

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [297]

It Was a Rickety Ladder Insights into Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 39b

With appreciation to Federico Surijon, who shed new light on this story



Background to Our Story

Deuteronomy 5:16

Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God has commanded you, so that you may live long and that it may go well with you in the land the Lord your God is giving you.

Honor Your father and Your Mother



The Torah commands us to honor our father and mother, the two people who were Hashem's partners in bringing us into the world. This mitzvah has many practical aspects, including standing up for our parents, respecting their wishes, and caring for their needs. In fact, the Chayei Adam explains that there are three parts to this mitzvah: 1) to think highly of our parents; 2) to speak highly of them; and 3) to act on their behalf, as in caring for them (Chayei Adam 67:3)

Deuteronomy 22:6-7

⁶ If you come across a bird's nest beside the road, either in a tree or on the ground, and the mother is sitting on the young or on the eggs, do not take the mother with the young. ⁷ You may take the young, but be sure to let the mother go, so that it may go well with you and you may have a long life.

Sending Away a Mother Bird - Shiluach Haken



One who finds a bird's nest with either chicks or eggs in it has to send away the mother bird before taking the chicks or eggs. Rashi (on [Berachos 33b](#)) explains that the objective of the mitzvah is to show that we are servants of Hashem and we follow His command in all areas of life. The Talmud ([Chullin 80a](#)) teaches that we also learn to have mercy on Hashem's creations. The Torah states that for this mitzvah, one will be rewarded with goodness and long life (ibid., 8). This is explained as measure for measure: for helping the mother bird live, you will gain life.

World to Come



The rabbis of the Talmud had a lot to say on the World to Come, but little about what it actually is.

The World to Come — or *olam ha-bah* in Hebrew — is a general Jewish term for the hereafter. References to it are sprinkled throughout ancient Jewish texts, though the particulars of what it means aren't entirely clear.

There are two general possibilities: One is that it refers to a heavenly abode where the souls of the righteous live on after death. The other is that it's the perfected world that will follow the coming of the messiah, when the dead are resurrected and complete peace prevails.

There are no explicit references to the World to Come in the Torah, though some commentators saw hints to it in the text. The first explicit mention of the World to Come appears in the Talmud, which records a number of teachings on the subject, the most famous probably being this one, from the Mishnah in Sanhedrin 10:1:



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Kiddushin. Koren publishers Jerusalem. 206.

There is no reward for a mitzvah in this world.

The reward that the righteous can expect is life in the World-to-Come. This is life without death, a life of good that contains no evil. That is the meaning of the verse: "That it may be well with you, and that you may prolong your days" (Deuteronomy 22:7). This refers to a world where all is entirely well, and where life is eternal (Rambam *Sefer HaMadda, Hilkhos Teshuva* 8:1).

? Why do you think the Sages declared that there is no reward for a mitzvah in this world and that the reward that the righteous can expect is in the World-to-Come?

Rabbi Ya'akov



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Kiddushin. Koren publishers Jerusalem. 206.

When the Gemara mentions Rabbi Ya'akov without any addition, it is referring to Rabbi Ya'akov ben Kurshai, a contemporary of Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel II, with whom he apparently maintained a close relationship. Rabbi Ya'akov was one of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi's teachers. His halakhic and aggadic statements are recorded in the Mishna and Gemara. According to the Gemara here, Rabbi Ya'akov's maternal grandfather was Elisha ben Avuya, also known as Aher.

Elisha ben Avuya/ Añer (the other)



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Kiddushin. Koren publishers Jerusalem. 208.

Elisha ben Avuya was born in Jerusalem toward the end of the Second Temple period to a family that was one of the most prominent and wealthy in the city. As related in the Jerusalem Talmud, his family was under the sway of foreign cultures and did not maintain deep ties with Judaism. Nevertheless, Elisha received an extensive Jewish education, and his great talents earned him a place among the chief scholars of the day. Nevertheless, even while a member of the yeshiva, Elisha maintained ties with Greek culture in its various manifestations, taking an interest in and reading heretical works. In addition to the story reported here, the Talmud offers other accounts of how severe emotional traumas, possibly connected to the Hadrianic persecutions, led Elisha to abandon Judaism entirely. Certain sources suggest that not only did he transgress the mitzvot, but he even cooperated with the Romans against his Jewish brethren, and many acts of cruelty are ascribed to him. This explains the enmity directed at him as early as the time of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi. In his own generation, Rabbi Meir was apparently the only one to maintain personal ties with the apostate. He even continued to learn Torah from Elisha, a controversial move at the time. More lasting than the immediate antagonism was the feeling of regret and pain over such a great scholar turning into a heretic, as well as the sense that Añer remained miserable even during his rebellion but could not find the courage to repent after having acted so wickedly. It is for this reason that his statements are preserved: A proverb of his can be found in the mishna in tractate *Avot* (4:20), while *Avot deRabbi Natan* features an entire chapter of his moral sayings.

