

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [292]

A Plank from the Boat Came to Me, and I Bent My Head Before Each and Every Wave That Came Toward Me.

(Insights into Babylonian Talmud Yevamot 121a)

With appreciation to Rabbi Joshua Kullock for his insights on this story



Background to Our Story

Agunah



<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agunah>

An agunah (Hebrew: עגונה, plural: agunot (עגונות); literally "anchored" or "chained") is a Jewish woman who is stuck in her religious marriage as determined by halakha (Jewish law). The classic case of this is a man who has left on a journey and has not returned, or has gone into battle and is missing in action. It is used as a borrowed term to refer to a woman whose husband refuses, or is unable, to grant her a divorce (which requires a document known as a get).

Talmudic Background to Our Story: Babylonian Talmud Yevamot 121a

Mishna

If a man fell into the water and did not come out, whether the body of water has a visible end or does not have a visible end, his wife is prohibited from remarrying. There is no absolute proof that the man died, as it is possible that he emerged from the water some distance away.

Rabbi Meir said: An incident occurred involving a certain person who fell into the Great Cistern and emerged only after three days. This is evidence that sometimes one may survive a fall into water, even when everyone assumes he is dead

Rabbi Yosei said: An incident occurred involving a blind man who descended to immerse for ritual purity in a cave, and his guide descended after him, and they disappeared there, and they remained there long enough for their souls to have departed, and the Sages permitted their wives to marry because they had disappeared into the water and not emerged. And there was another

incident in Asya in which they lowered a certain man into the sea on a rope, and when they pulled the rope back to land only his leg came up in their hands, and they were not certain whether he was alive or dead. The Sages said: If his leg was cut from the knee and above, his wife may marry, as he did not survive such a wound; if his leg was cut only from the knee and below, she may not marry.

Gemara

The Sages taught: If a man fell into the water, whether the body of water has a visible end or does not have a visible end, his wife is prohibited from marrying; this is the statement of Rabbi Meir. And the Rabbis say: If he fell into a body of water with a visible end, his wife is permitted to marry, but if he fell into a body of water with no end, his wife is prohibited from marrying.

The Gemara asks: What are the circumstances defining a body of water with a visible end? Abaye said: Any body of water where one stands in one place and can see the shore in all four directions is considered water with a visible end, since anyone emerging from the water would be seen. However, if the body of water is so large that it is impossible to see its shore on all sides, the individual may have emerged at a place where he could not be seen by others standing at the place where he fell in.

Rabban Gamliel



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Berakhot. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 7.

Nasi of the Sanhedrin and one of the most important *tanna'im* in the period following the destruction of the Second Temple. Rabban Gamliel's father, Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel (the Elder), had also been *Nasi* of the Sanhedrin, as well as one of the leaders of the nation during the rebellion against Rome.

Rabban Gamliel was taken to Yavne by Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai after the destruction of the Temple, so that he became known as Rabban Gamliel of Yavne. After Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai's death, Rabban Gamliel presided over the Sanhedrin. Under Rabban Gamliel's leadership, Yavne became an important spiritual center. The greatest of the Sages gathered around him, including Rabbi Eliezer (Rabban Gamliel's brother-in-law), Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Akiva, and Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya.

Rabban Gamliel sought to create a spiritual center for the Jews that would unite the entire people, a role filled by the Temple until its destruction. Therefore, he strove to enhance the prominence and central authority of the Sanhedrin and its *Nasi*. His strict and vigorous leadership eventually led his colleagues to remove him from his post for a brief period, replacing him with Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya. However, since everyone realized that his motives and actions were for the good of the people and were not based on personal ambition, they soon restored him to his position.

We do not possess many halakhic rulings explicitly in the name of Rabban Gamliel. However, in his time, and under his influence, some of the most important decisions in the history of Jewish spiritual life were made. These included the decision to follow Beit Hillel, the rejection of the halakhic system of Rabbi Eliezer, and the establishment of fixed formulas for prayers. In those halakhic decisions attributed to Rabban Gamliel, we find an uncompromising approach to the *halakha*; in reaching his conclusions, he was faithful to his principles. We know that two of his sons were Sages: Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, who served as *Nasi* of the Sanhedrin after him, and Rabbi Ĥanina ben Gamliel.

