

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [30]

Give me My Wages, and I will go and Feed my Wife and Children!

(Insights into Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 127b)



Background to Our Story

Mishnah Avot Chapter 1, 6:

Joshua the son of Perachia would say: Assume for yourself a master, acquire for yourself a friend, and judge every man to the side of merit.

Yom Kippur



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

Yom Kippur, also known in English as the *Day of Atonement*, is the most solemn and important of the Jewish holidays. Its central themes are atonement and repentance. Jews traditionally observe this holy day with a 25-hour period of fasting and intensive prayer, often spending most of the day in synagogue services.

Can a vow be annulled?



<http://www.askmoses.com/en/>

For a start, our Sages advise you not to make vows in the first place.¹

If you have made a vow, there is a process available to annul it. We call this "*Hatarat Nedarim*". As each Rosh Hashanah marks a fresh start on a new year, it is customary to perform *Hatarat Nedarim* on the morning before the festival for any vows you had made in the preceding year. The full *Hatarat Nedarim* process can be found in most ordinary prayer books or in your special High Holidays prayer book.

You cannot annul your own vow. Technically, you could call on an "expert" Torah scholar to do that. An easier way (after all, it's tricky to determine who qualifies as "expert") is to have three Jewish men annul the vow.²

You begin the process by making a declaration that you regret having made the vow(s) in the first place. To absolve you, the three "judges" need to declare three times that your vow is annulled.

Ideally, you should mention the details of the vow to at least one person on the panel.³ The standardized pre-Rosh Hashanah version allows for annulment of vows that you can no longer remember.

You don't have to wait until Rosh Hashanah. If you regret ever having made a vow,⁴ you can assemble an "annulment team" immediately and follow the *Hatarat Nedarim* process (by Rabbi Ari Shishler)

Footnotes

- 1. Code of Jewish Law, Yoreh Deah 203:1; Maimonides, Hilchot Nedarim 13:25; Babylonian Talmud, Nedarim 22b.
- 2. Code of Jewish Law, *ibid* 228:1.
- 3. *Ibid* 14.
- 4. *Ibid* 7.

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 127b

תנו רבנן: הדין חבירו לכת זכות דנין אותו לזכות. ומעשה באדם אחד שירד מגליל העליון ונשפר אצל בעל הבית אחד בדרום שלש שנים.

ערב יום הכפורים אמר לו: תן לי שכרי, ואלה ואזון את אשתי ובני. אמר לו: אין לי מעות. אמר לו: תן לי פירות. אמר לו: אין לי. תן לי קרקע. אין לי. תן לי בהמה. אין לי. תן לי פרים וכסות. אין לי.

הפשיל כליו לאחוריו, והלה לביתו בפחי נפש.

לאחר הרגל נטל בעל הבית שכרו בידו, ועמו משוי שלשה חמורים, אחד של מאכל ואחד של משקה ואחד של מיני מגדים, והלה לו לביתו. אחר שאכלו ושתו נתן לו שכרו. אמר לו: בשעה שאמרתי לי "תן לי שכרי" ואמרתי "אין לי מעות" במה חשדתיני? אמרתי: שמא פרקמטיא בזול נודמנה לה, ולקחת בהו. ובשעה שאמרתי לי "תן לי בהמה" ואמרתי "אין לי בהמה" במה חשדתיני? אמרתי: שמא מושפרת ביד אחרים. בשעה שאמרתי לי "תן לי קרקע" ואמרתי לה "אין לי קרקע" במה חשדתיני? אמרתי: שמא מושפרת ביד אחרים היא. ובשעה שאמרתי לה "אין לי פירות" במה חשדתיני? אמרתי: שמא אינן מעושרות". ובשעה שאמרתי לה "אין לי פרים וכסות" במה חשדתיני? אמרתי: שמא הקדיש כל נכסיו לשמים.

אמר ליה: העבודה, כך הנה! הדרתי כל נכסי בשביל הורקנוס בני שלא עסק בתורה, וכשבאתי אצל חבירי בדרום התירו לי כל נדרי. ואתה, כשם שדנתני לזכות – המקום ידין אותך לזכות.

The Sages taught: One who judges another favorably is himself judged favorably. And there was an incident involving a certain person who descended from the Upper Galilee and was hired to work for a certain

homeowner in the South for three years.¹ On the eve of the Day of Atonement, he [the worker] said to the homeowner: Give me my wages, and I will go and feed my wife and children.

The homeowner said to him: I have no money.

He [the worker] said to him: In that case, give me my wages in the form of produce.

He [the homeowner] said to him: I have none.

The worker said to him: Give me my wages in the form of land.

The homeowner said to him: I have none.

The worker said to him: Give me my wages in the form of animals.

He [the homeowner] said to him: I have none.

The worker said to him: Give me cushions and blankets.

He [the homeowner] said to him: I have none.

The worker slung his tools over his shoulder behind him and went to his home in anguish.

After the festival of *Sukkot*, the homeowner took the worker's wages in his hand, along with a burden that required three donkeys, one laden with food, one laden with drink, and one laden with types of sweets, and went to the worker's home. After they ate and drank, the homeowner gave him his wages.

The homeowner said to him: When you said to me: Give me my wages, and I said: I have no money, of what did you suspect me? Why did you not suspect me of trying to avoid paying you?

¹ In the *She'iltot*, Rav Añai Gaon cited this incident and identified the homeowner as Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus and the worker that he hired as Rabbi Akiva.