As a Driven Leaf, by Milton Steinberg (A Highly Recommended Book)

The age of the Talmud is brought to life in a breathtaking saga. This masterpiece of modern fiction tells the gripping tale of renegade talmudic sage Elisha ben Abuyah's struggle to reconcile his faith with the allure of Hellenistic culture. Set in Roman Palestine, *As a Driven Leaf* draws readers into the dramatic era of Rabbinic Judaism.

Ĥutzpit the Disseminator



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Kiddushin. Koren publishers Jerusalem. 208.

Rabbi Ĥutzpit was a disseminator in Yavne. His own statements are cited in both the Mishna and the *Tosefta*. He apparently lived to an old age. However, he was killed by the Romans during the times of the decrees of persecution and is listed among the ten martyrs.

Cognitive Bias



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

A cognitive bias is a systematic pattern of deviation from norm or rationality in judgment. Individuals create their own "subjective reality" from their perception of the input. An individual's construction of reality, not the objective input, may dictate their behavior in the world. Thus, cognitive biases may sometimes lead to perceptual distortion, inaccurate judgment, illogical interpretation, or what is broadly called irrationality.

Although it may seem like such misperceptions would be aberrations, biases can help humans find commonalities and shortcuts to assist in the navigation of common situations in life. Some cognitive biases are presumably adaptive.

Algo habrán hecho (Spanish: They must have done something)



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

Algo habrán hecho (Spanish: They must have done something) is an infamous Spanish popular quote, from the time of the Dirty war; it was used mostly as a kind of excuse made out by a portion of the population of Argentina, to avoid having to help the *desaparecidos* when they were arrested by the genocidal military dictatorship that ruled the country from 1976 to 1983.

? What else do you think might have prompted the use of "Algo habrán hecho (They must have done something)" in addition to avoid having to help the *desaparecidos*?

Mishna Kiddushin 1:10 (Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 39b)

מתני'

כל העושה מצוה אחת – מטיבין לו, ומאריכין לו גמיו, ונוחל את הארץ. וכל שאינו עושה מצוה אחת – אין מטיבין לו, ואין מאריכין לו גמיו, ואינו נוחל את הארץ.

Mishna

Anyone who performs one mitzvah has goodness bestowed upon him, his life is lengthened, and he inherits the land. And anyone who does not perform one mitzvah does not have goodness bestowed upon him, his life is not lengthened, and he does not inherit the land.

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Yoma 83b

דתנא, רבי יעקב אומר: אין לה כל מצוה ומצוה שכתובה בתורה שמתן שכרה בצדה, שאין תחיית המתים תלויה בה.

בכיבוד אב ואם כתיב: "למען יאריכון ימיה וילמען ייטב לה", בשילוח הקן כתיב: "למען ייטב לה והארקת ימים". הרי שאמר לו אביו: עלה לבירה והבא לי גוזלות, ועלה לבירה ושלח את האם ונטל את הבנים, ובחזירתו נפל ומת – היכן טובת ימיו של זה והיכן אריכות ימיו של זה? אלא: "למען ייטב לה" – לעולם שכולו טוב; ו"למען יאריכון ימיה" – לעולם שכולו ארוך.

ודלמא לאו הכי הוה?
רבי יעקב מעשה קזא.

ודלמא מהרהר בעבירה הוה?
מחשבה רעה אין הקדוש ברוך הוא מצרפה למעשה.

ודלמא מהרהר בעבודה זרה הוה, וקתיב: "למען תפוש את בית ישראל בלבם"?
איהו נמי הכי קאמר: אי סלקא דעתך שכר מצוה בהאי עלמא – אמאי לא אגין מצות עליה, כי היכי דלא לייתי לידי הרהור?

והא אמר רבי אלעזר: שלוחי מצוה אין גזוקין!
התם – בהליכתן, שאני.

והא אמר רבי אלעזר: שלוחי מצוה אינן גזוקין, לא בהליכתן ולא בחזירתן!

סולם רעוע הוה, דקביע היזיקא. וכל היכא דקביע היזיקא לא סמכינן אניסא, דכתיב: "ויאמר שמואל
איה אלה ושמע שאול והרגני".

אמר רב יוסף: אילמלי דרשיה אחר להאי קרא פריי יעקב בר ברתיה – לא חטא.

ואחר מאי הוא? איכא דאמרי: פי האי גוונא חזא.
ואיכא דאמרי: לישנא דחוצפית המתורגמן חזא, דהנה גריר ליה דבר אחר אמר: פה שהפיק מרגליות
ילחד עפר?! נפק, חטא.

As it is taught in a *baraita* that Rabbi Ya'akov says: There is not a single mitzvah written in the Torah whose reward is stated alongside it, which is not dependent on the resurrection of the dead, i.e., the reward is actually bestowed in the World-to-Come.

How so? With regard to honoring one's father and mother it is written: "That your days may be long, and that it may go well with you" (Deuteronomy 5:16).

With regard to the dispatch of the mother bird from the nest it is written: "That it may be well with you, and that you may prolong your days" (Deuteronomy 22:7).