Rabbi Akiva



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Pesachim, Part Two. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 26

Rabbi Akiva, who lived just after the destruction of the Second Temple, was one of the greatest of the *tanna'im*. Unlettered until the age of forty, Akiva was encouraged by his wife Rachel to devote himself to the study of Torah. After years of study under the tutelage of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, Yehoshua ben Hananya, and others, he acquired thousands of students and established his own academy in Bnei Brak. Rabbi Akiva systematized and arranged the many oral traditions, and it was the mishna of Rabbi Akiva as received by his disciple, Rabbi Meir, that ultimately became the basis of the six orders of the Mishna. Rabbi Akiva was the spiritual leader of the bar Kokheva revolt. He even proclaimed bar Kokheva to be the Messiah early in the struggle, but he later retracted this opinion. Despite Roman decrees against disseminating Torah, the aged Rabbi Akiva continued to teach. Rabbi Akiva was arrested by the Romans, imprisoned, tried, and sentenced to death. As one of the Ten Martyrs, he suffered a martyr's death at the hands of the Romans. As the Romans were torturing him to death, he recited *Shema* and explained to his students that he now has the opportunity to fulfill the true meaning of loving God with all of one's soul.

Rabbi Meir



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Eruvin, Part One. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 66

One of the greatest *tanna'im* of the generation that preceded the redaction of the Mishna. There is no clear information available concerning Rabbi Meir's parents, though it is told that he descended from a family of converts from the house of the Roman emperors.

His exceptional brilliance in Torah study was evident from a very early age, and he was a student of the two greatest scholars of the generation, Rabbi Yishmael and Rabbi Akiva. He was also the lone Sage who continued to study with Elisha ben Avuya, despite the latter's estrangement from Judaism. His primary teacher was Rabbi Akiva, who ordained him at a very young age, which is the reason that he was ordained a second time by Rabbi Yehuda ben Bava.

In recognition of his outstanding scholarship, Rabbi Meir was officially appointed *hakham*, literally, wise man, the third level below *nasi*, head of the Sanhedrin. The halakhic discussions between him and his colleagues Rabbi Yehuda, Rabbi Yosei, Rabbi Shimon, and Rabbi Elazar form one of the most important foundations of the Mishna.

Rabbi Meir's greatest undertaking appears to have been a structured, oral redaction of the Oral Law, including establishing specific formats for the *halakhot*. Apparently, Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi followed in Rabbi Meir's footsteps and incorporated his work in the Mishna. Consequently, it is a well-known principle that the author of an unattributed statement in the Mishna is Rabbi Meir, as the assumption is that this was one of the *mishnayot* he formulated. Due to his involvement in the attempt to depose Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, the head of the Sanhedrin, he was punished by the latter, and for a long period his teachings were not cited in his name but were introduced with the words: Others say. His private life was full of suffering. His two sons died during his lifetime, and his extraordinary wife Beruria also died in painful circumstances. Nevertheless, it is known that a daughter of his survived. He was eventually forced into exile to Asia Minor, where he died, with the order that his coffin be transferred to Eretz Yisrael and that he be temporarily interred on the shore of the sea whose waves reach the Holy Land.

Rabbi Meir was famous in his lifetime, not only for his sharp intellect, which exceeded that of all his peers, but also for his personal attributes, his efforts as a peacemaker, and his willingness to relinquish personal honor for the good of others. He was known as a magnificent public speaker. It is said that following his death, those who composed parables ceased. Several of his animal parables were repeated for many generations. He was also renowned as a miracle worker, and for many years a charity fund named after him, Rabbi Meir the Miracle Worker [*Ba'al HaNes*] served as the main source of funding for the Jews in Eretz Yisrael.

