

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**  
[298]

**"By all the Tanna'im and all the Amora'im"**  
Insights into Babylonian Talmud Megilah 15b



**Background to Our Story**

**A Good Oldie**



There is a well-known story about a rabbi who was called upon to settle a dispute between two of his followers. The first man poured out his complaints to the rabbi, and when he finished, the rabbi said, "You're right."

Then it was the second one's turn. When he finished, the rabbi said, "You're also right."

The rabbi's wife, who had been listening to the conversation, said incredulously to her husband, "What do you mean, 'You're also right'? They can't both be right!"

The rabbi thought for a few moments, and then replied, "You know, my dear, you're also right."

**?** Can you imagine a dispute/situation in which both parties are right?

**?** How is the rabbi's wife right?

**Bonus ?** How is the rabbi right?

**Bonus ?** Does it make a difference that the person called to settle the dispute was the litigants' rabbi? How would the situation be different had the litigants gone to regular court?

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

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

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

## The Purim Story



Purim, (Hebrew: "Lots") English Feast of Lots, a joyous Jewish festival commemorating the survival of the Jews who, in the 5th century BCE, were marked for death by their Persian rulers. The story is related in the biblical Book of Esther.

Haman, chief minister of King Ahasuerus, incensed that Mordecai, a Jew, held him in disdain and refused obeisance, convinced the king that the Jews living under Persian rule were rebellious and should be slaughtered. With the king's consent, Haman set a date for the execution (the 13th day of the month of Adar) by casting lots and built a gallows for Mordecai.

When word of the planned massacre reached Esther, beloved Jewish queen of Ahasuerus and adopted daughter of Mordecai, she risked her life by going uninvited to the king to suggest a banquet that Haman would attend. At the meal she pleaded for the Jews and accused "this wicked Haman" of plotting the annihilation of her people. Upset, the king stepped out into the palace gardens. On returning, he found Haman "falling on the couch where Esther was." The king mistook Haman's frantic pleas for mercy as an attack upon the queen. The outraged king ordered that Haman be hanged and that Mordecai be named to his position. Esther and Mordecai then obtained a royal edict allowing Jews throughout the empire to attack their enemies on Adar 13. After an exhilarating victory, they declared the following day a holiday and (alluding to the lots Haman had cast) named it Purim.

### Esther 4:1-5:4

#### Chapter 4

<sup>1</sup> When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly. <sup>2</sup> But he went only as far as the king's gate, because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it. <sup>3</sup> In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes.

<sup>4</sup> When Esther's eunuchs and female attendants came and told her about Mordecai, she was in great distress. She sent clothes for him to put on instead of his sackcloth, but he would not accept them. <sup>5</sup> Then Esther summoned Hathak, one of the king's eunuchs assigned to attend her, and ordered him to find out what was troubling Mordecai and why.

<sup>6</sup> So Hathak went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate. <sup>7</sup> Mordecai told him everything that had happened to him, including the exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews. <sup>8</sup> He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict for their annihilation, which had been published in Susa, to show to Esther and explain it to her, and he told him to instruct her to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people.

<sup>9</sup> Hathak went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said. <sup>10</sup> Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai, <sup>11</sup> "All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that they be put to death unless the king extends the gold scepter to them and spares their lives. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king."

<sup>12</sup> When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, <sup>13</sup> he sent back this answer: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. <sup>14</sup> For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?"

<sup>15</sup> Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: <sup>16</sup> "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish."

<sup>17</sup> So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions.

## Chapter 5

<sup>1</sup> On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the palace, in front of the king's hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne in the hall, facing the entrance.<sup>2</sup> When he saw Queen Esther standing in the court, he was pleased with her and held out to her the gold scepter that was in his hand. So Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter.

<sup>3</sup> Then the king asked, "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you."

<sup>4</sup> "If it pleases the king," replied Esther, "let the king, together with Haman, come today to a banquet I have prepared for him."

**?** What is puzzling in the underlined verses at the beginning of Chapter 5 of the Book of Esther?

## Tannaim



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

Tannaim (**Aramaic**: תנאים singular תנא "repeaters", "teachers") were the **rabbinic sages** whose views are recorded in the **Mishnah**, from approximately 10–220 CE. The period of the Tannaim, also referred to as the Mishnaic period, lasted about 210 years. It came after the period of the **Zugot** ("pairs"), and was immediately followed by the period of the **Amoraim** ("interpreters").

The root tanna (תנא) is the **Talmudic Aramaic** equivalent for the **Hebrew** root shanah (שנה), which also is the root-word of Mishnah. The verb shanah (שנה) literally means "to repeat [what one was taught]" and is used to mean "to learn".

The Mishnaic period is commonly divided up into five periods according to generations. There are approximately 120 known Tannaim.

