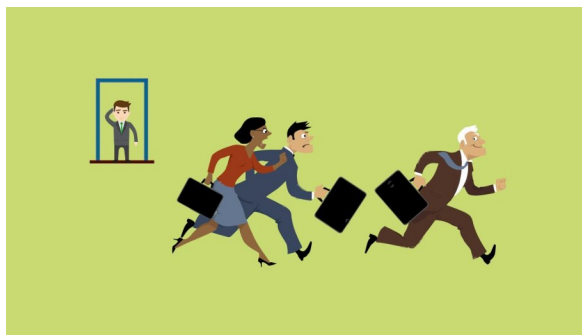


From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [283]

I Wish to Say Something to You, but I am Afraid That Then You Will Leave Me and Go

(Insights into Babylonian Talmud Avoda Zara 19a)



Background to Our Story

Rav Hisda or Rav Chisda



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

Rav Chisda (Hebrew: רב חסדא) was a Jewish Talmudist who lived in Kafri, Babylonia, near what is now the city of Najaf, Iraq. He was an amora of the third generation (died in ca 320 CE at the age of ninety-two), and is mentioned frequently in the Talmud.

Rav Chisda descended from a [priestly](#) family. He studied under [Rav](#), who was his principal teacher and after the latter's death he attended the lectures of [Rav Huna](#), a companion of the same age. The pair were called "the Hasidim of Babylon" Rav Chisda was also among those called [Tzadikim](#), those who could bring down rain by their prayers. At first he was so poor that he abstained from vegetables because they increased his appetite and when he walked in thorny places he raised his garments, saying: "The breaches in my legs will heal of themselves but the breaches in my garments will not". At the age of sixteen he married the daughter of Hanan bar Raba and together they had seven or more sons and two daughters. Later, as a [brewer](#), he became very wealthy. One of his pupils, [Rava](#), became his son-in-law.

Rav Chisda was a great [casuist](#), his acute mind greatly enhanced the fame of [Rav Huna](#)'s school at [Sura](#), but his very acuteness indirectly caused a rupture between himself and [Rav Huna](#). The separation was brought about by a question from Rav Chisda as to the obligations of a disciple toward a master to whom he is indispensable. [Rav Huna](#) saw the point and said, "Chisda, I do not need you; it is you that needs me!". Forty years passed before they became reconciled. Rav Chisda nevertheless held [Rav Huna](#) in great esteem, and although he had established a school built at his own expense in Mata Mehasya four years before [Rav Huna](#)'s death, he never published any decision during the [Rav Huna](#)'s

lifetime. [Rav Huna](#) came to recognize Rav Chisda's merit later and recommended his son [Rabbah bar Rav Huna](#) to attend his lectures.

Rav Chisda also presided over the [Academy](#) of Sura for ten years following the death of [Rav Yehuda](#), or following the death of [Rav Huna](#), according to Abraham ibn Daud. He always preserved great respect for the memory of [Rav](#), whom he referred to as "our great teacher, may God aid him". Once, holding up the gifts which are given to the [Kohen](#), he declared that he would give them to the man who could cite a previously unknown [halakha](#) in the name of [Rav](#). After Rav Chisda's death, no one succeeded him as the [Rosh Mesivta](#) of [Sura](#) and the central Talmudic authority passed to Rabbah in [Pumbedita](#).

Rava



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rava_\(amora\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rava_(amora))

Abba ben Joseph bar Ḥama (c. 280 – 352 CE), who is exclusively referred to in the Talmud by the name Rava (רבא), was a Babylonian rabbi who belonged to the fourth generation of amoraim. He is known for his debates with Abaye, and is one of the most often cited rabbis in the Talmud.

He was born about 280 CE in [Mahoza](#) (a suburb of [Ctesiphon](#), the capital of [Babylonia](#)), where his father was a wealthy and distinguished scholar. In his youth Rava went to [Sura](#), where he attended the lectures of [Rav Chisda](#) and associated with [Rami bar Hama](#). About ten years after Rami's death Rava married his widow, the daughter of Rav Chisda. It is said that earlier Rav Chisda's daughter sat in her father's classroom, while his students, Rava and Rami bar Hama, stand before them. When Rav Chisda asked her which of the two she wants to marry, she replied "both of them," and Rava added, "I'll be the last one" (commentators let us know that she indeed married Rami first and Rava second). They had five sons, the eldest of whom, Joseph, died during his parents' lifetime.

Rava studied at the [Talmudical Academy](#) at [Pumbedita](#), site of modern-day Falluja, Iraq. Rava's teachers were [Rav Yosef](#), Rabbah, and, chiefly, [Rav Nachman](#) (who lived in Mahoza). His chief study-companion was [Abaye](#), who was about the same age, and both of them developed the dialectic method which [Rav Judah](#) and their teacher Rabbah had established in their discussions of tradition; their debates became known as the "Havayot de-Abaye ve-Rava".

Rava enjoyed the special protection of the mother of [Shapur II](#), the reigning King of Persia. For this reason, and in consideration of large sums which he secretly contributed to the court, he succeeded in making less severe Shapur's oppressions of the Jews in Babylonia.

When, after the death of Rav Yosef, Abaye was chosen head of the Academy of Pumbedita (Horayot 14a), Rava founded a school of his own in Mahoza. Many pupils, preferring his lectures Abaye's, followed him to there. After Abaye's death Rava was elected head of the school, and the academy was transferred from Pumbedita to Mahoza, which, during the lifetime of Rava, was the only seat of Jewish learning in Babylonia.

