

From the Rabbi's Desk  
Rabbi Manes Kogan  
Hillcrest Jewish Center  
183-02 Union Turnpike, Flushing, NY 11366  
[rabbikogan@hillcrestjc.org](mailto:rabbikogan@hillcrestjc.org)

## Stories with a Twist [286]

### That Night, the Dates He Ate Afflicted Him (Insights into Babylonian Talmud Pesachim 88a)



#### Background to Our Story

##### Ulla – עולא



[Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Pesachim Part 2. Koren publishers Jerusalem Page 140](#)

Ulla bar Yishmael was an *amora* and one of the most important emissaries from Eretz Yisrael to Babylonia. He was one of Rabbi Yohanan's students who would regularly bring the Torah of Eretz Yisrael to Babylonia. He would then return to Eretz Yisrael and transmit the innovations of the Babylonian Sages. Ulla journeyed often and traveled from place to place to teach Torah. The Babylonian Sages held him in high regard and treated him with great respect. Rav Hisda referred to him as: Our teacher who comes from Eretz Yisrael, and Rav Yehuda sent his son to Ulla to learn practical *halakha*. In the Jerusalem Talmud, he is usually referred to as Ulla bar Yishmael or Ulla the descender, as one who leaves Eretz Yisrael for another country is considered to have descended. Many *halakhot* are cited in his name, and numerous Sages of the succeeding generation were his students. The *amora* Rabba bar Ulla may have been his son, but nothing is known of his private life. He died during one of his journeys to Babylonia and was brought back to Eretz Yisrael for burial.

##### Zuz (Jewish coin)



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zuz\\_\(Jewish\\_coin\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zuz_(Jewish_coin))

A Zuz (Hebrew-זוז; plural zuzzim Hebrew-זוזים) was an ancient Jewish silver coin struck during the Bar Kochba revolt, as well as a Jewish name for the various types of non-Jewish small silver coinage, used before and after the period of the revolt. The name was used

from the Greek era of drachmas, through the Roman era of Denarius, and then as the quarter denomination of Bar Kochba coinage. The Jewish insurrectionists' zuz were overstruck on Roman Imperial denarii or Roman provincial drachmas of Vespasian, Titus, Domitian, Trajan and Hadrian.



Four Zuzzim, denarii or drachmas make a Shekel, a Sela or a Tetradrachm.

In the [Talmud](#), the Zuz and the dinar are used interchangeably, the [difference being](#) that the Zuz originally referred to the [Greek Drachma](#) (which was a quarter of the Greek Tetradrachm weighing approximately 17 grams) while the Dinar referred to the later Roman [Denarius](#) (which was a quarter of the [Tyrian shekels](#) and had the same weight as the [Jerusalem Shekels](#) and the Roman provincial [Tetradrachms](#) at approximately 14 grams).

The Zuz is mentioned in the [Passover Haggadah](#) in the [Passover song Chad gadya, chad gadya](#) (One little goat, one little goat); in which the lyric of dizabin abba bitrei zuzei (Which Father bought for two zuzim ([half shekel](#))) repeats at the end of every stanza. It may be significant that two zuzim equal the half-shekel tax required of every adult male Israelite in Exodus 30:13.

### The Text: Babylonian Talmud Pesachim 88a

עולא איקלע לפומבדיתא, קריבו ליה טירינא דתמרי.  
אמר להו: כמה כי הני בזוזא? אמרו ליה: תלת בזוזא. אמר: מלא צנא דדובשא בזוזא ובבלאי לא עסקי באורייתא!  
בלינא צערוהו. אמר: מלא צנא סמא דמותא בזוזא בבבל, ובבלאי עסקי באורייתא!

Ulla visited Pumbedita, and they brought him a basket [*tirina*] of dates.

He [Ulla] said to them [to his hosts]: How many baskets of dates like these can one purchase for a *zuz*? They said to him: One can purchase three for a *zuz*. He said: How can it be that it is possible to purchase a basketful of date honey for just a single *zuz*, and yet the Babylonians do not engage in Torah study more extensively? Since the cost of food is so low and they do not need to work hard to support themselves, the Babylonians should be more extensively engaged in Torah study.

That night, the dates he ate afflicted him and he suffered from indigestion.

In light of this, Ulla retracted his original assessment of the Babylonians and instead praised them and said: A basketful of lethal poison, i.e., the dates that cause indigestion, sells for a *zuz* in Babylonia, and despite the fact that they suffer its effects the Babylonians still engage in Torah study!



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

### Comprehension and Analysis Questions

**?** Why did the people of Pumbedita bring a basket of dates to Ulla?

**Bonus ?** Why did Ulla inquire about how many baskets of dates you could purchase with one *zuz*?

**?** "He [Ulla] said: How can it be that it is possible to purchase a basketful of date honey for just a single *zuz*, and yet the Babylonians do not engage in Torah study more extensively?" To whom did Ulla say the above words?

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

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

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

**?** When you read Ulla's bio, you realize his original residence was in the Land of Israel. What do you think was Ulla's opinion about the Babylonians and the quality of their Torah before his visit?

**Bonus ?** What is the *inflection point* in our story?

**?** The people of Pumbedita are the same ones at the beginning of our story and at its end. What changed in our story?

**?** In light of his indigestion, Ulla retracted his original assessment of the Babylonians and instead praised them. What else could Ulla have thought after suffering indigestion from the dates?

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

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

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 4 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 5 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 6 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 7 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 8 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 9 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 10 \_\_\_\_\_

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

! Painful experiences can be catalysts for growth. If you do not believe me, ask Ulla.

! Life itself can be a great teacher. The question is: are you ready to learn?



In our short story, Ulla, who is visiting Babylonia from the land of Israel, looks down at his hosts in Pumbedita and at their study. Ungrateful to the hospitality he receives, he arrogantly puts his hosts down. Ulla’s painful experience - the indigestion and realization that he was wrong - gave him a new perspective not only about his hosts, but also about the nature of human beings in general and their circumstances. Ulla’s greatness resides in his ability to recognize his fault and to admit to it, which is something not many people know how to do.