

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

Stories with a Twist [294]

Still, there is a Desecration of God's Name! (Insights into Babylonian Talmud Yoma 84a)



Background to Our Story

Rabbi Yoĥanan



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Berachot. Koren publishers Jerusalem. 28.

This is Rabbi Yoĥanan bar Nappaĥa, one of the greatest *amora'im*, whose teachings are fundamental components of both the Babylonian and the Jerusalem Talmud. He resided in Tiberias and lived to an advanced age. Almost nothing is known of his family origins. He was orphaned at a young age and, although his family apparently owned considerable property, he spent virtually all of his resources in his devotion to the study of Torah, and he eventually became impoverished. In his youth, he had the privilege of studying under Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, the redactor of the Mishna, but most of his Torah learning was accomplished under Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi's students: Ĥizkiya ben Ĥiyya, Rabbi Oshaya, Rabbi Ĥanina, and Rabbi Yannai, who lavished praise upon him. In time, he became the head of the yeshiva in Tiberias, at which point his fame and influence increased greatly. For a long time, Rabbi Yoĥanan was the leading rabbinic scholar in the entire Jewish world; not only in Eretz Yisrael, but in Babylonia, as well, where he was respected by the Babylonian Sages. Many of them ascended to Eretz Yisrael and became his outstanding students.

He was a master of both *halakha* and *aggada*, his teachings in both disciplines are found throughout both of the Talmuds. In recognition of his intellectual and spiritual stature, the *halakha* is ruled in accordance with his opinion in almost every case, even when Rav or Shmuel, the preeminent *amora'im* of Babylonia, whom he treated deferentially, disagree with him. Only in disputes with his teachers in Eretz Yisrael, such as Rabbi Yannai and Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, is the *halakha* not ruled in accordance with his opinion.

Rabbi Yoĥanan was renowned for being handsome, and much was said in praise of his good looks. We know that his life was full of suffering. Ten of his sons died in his lifetime. There is a geonic tradition that one of his sons, Rabbi Mattana, a Babylonian *amora*, did not predecease him. The death of Rabbi Yoĥanan's disciple colleague and brother-in-law, Reish Lakish, for which he considered himself responsible, hastened his own death.

Rabbi Yoḥanan had many students. In fact, all of the *amora'im* of Eretz Yisrael in succeeding generations were his students and benefited from his teachings, to the extent that he is considered the author of the Jerusalem Talmud. His greatest students were his brother-in-law Reish Lakish, Rabbi Elazar, Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Abba, Rabbi Abbahu, Rabbi Yosei bar Ḥanina, Rabbi Ami, and Rabbi Asi.

Tzefidna



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Yoma. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 420.

From the descriptions in the Talmud, it seems that this is referring to the disease scurvy, which is caused by vitamin C deficiency. The symptoms of the disease include teeth loosening and falling out, internal bleeding, and anemia. The treatments described in the Talmud are various attempts to fill this vitamin C deficiency in a concentrated form.

Matronita



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Berachot. Koren publishers Jerusalem. 355.

Matron [*matronita*] – מַטְרוֹנִיתָא: This is the Aramaic form of the Latin word *matrona*, meaning woman; particularly an important woman.

Matrons in Ancient Rome

By **Emily Kittell-Queller**

Holding the title of “matron” in Ancient Rome was a sign of a certain status. A matron was a woman with a certain amount of distinction. She was freeborn and usually either married or a widow. There were some concrete markers of this status, especially in terms of clothing. During the late Republic and throughout the time of the Empire a matron generally wore two tunics covered by a long dress known as a stola. When she went out she would add a palla, a mantle draped over the shoulders and sometimes over the head as well. Young girls, prostitutes, and those who had forfeited the title of matron (usually through being caught in adultery) were not permitted to wear either of these garments.

Though matrons were generally expected to occupy themselves with running their households, as a group they also granted various honors and responsibilities on certain occasions and could get their voices heard in ways other women could not.

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Yoma 84a

“ועוד אמר רבי מתניא.” רבי יוחנן קש בצפידנא, אזל גבה דההיא מטרוניתא, עבדא ליה מלתא חמשא ומעלי שבתא.
אמר לה: בשבת מאי? אמרה ליה: לא צריכת. אי מצטרכינא מאי? אמרה ליה: אישתבע לי דלא מגלית. אישתבע: לאלהא דישראל לא מגלינא. נפק דרשה בפירקא.
והא אישתבע לה! לאלהא דישראל לא מגלינא, הא לעמו ישראל מגלינא.
והא איכא חלול השם!
דמגלי לה מעיקרא.

Rabbi Yoĥanan suffered from the illness *tzefidna*, which first affects the teeth and gums and then the intestines. He went to a certain gentile matron [*matronita*]. She prepared a medicine for him on Thursday and Friday.

He [Rabbi Yoĥanan] said to her: What shall I do on Shabbat?

She said to him: You will not need it. He asked her: If I do need it, what shall I do? She said to him: Swear to me that you will not reveal the remedy; then I will tell you, and you can prepare it yourself should you need it. He swore: "To the God of the Jews, I will not reveal it." She told him the remedy.

Rabbi Yoĥanan then went out and taught it publicly, revealing the secret of the remedy.

The Gemara is surprised at this: But he swore to her!

The Gemara answers that in his vow he declared: I will not reveal it to the God of the Jews. However, his words imply: I will reveal it to His people, the Jews.

The Gemara asks: Still, there is a desecration of God's name!

The Gemara answers: He [Rabbi Yoĥanan] revealed it to her at the outset. As soon as she revealed the remedy to him, he told her that his vow would not prevent him from publicizing the remedy.



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

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Why did Rabbi Yoĥanan go to the matronita?

? Why did the matronita prepare a medicine on Thursday and Friday?

? Why did Rabbi Yoĥanan ask the matronita "What shall I do on Shabbat?"

? Why did the matronita tell Rabbi Yoĥanan "You will not need it," when the latter asked her "What shall I do on Shabbat?"

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Why did Rabbi Yoĥanan insist on getting the medicine?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Why didn't the matronita want to reveal the formula of the medicine to Rabbi Yoĥanan?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Why did the matronita finally agree to reveal the formula of the medicine to Rabbi Yoĥanan?

Bonus ? Why didn't the matronita grasp the ambiguous nuance of Rabbi Yoĥanan's oath, "To the God of the Jews, I will not reveal it"?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Why did Rabbi Yoĥanan reveal the remedy's formula?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

? What is the Gemara's justification to Rabbi Yoĥanan behavior?

Bonus ? How was God's name desecrated by Rabbi Yoĥanan behavior?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? The Gemara explains that Rabbi Yoĥanan revealed to the matronita at the outset that his vow would not prevent him from publicizing the remedy. Are you satisfied with the Gemara's explanation? If not, what prompted the Gemara (the later Sages) to explain Rabbi Yoĥanan's behavior the way they did?

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

! Being "technically" right is usually being wrong!



The modern reader of our story is shocked by the behavior of one of the greatest Sages of the Talmud, who not only is being ungrateful to the helpful matronita by stealing the formula of the remedy, but he also doesn't hesitate to "swear" in God's name to accomplish his goal.

A close reading of our story shows that we are not the first ones to be shocked by the behavior of Rabbi Yoĥanan. His contemporaries, 1500 years ago, pointed already to the desecration of God's name involved in the Rabbi's conduct. Yet at the end of our story, the Sages, prefer to somehow whitewash their teacher's inexcusable action, perhaps protecting his integrity, but leaving the reader with feelings of shame, sadness, and anger.