When [Rabbah bar Nahmani](#), the head of the [yeshiva](#) of [Pumbedita](#), retired, the position went to [Abaye](#). At that point, Rava returned to [Mahoza](#), where he established a yeshiva there. After the death of Abaye, many of his students moved from Pumbedita to Mahoza, to join Rava's Yeshiva, which had become one of the intellectual centers of the Babylonian Jewish Community.

According to [Sherira Gaon](#), Rava died in 352 CE. Some texts of the Talmud say that he died at age 40, being one of the descendants of [Eli](#) who were cursed with early death; but in all likelihood the correct version of the text refers to [Rabbah](#) not Rava.

Book of Psalms, Chapter 1

- ¹ Blessed is the one
who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
or sit in the company of mockers,
² but whose delight is in the law of the LORD,
and who meditates on his law day and night.
³ **That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,**
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—
whatever they do prospers.
⁴ Not so the wicked!
They are like chaff
that the wind blows away.
⁵ Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.
⁶ For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.

Transplanting Trees



The Text: Babylonian Talmud Avoda Zara 19a

”וְהָיָה כַּעֵץ שֶׁתּוֹלַע עַל פְּלִגֵּי מַיִם”, אָמְרֵי דְבֵי רַבִּי יַנַּי: כַּעֵץ שֶׁתּוֹלַע וְלֹא כַּעֵץ נְטוּעַ, כָּל הַלּוֹמֵד תּוֹרָה מֵרַב אֶחָד – אֵינוֹ רוֹאֶה סִימָן בְּרִכָּה לְעוֹלָם.

אָמַר לְהוּ רַב חֶסְדָּא לְרַבְנָן: בְּעֵינָא דְאִימָא לְכוּ מִלְתָּא, וּמְסַתְפִּינָא דְשִׁבְקִיתוּ לִי וְאַזְלִיתוּ: כָּל הַלּוֹמֵד תּוֹרָה מֵרַב אֶחָד – אֵינוֹ רוֹאֶה סִימָן בְּרִכָּה לְעוֹלָם, שִׁבְקוּהוּ וְאַזּוּל קַמִּיהָ דְרַבָּא

אָמַר לְהוּ: הֲנִי מִיְלֵי סְבָרָא, אֲבָל גְּמָרָא – מֵרַב אֶחָד עֲדִיתָ, פִּי הִיכִי דְלֹא לִיפְלוּג לִישְׁנָי.

And he shall be like a tree planted [*shatul*] by streams of water” (Psalms 1:3). The students of the school of Rabbi Yannai say: The verse states that a Torah scholar is comparable to a tree that has been uprooted from its original location and replanted [*shatul*] somewhere else. It does not say that he is comparable to a tree that is planted [*natu’a*] and remains in one place. This is teaching that anyone who

learns Torah from one teacher alone never sees a sign of blessing, as it is necessary to acquire knowledge from many teachers.

Rav Ḣisda said to the Sages who were studying with him: I wish to say something to you, but I am afraid that then you will leave me and go. Anyone who learns Torah from one teacher alone never sees a sign of blessing.

When the students heard this, they did in fact leave him and went to learn from Rava.

Rav Ḣisda said to them: That matter applies only with regard to reasoning, i.e., in order to come up with sophisticated reasoning it is necessary to hear many different opinions. But with regard to the oral tradition itself, it is preferable to learn from one teacher so that he will not become confused by the different versions of the same statements he hears from each teacher.



Explaining the Story - What is going on in our story? (Explain the sequence of events)

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Why do the students of the school of Rabbi Yannai teach that a Torah scholar is comparable to a tree that has been uprooted from its original location and replanted [*shatul*] in somewhere else as opposed to a tree that is planted [*natu'a*] and remains in one place?

Bonus ? Why was Rav Ḣisda hesitant in teaching his students the teaching of the school of Rabbi Yannai?

Extra Bonus ? Why does Rav Ḣisda share his inner struggle with his students?

Bonus ? Why did Rav Ḣisda's students leave him and go to study with Rava?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Extra Bonus ? From our story we see that Rav Ḣisda was right in being afraid that his students would leave him. Why did he share anyway the teaching of the school of Rabbi Yannai?

Extra Bonus ? Why do you think the students went to study with Rava, the son-in-law of Rav H̄isda, as opposed to going to an older or somehow more experienced teacher? What do you think were the feelings of Rav H̄isda when his students went to study with Rava?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Bonus ? What is the difference between *reasoning* and *tradition* in the leaning process? Which one is more important? Which one is more exiting?

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

! How to be a good teacher (and parent): insights into the inner struggle and graciousness of spirit of Rav H̄isda.



In this short story, Rav H̄isda is faced with a dilemma: on one hand, he wishes to transmit to his students that in order to grow, they must be “transplanted” to different teachers. On the other hand, he is afraid that his students will follow his advice and leave him. Rav H̄isda chooses to share the advice anyway, and the students indeed love him. When the students are on the way out, Rav H̄isda reminds them that the solid knowledge - the tradition- they learn from him (and only from him), is the foundation for their subsequent intellectual journeys.

Rav H̄isda’s lesson, involving his inner struggle and graciousness of spirit, serves as a model to good teachers and parents, who not only need to learn to let go of their beloved students and children to allow them to grow and to thrive in life, but must encourage them to do so.