The Tannaim lived in several areas of the **Land of Israel**. The spiritual center of **Judaism** at that time was **Jerusalem**, but after the destruction of the city and the **Second Temple**, **Yohanan ben Zakkai** and his students founded a new **religious center in Yavne**.

Some Tannaim worked as laborers (e.g., charcoal burners, cobblers) in addition to their positions as teachers and legislators. They were also leaders of the people and negotiators with the [Roman Empire](#).

## Amoraim



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

Amoraim (Aramaic: plural אמוראים, singular Amora אמורא "those who say" or "those who speak over the people", or "spokesmen") refers to Jewish scholars of the period from about 200 to 500 CE, who "said" or "told over" the teachings of the Oral Torah.

They were primarily located in Babylonia and the Land of Israel. Their legal discussions and debates were eventually codified in the Gemara. The Amoraim followed the Tannaim in the sequence of ancient Jewish scholars. The Tannaim were direct transmitters of uncodified oral tradition; the Amoraim expounded upon and clarified the oral law after its initial codification.

## Elijah the Prophet



Elijah the Prophet (known in Hebrew as Eliyahu Hanavi) is perhaps the most beloved prophet in the Bible. His lifetime is chronicled in Kings I and King II—including the [miracles he performed](#), the [inspiration he caused](#), and his dramatic ascent to heaven.

According to tradition, Elijah [frequently comes down to earth](#) to help Jews in distress or reveal secrets of the Torah to our great scholars. He is [present](#) at a Jewish baby boy's [circumcision](#) and he [visits us every year](#) at the [Passover Seder](#).

The [Prophet Malachi](#) tells us that it will be Elijah the Prophet who [will announce](#) the arrival of the Messiah.

## Rabba bar Avuh



[Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Ta'anit - Megillah. Koren publishers Jerusalem. 288.](#)

Rabba bar Avuh, a second generation Babylonian *amora*, was a close student of Rav, whose teachings he often quotes. He lived and taught in the city of Mehoza. His student, Rav Naĥman, became his son-in-law and continued to teach much of what he learned from his father-in law.

Although Rabba bar Avuh was a member of the Exilarch's family, he remained poor throughout his life, as he did not want to profit from his Torah knowledge.

We find a number of stories in the Talmud that describe his interactions with the Elijah the Prophet, to whom he posed various questions.

Rabba bar Avuh's son, Rav Ĥama, was also a Sage, and two of his descendants were the great *ge'onim* of Babylonia, Rav Sherira Gaon and Rav Hai Gaon.

## The Text: Babylonian Talmud Megilah 15b

"יבא המלך והמן... אל המשתה."  
תנו רבנן: מה ראתה אסתר שזימנה את המן?

רבי אלעזר אומר: פחים טמנה לו, שנאמר "יהי שלחנם לפניהם לפח",  
רבי יהושע אומר: מבית אביה למדה, שנאמר "אם רעב שונאך האכילהו לחם" וגו'  
רבי מאיר אומר: כדי שלא ישול עצה וימרוד,  
רבי יהודה אומר: כדי שלא יכירו בה שהיא יהודית  
רבי נחמיה אומר: כדי שלא יאמרו ישראל אחות יש לנו בבית המלך ויסיחו דעתן מן הרחמים.  
רבי יוסי אומר: כדי שיהא מצוי לה בכל עת  
רבי שמעון בן מנסיא אומר: אולי ירגיש המקום ויעשה לנו נס.  
רבי יהושע בן קרחה אומר: אסביר לו פנים כדי שיהרג הוא והיא  
רבן גמליאל אומר: מלך הפכפכן היה.  
אמר רבי גמליאל: עדיין צריכין אנו למודעי. דתנא, רבי אלעזר המודעי אומר: קנאתו במלך, קנאתו  
בשרים.  
רבה אומר: "לפני שבר גאון",  
אבני ורבא דאמרי תרוויהו: "בתומם אשית את משתייהם" וגו'

אשפחיה רבה בר אבוה לאליהו, אמר ליה: כמאן חזיא אסתר ועבדא הכי?  
אמר ליה: ככולהו תנאי וככולהו אמוראי.

"If it seems good unto the king, let the king and Haman come this day to the banquet that I have prepared for him" (Esther 5:4).

The Sages taught in a baraita: What did Esther see to invite Haman to the banquet?

Rabbi Elazar says: She hid a snare for him, as it is stated: "Let their table become a snare before them" (Psalms 69:23), as she assumed that she would be able to trip up Haman during the banquet

Rabbi Yehoshua says: She learned to do this from the Jewish teachings of her father's house, as it is stated: "If your enemy be hungry, give him bread to eat" (Proverbs 25:21).