Despite this, it occurred that there was one whose father said to him: Climb to the top of the building and fetch me chicks. And he climbed to the top of the building and dispatched the mother bird and took the young, but upon his return he fell and died. Where is the goodness of the days of this one, and where is the length of days of this one? Rather, the verse "that it may be well with you" means in the world where all is well, and "that your days may be long" is referring to the world that is entirely long (the World-to-Come).

The Gemara asks: But perhaps this incident never occurred? It is possible that everyone who performs these mitzvot is rewarded in this world, and the situation described by Rabbi Ya'akov never happened.

The Gemara answers: Rabbi Ya'akov himself saw an incident of this kind.

The Gemara asks: But perhaps that man was contemplating sin at the time, and he was punished for his thoughts?

The Gemara answers: The Holy One, Blessed be He, does not link a bad thought to an action, i.e., one is not punished for thoughts alone.

The Gemara asks: But perhaps he was contemplating idol worship at the time, and it is written with regard to idol worship: "So I may take the house of Israel in their own heart" (Ezekiel 14:5), which indicates that one is punished for idolatrous thoughts.

The Gemara answers: Rabbi Ya'akov was saying this as well: If it enters your mind that there is reward for performing a mitzvah in this world, why didn't these mitzvot protect him so that he should not come to contemplate idol worship?

The Gemara asks: But didn't Rabbi Elazar say that those on the path to perform a mitzvah are not susceptible to harm? How is it possible that this individual, who was sent by his father to perform a mitzvah, could have died?

The Gemara answers: **There**, Rabbi Elazar is referring to those on their way to perform a mitzvah, which is different, as one is not susceptible to harm when he is on his way to fulfill a mitzvah. In this case the individual was harmed on his return, and one is not afforded protection after having performed a mitzvah.

The Gemara asks: But didn't Rabbi Elazar say that those on the path to perform a mitzvah are not susceptible to harm, neither when they are on their way to perform the mitzvah nor when they are returning from performing the mitzvah?

The Gemara answers: In that case it was a rickety ladder, and therefore the danger was established; and anywhere that the danger is established one may not rely on a miracle, as it is written with regard to God's command to Samuel to anoint David as king in place of Saul: "And Samuel said: How will I go, and Saul will hear and kill me; and God said: Take in your hand a calf and say: I have come to sacrifice an offering to God" (I Samuel 16:2). Although God Himself issued the command, there was concern with regard to the established dangers.

Appendix to Our Story

Rav Yosef said: Had A'har interpreted this verse: "That it may go well with you" (Deuteronomy 5:16), homiletically, as referring to the World-to-Come, as did Rabbi Ya'akov, son of his daughter, he would not have sinned.

The Gemara asks: And what caused A^her to sin? There are those who say he saw a case like this, where a son went up to the roof on his father's command, dispatched the mother bird, and then died. It was witnessing this episode that led Elisha ben Avuya astray.

And there are those who say that he saw the tongue of H^utzpit the disseminator after the latter was executed by the government, thrown in the street, and dragged along by something else, a euphemism for a pig. He [Elisha ben Avuya] said: Shall a mouth that produced pearls lap up dirt? For this reason, he went out and sinned.



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

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

Bonus ? What is the big underlying existential question our text is trying to answer?

Bonus ? "Rabbi Ya'akov says: There is not a single mitzvah written in the Torah whose reward is stated alongside it, which is not dependent on the resurrection of the dead." What prompted Rabbi Ya'akov's teaching?

Extra Bonus ? The Sages tried again and again to prove that Rabbi Ya'akov's proof case (the story of the son who fulfilled the two mitzvot and nevertheless fell from the ladder and died) either never happened or was something extraordinary about it ("perhaps this incident never occurred," "perhaps that man was contemplating sin," "perhaps he was contemplating idol worship," "perhaps what happens is that in this case the individual was harmed on his return, and one is not afforded protection after having performed a mitzvah," "it was a rickety ladder"). What do you think prompts the Sages to push back on Rabbi Ya'akov's teaching?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Extra Bonus ? Why did A^her sin according to our text?

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

! It Never Happened! *Algo Habrá Hecho!* (He Must Have Done Something!) It was a Rickety Ladder! Pushing back on the terrifying thought that our worst nightmares could happen –God forbid– to us as well.



Our story can be read and analyzed on two levels.

On one level, it presents a traditional theological response to the problem of unjustified suffering by claiming that the true reward and punishment for man's actions are in the hereafter. Our story concludes that the inability of Añer to grasp the true nature of reward and punishment is what led him to sin.

On a second, and in my opinion, more interesting level, our story presents us with the pushback of the Sages to the proof case brought by Rabbi Ya'akov. In our story, the Sages use every psychological tool at hand (denial, cognitive bias, disassociation, rationalization) to resist the terrifying but real scenario that undeserved senseless death and suffering could happen to anybody at any time.

Not unlike us, the theological answer provided by Rabbi Ya'akov that true reward and punishment for man's actions are in the hereafter, didn't take away the anxiety of dealing day after day with the unpredictable nature of life itself.