The Serenity Prayer

The Serenity Prayer is a [prayer](#) written by the American theologian [Reinhold Niebuhr](#) (1892–1971). It is commonly quoted as:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
courage to change the things I can,
and wisdom to know the difference.

Niebuhr's prayer originally asked for courage first, and specifically for changing things that must be changed, not things that simply can be changed:

Father, give us courage to change what must be altered, serenity to accept what cannot be helped, and the insight to know the one from the other

? Why do you think the above prayer is called the *Serenity Prayer* and not the *Courage Prayer* or the *Insight Prayer*?

? Serenity, courage, insight. Which one of the three do you find more difficult to attain?

? Do you think it is possible to learn serenity, courage, and insight (wisdom)? If yes, how?

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Yevamot 121a

תנא, אמר רבן גמליאל: פעם אחת הייתי מהלך בספינה וראיתי ספינה אחת שנשברה, והייתי מצטער על תלמיד חכם שבה, ומנו – רבי עקיבא. וכשעליתי פנישה בא וישב ודן לפני בהלכה. אמרתי לו: בני, מי העלה? אמר לי: דף של ספינה נזדמן לי, וכל גל וגל שבה עלי נענעתי לו ראשי.

מפאן אמרו חכמים: אם יבואו רשעים על אדם – ינענע לו ראשו.

אמרתי באותה שעה: כמה גדולים דברי חכמים, שאמרו: מים שיש להם סוף – מותרת, מים שאין להם סוף – אסורה.

תנא, אמר רבי עקיבא: פעם אחת הייתי מהלך בספינה וראיתי ספינה אחת שמטרפת בים, והייתי מצטער על תלמיד חכם שבה, ומנו – רבי מאיר. כשעליתי למדינת קפוטקיא בא וישב ודן לפני בהלכה. אמרתי לו: בני, מי העלה? אמר לי: גל טרדני לחברו, וחברו לחברו, עד שהקיאני ליבשה.

אָמַרְתִּי בְּאוֹתָהּ שְׁעָה: כַּמָּה גְּדוּלִים דְּבָרֵי חֲכָמִים, שְׁאָמְרוּ: מִיָּם שֵׁשׁ לָהֶם סוּף – אֲשֶׁתּוֹ מוֹתֶרֶת, מִיָּם שְׁאֵין לָהֶם סוּף – אֲשֶׁתּוֹ אֲסוּרָה.

It is taught in a baraita: Rabban Gamliel said: Once I was traveling on a boat, and I saw a boat that shattered and sank. And I was grieved over the Torah scholar who was on board. And who was it? Rabbi Akiva.

But when I disembarked onto dry land, he came, and sat, and deliberated before me about halakha. I said to him: My son, who brought you up from the water? He said to me: A plank from the boat came to me, and I bent my head before each and every wave that came toward me.

From here the Sages stated: If wicked people come upon a person, he should bend his head before them.

I [Rabban Gamliel] said at that moment: How great are the words of the Sages, who said: If a man fell into a body of water with a visible end, his wife is permitted to remarry. But in a case of an endless body of water, his wife is prohibited from remarrying.

It is taught in a baraita: Rabbi Akiva said: Once I was traveling on a boat, and I saw a certain boat sinking at sea, and I was grieved over the Torah scholar who was on board. And who was it? Rabbi Meir.

But when I disembarked at the province of Cappadocia, he came, and sat, and deliberated before me about halakha. I said to him: My son, who brought you up from the water? He said to me: One wave carried me to another, and that other wave to another, until I reached the shore, and a wave cast me up onto dry land.

I said at that moment: How great are the words of the Sages, who said: If a man fell into a body of water with a visible end, his wife is permitted to remarry. But in a case of an endless body of water, his wife is prohibited from remarrying.



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

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Why was Rabban Gamliel grieved over Rabbi Akiva?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

? Why does Rabban Gamliel call Rabbi Akiva "My son"?

Bonus ? Why does Rabban Gamliel ask Rabbi Akiva "My son, who brought you up?"

Extra Bonus ? Who brought Rabbi Akiva up?