Rabbi Meir says: She invited him in order that he be near her at all times, so that he would not take counsel and rebel against Ahasuerus when he discovered that the king was angry with him.

Rabbi Yehuda says: She invited Haman so that it not be found out that she was a Jew, as had she distanced him, he would have become suspicious.

Rabbi Neĥemya says: She did this so that the Jewish people would not say: We have a sister in the king's house, and consequently neglect their prayers for divine mercy.

Rabbi Yosei says: She acted in this manner, so that Haman would always be on hand for her, as that would enable her to find an opportunity to cause him to stumble before the king.

Rabbi Shimon ben Menasya said that Esther said to herself: Perhaps the Omnipresent will take notice that all are supporting Haman and nobody is supporting the Jewish people, and He will perform for us a miracle.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korĥa says: She said to herself: I will act kindly toward him and thereby bring the king to suspect that we are having an affair; she did so in order that both he and she would be killed. Essentially, Esther was willing to be killed with Haman in order that the decree would be annulled.

Rabban Gamliel says: Ahasuerus was a fickle king, and Esther hoped that if he saw Haman on multiple occasions, eventually he would change his opinion of him.

Rabban Gamliel said: We still need the words of Rabbi Eliezer HaModa'i to understand why Esther invited Haman to her banquet. As it is taught in a baraita: Rabbi Eliezer HaModa'I says: She made the king jealous of him and she made the other ministers jealous of him, and in this way she brought about his downfall.

Rabba says: Esther invited Haman to her banquet in order to fulfill that which is stated: "Pride goes before destruction" (Proverbs 16:18), which indicates that in order to destroy the wicked, one must first bring them to pride.

Abaye and Rava, who both say that she invited Haman in order to fulfill the verse: "When they are heated, I will make feasts for them, and I will make them drunk, that they may rejoice, and sleep a perpetual sleep" (Jeremiah 51:39).


Rabba bar Avuh once happened upon Elijah the Prophet and said to him: In accordance with whose understanding did Esther see fit to act in this manner (to invite Haman)? What was the true reason behind her invitation?


He, Elijah, said to him: Esther was motivated by all the reasons given by all the tanna'im and all the amora'im.



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

### Comprehension and Analysis Questions


**Bonus**  Why did the Sages ask "What did Esther see to invite Haman to the banquet?"

 Our teaching/story brings twelve different answers to the above question. Which ones are your favorite one?

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

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


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

 Why did Rabba bar Avuh ask Elijah the Prophet what was the true reason behind Esther's invitation?

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

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

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

 "He, Elijah, said to him: Esther was motivated by all the reasons given by all the tanna'im and all the amora'im." What do you think prompted Elijah's (or the editor of the Talmud's) answer?

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

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

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

**Bonus ?** How do you think the Sages felt upon hearing Elijah's answer to Rabba bar Avuh's question?

**Extra Bonus ?** Why was Elijah (or the editor of the Talmud) able to use the "You're right" "You're also right" "You know, my dear, you're also right" approach to answer Rabba bar Avuh's question?

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

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

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

**Bonus ?** In which situations should the approach "You're right." "You're also right." "You know, my dear, you're also right" be encouraged? In which situations should this approach be discouraged?

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

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

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

**A Question Just for You: ?** What did Esther see to invite Haman to the banquet?

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

! Making everybody feel like a winner (or at least not like a loser) is easier than you think, and an approach worth considering in your relationships with others.



What did Esther see to invite Haman to the banquet? The simple answer is that we do not know. Thirteen different rabbis came up with twelve different answers (Abaye and Rava shared the same answer) to a question for which there is no definitive answer.

Rabba bar Avuh, having "VIP access" to Elijah the Prophet (who in turn has "VIP access" to the heavenly realms), wishes to know which of the twelve answers is the "true" one; in other words, who is the winner.

Elijah the Prophet, as the true herald of peace that he is, refuses to declare one winner (or 11 losers), thus encouraging the Sages' creativity and active involvement.

While some situations require the drawing of a precise line, most situations in life are complex and ambiguous and lend themselves to the "You're right" "You're also right" "You know, my dear, you're also right" approach.

Our story - in the persona of Elijah the Prophet - invites the reader to limit the winner/loser approach to problem solving to the bare minimum, allowing for more situations in which everybody involved can feel they are a winner, or at least can feel heard, considered, and included.

### Finalists for the Twist

- You had to be there!
- "It doesn't matter if you win or lose, it's that you play the game!"
- "Just as beauty is in the eye of the beholder, truth is also in the eye of the beholder"
- Anyway, you just can't know some things without having been there, or without "walking a mile in my moccasins."

Reminds me of the story of a Holocaust survivor who gets to heaven and tells God a joke about something that happened in Auschwitz. God doesn't laugh and says, "I don't get it." The survivor says, "I guess you had to be there."