The worker answered, I said: Perhaps the opportunity to purchase merchandise [*perakmatya*] inexpensively presented itself, and you purchased it with the money that you owed me, and therefore you had no money available.

The homeowner asked: And when you said to me: Give me animals, and I said: I have no animals, of what did you suspect me?

The worker answered: I said: Perhaps the animals are hired to others.

The homeowner asked: When you said to me: Give me land, and I said: I have no land, of what did you suspect me?

The worker answered: I said: Perhaps the land is leased to others, and you cannot take the land from the lessees.

The homeowner asked: And when you said to me: Give me produce, and I said: I have no produce, of what did you suspect me?

The worker answered: I said: Perhaps they are not tithed, and that was why you could not give them to me.

The homeowner asked: And when I said: I have no cushions or blankets; of what did you suspect me?

The worker answered: I said: Perhaps he consecrated all his property to Heaven and therefore has nothing available at present.

The homeowner said to him: I swear by the Temple service that it was so. I had no money available at the time because I vowed and consecrated all my property on account of Hyrcanus, my son, who did not engage in Torah study. The homeowner sought to avoid leaving an inheritance for his son. And when I came to my fellow residents in the South, the Sages of that generation, they dissolved all my vows. At that point, the homeowner had immediately gone to pay his worker.

Now the homeowner said: And you, just as you judged favorably, so may God judge you favorably.



Explaining the Story - What's going on in our story? (The sequence of events)

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? What is your first reaction when reading the story?

? Why do you think our story happens on the eve of Yom Kippur?

? The homeowner seems positively surprised by his employee's generosity of spirit? Why do you think that is?

Bonus ? Why do you think someone would be naturally inclined to give others the benefit of the doubt? Why do you think someone would be naturally inclined not to give others the benefit of the doubt?

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

- !** It is a story, it may be too much, and yet...
- !** What goes around comes around!
- !** When faith in God and giving others the benefit of the doubt are intertwined



The heroes of our story (according to Rav Hai Gaon, two Sages from the Mishna) appear not very real, and the story is perhaps a hyperbole. Yet the message is there: What goes around comes around! When you work on giving others the benefit of the doubt, you yourself will be given the benefit of the doubt. On the eve of Yom Kippur, when we are beseeching God to give us the benefit of the doubt, our story reminds us that compassion, forgiveness, understanding, and graciousness of spirit on our end will generate compassion, forgiveness, understanding, and graciousness of spirit in others, and in God willing, in God Himself.

Analysis by Rabbi Guido Cohen

Here we find a Talmudic legend that takes place on the eve of Yom Kippur. We don't know who the protagonists are, but an ancient medieval tradition identifies them as Rabbi Akiva (the employee) and one of his teachers, Eliezer ben Hyrkanos.

The story begins with a statement with which we are more than familiar, a piece of advice about the way to judge people, which is uttered by Joshua ben Perahia in the Mishnah, in Pirke Avot. We can imagine that the person giving the advice is annoyed by a common human practice, which consists of judging people with excessive severity, without taking into account that we too could be on the other side, being judged. For our sages, judgment is not rendered strictly by the "dry" application of a standard. If the employee had applied simply the purest logic, he would have thought that his employer didn't want to pay him, above all after the countless alternatives that he offered him. Nevertheless, this man chose to judge his fellow man by setting aside the rod of severity and using one that was a little more merciful. This is more than understandable, if we take into account that the story takes place precisely on Yom Kippur Eve, a few hours from the time when anyone now in the position of "judge" will become the person being judged. The key to this story is found precisely there, in the switching of positions. If this story were a play, it would be divided into two scenes with two quite different set designs. The first scene would take place on the employer's estate, where the poor, unprotected employee goes too far in his generosity toward his employer and returns home empty-handed, without what he needs to support his family. On the other hand, the second scene would take place in the home of this poor employer, where he lives in hardship. The employer must "descend" on the house of his servant to give him what he deserves, what is due to him. The switching of places in this story is as important as in the story of Plimo, in which we go from the beauty of the house to the disagreeable atmosphere of the bathhouse facilities. In this case too, the protagonist changes location, leaves his home to go to some other place. The same thing is going to happen to this servant, hours after having judged his employer. We could even describe Yom Kippur as the day on which the roles are reversed. The day on which millions of chronic judges are judged by a judge who, thanks to Him, does not judge us with the same harshness with which we are wont to judge our fellow men. It is an interesting exercise, to think how everything would be if on Yom Kippur each one of us were judged only with the quality of justice. The Midrash tells us that when G-d created the world, He did it as Elohim, which is the name that represents His quality of justice and rigor. Nevertheless, He needed little time to realize that if He evaluated human attitudes with the strictness and severity of that justice that is beyond mankind, He would only succeed in destroying what He had created. Therefore He decided to mitigate that quality with the quality of mercy, represented by the name YHWH, which we Jews are accustomed to pronounce as Adonai or simply as HaShem, the Name.

Like G-d after His creation, this employee who demanded his wages understood that if he judged his employer simply by using the coldness of a judgment that did not consider the reality of the individual, not only would his employer be damaged, but the entire relationship would also lose its harmony. The immediacy of the "defendants' dock" probably made this man see how important it was to give his fellow man the benefit of the doubt in the interest of maintaining a relationship that was important to maintain for both. Perhaps that is one of the most valuable moral functions of this day, which is so feared and at the same time so banalized. On Yom Kippur, thousands of individuals who enjoy being district attorneys on a daily basis are judged and in this way are taught the benefits of a judgment that takes into account the existence of someone else on the other side of the relationship.