? How do the stories of Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Meir illustrate the halacha of a person lost at sea in relationship with his wife's ability to remarry?

Bonus ? "From here the Sages stated: If wicked people come upon a person, he should bend his head before them." How are wicked people comparable to waves? How are they different?

? What does the Sages' statement on how to deal with wicked people tell us about the times they lived in?

Extra Bonus ? The second story (the one about Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Meir) is a repetition almost word by word of the first story (the one about Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Akiva), and yet, the editor of the Talmud decided to include it. How does the second story shed light on the first one?

Extra Bonus ? Who brought Rabbi Meir up? (help: the answer might be slightly different than the one to "Who brought Rabbi Akiva up?")

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Food for Thought



What are the storms of your life -the variables- you wish you could change, but you can't?



What are "the planks" in your life that keep you afloat?



How can you become "a plank" to someone else?

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

! Dealing with life's storms: don't fight the waves, ride them!



What do we do when we face a situation we don't have control over? How do we deal with the waves of problems and challenges we encounter day after day?

Our story (actually our two stories) illustrate how it is possible to survive not only the shipwrecks and storms of the sea, but also the shipwrecks and storms of life.

Rabbi Akiva first, and then his student, Rabbi Meir share their experience of submission to the unchangeable: While Rabbi Akiva bends his head towards the waves, Rabbi Meir allows the waves to carry him to safety. Both of them let go and go –literally- with the flow.

On a deeper level, our stories perhaps are about the lives of Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Meir, who, as opposed to Rabban Gamliel, don't enjoy the security of wealth and power and must use every opportunity, every plank and wave that come their way, to move forward in life. The shipwrecks' victims, aware that they are not in control, make a conscious decision to embrace the situation they are in, *to sit with it*, to submit to the waves, and to let go and allow the sea to carry them.

Appendix

1)

"Don't fight with your thoughts or try to suppress them with your will. This will only frustrate you and bind you to your thoughts even more strongly." (Frederick Lenz)

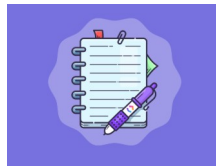
Frederick Philip Lenz, III (1950 – 1998) was a spiritual teacher who taught what he termed American Buddhism, including the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism, Zen, Vedanta, and Mysticism.

2) SO on trying to fight and control our thoughts...



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kW4GbyjMEDU>

3)



Notes on Rabbi Joshua Kullock's Presentation

Miriam Feldman

גזדמן - A plank from the boat came to me – the passive approach of Rabbi Akiva versus the active approach of Rabban Gamliel

- קניתי מהלך
- וראיתי
- וקניתי מצטער
- אמרתי לו

גזדמן לי ○

Susan Beberfall

Rabban Gamliel doesn't have to struggle to get his way

Sheila Rubin

Rabbi Akiva goes with the flow.

Rabbi Kogan

- Who brought you up? (to Torah?) My way (Rabban Gamliel) was paved with gold, but what about you?
- What do you do with the situations you cannot change? (COVID, illness, death of a loved one, unrequited love). The waves are there...
- Learn to nod to the waves...This was the story of Rabbi Akiva's rough life. He learned to nod to the waves of life.
- Meditation: Sit with it! The mind as an ocean. You cannot fight your thoughts.

Rabbi Kullock

- Rabban Gamliel is in pain because he is not in control. There is nothing he can do. Cannot control the storm
- Rabbi Akiva holds himself to the broken pieces and rides the storm.
- Who brought you up? In the middle of the storm, who are the people, thoughts, "planks" that bring you up?
- What can we do to bring others up? How can we become the *plank*?
- We might not be able to control the storm, but we can help others and ourselves ride the waves...
- The nodding, submitting, נִעְנַעְתִּי (the story of Berachot with Rabban Gamliel). Rabban Gamliel is unaware of the suffering of the other scholars. I am submitting to you, he says. I accept. I made a mistake, I am not in control. Perhaps he learned from our story, from his student how to submit.