosa said to them: "I am no prophet, neither am I a prophet's son" (Amos 7:14), but this is what I said to myself: Shall the offspring of Neḥunya stumble by means of the very matter which concerned that righteous man?

Reflecting on the Story

Rabbi Aḥa says: Although Neḥunya ensured that others would have water, even so, his son died of thirst.



Explaining the Story - What's going on in our story? (The sequence of events)

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Why if someone dug a well and transferred it to the public for their use, is he exempt from damage caused by the well? Do you agree with this rule? Why? Why not?

Bonus ? How do we know from the story that Neḥunya didn't just dig wells and transfer them to the public occasionally?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? What is the Sages' opinion of Neḥunya?

Bonus ? Why did Neḥunya's daughter fall into a large cistern?

? "They came and informed Rabbi Hânina ben Dosa." Who are "they"?

? Why did they inform Rabbi Hânina ben Dosa?

? How did Rabbi Hânina ben Dosa know that Neĥunya's daughter was safe and unharmed?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Bonus ? Who saved Neĥunya's daughter?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Bonus ? Why do you think Rabbi Aĥa brings the episode of Neĥunya's son dying from thirst immediately after the miraculous salvation of his daughter?

"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from These Texts

! Hard work, kindness, generosity, and persistent investment (almost) always pay back!



Neĥunya's daughter's story wishes to teach us that good things happen to good people, that genuine generosity is reciprocated, and that effort, hard work, and persistent investment, pay back.

Yet, Rabbi Aha's reflection on Neĥunya's son dying from thirst, also reminds us of the sad reality that sometimes "bad things happen to good people," and that hard working, kind, and generous individuals do not always get to enjoy the fruit of their worthy actions.

Which story will accompany us in our life journey, Neĥunya's daughter's story or Neĥunya's son's story? While the ultimate response to this question is personal, I would like to suggest that the Sages believe that seeing Neĥunya's son's story as

the exception of the rule and not as the rule itself, will lead us to live happier and more meaningful lives.