

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [31]

I will go [to him] to effect a Reconciliation (Insights into Babylonian Talmud Yoma 87a)



Background to Our Story

Yom Kippur



<http://www.wikipedia.org/>

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.

Rav (Abba Arika)

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The Jewish scholar Abba Arika (ca. 175-ca. 247), also known as Rav, founded a yeshiva, or academy, in Sura, Babylonia. The school remained an important center of Jewish learning until the 11th century.

Abba Arika was born to an aristocratic family in Kafri, Babylonia. As a young man, he went to Palestine to study at the academy of the eminent rabbi Judah I. Rabbi Judah had compiled the Mishna, a work containing the Oral Law, or body of unrecorded Jewish teachings or traditions. After acquiring considerable knowledge, Abba returned to Babylonia, where he became an inspector of markets and a lecturer at the academy at Nehardea. About 219 he moved to Sura on the Euphrates River and opened his own academy. His school gained an excellent reputation and attracted many students; in time its importance as a center of learning surpassed that of the academies in Palestine. Abba became known as Rav (master par excellence).

Rav was deeply concerned not only with the training of scholars but also with the education of all the members of the Jewish community. He therefore taught workers

in the hours preceding and following the regular school day. Twice a year, in the spring and the fall, some 12,000 students came from all parts of the country to listen to lectures and discussions on Jewish law.

The Mishna was the basic text taught at Sura, where it was analyzed, discussed, and expounded. The debates on the Mishna in the Babylonian academies over the centuries were incorporated in the Gemara, an encyclopedic work which was completed about 500. The Mishna and the Gemara compose the Talmud. The Palestinian schools produced a Talmud in the 5th century, but it was not well preserved. The Babylonian Talmud thus became authoritative. Rav was a member of the last generation of *Tannaim* (teachers who are mentioned in the Mishna); he also belonged to the first generation of *Amoraim* (scholars whose commentaries are recorded in the Gemara).

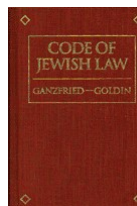
In addition to his scholarly work, Rav wrote a number of prayers which were incorporated in the traditional liturgy. Among them is the inspiring *Alenu*, which entreats God to perfect the universe as a kingdom of the Almighty. He also composed the major poetic selections of the *Musaf*, or supplementary service, for the New Year.

Rav was devoted to the study of Judaism and valued this activity above worship and sacrifice in the temple. He extolled the importance of work and earning a livelihood, but he also displayed an affirmative attitude toward life and pleasure. "A person will be called to account," he warned, "for having deliberately rejected the permissible pleasures he can enjoy." Rav indulged in mystical speculation, but he abhorred superstition and discouraged indulgence in astrology. He always stressed that redemption can come only through repentance and good deeds.

Rav guided his school until his death about 247. The academy continued to exist until 1034.

Honor due the Teacher, the Scholar, the Aged, and the Priest

[Code of Jewish Law: Kitzur Shuhan Arukh: A Compilation of Jewish Laws and Customs \(Annotated Revised Edition\) by Solomon Ganzfried and Hyman E. Goldin. Chapter 144](#)



1. A person must fear and revere his teacher more than his father, because his father has given life in this world, while his teacher prepares him for life in the world to come.
2. It is written (Leviticus 19:32): "Thou shalt rise up before the hoary head, and honor the face of the old man." By the expression 'Old man,' is meant a man versed in the Law of God, as it is written (Numbers 11:16): "Gather unto Me seventy of the elders of Israel."
3. When three walk together and one of them is a rabbi, the latter is to walk in the center, while the other two should fall back and walk on his side, the older one on his right, and the younger one on his left.
4. It is a grave sin to disrespect or to hate men learned in the Torah.

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Yoma 87a

רב הוה ליה מילתא בהדי ההוא טבחא – לא אתא לקמיה. במעלי יומא דכפורי אמר איהו: איזיל אנא לפיוסי ליה. פגע ביה רב הונא; אמר ליה – להיכא קא איזיל מר? אמר ליה לפיוסי לפלגנא. אמר: איזיל אבא למיקטל נפשא. אזל וקם עילויה, הוה יתיב וקא פלי רישא, דלי עיניה ותזניה, אמר ליה: אבא את! זיל, לית לי מילתא בהדך! בהדי דקא פלי רישא אישתמיט גרמא, ומתניה בקועיה, וקטליה.

Rav had grounds [for a grievance] against a certain butcher.

The butcher did not come before him.

On Yom Kippur eve, Rav said: I will go and appease him.

He met Rav Huna, who said to him: Where is my Master going?

He [Rav] said to him: I am going to appease so-and-so.

Rav Huna said: Abba is going to kill a person.

Rav went and stood by him. He found the butcher sitting and splitting the head of an animal. The butcher raised his eyes and saw him. He [the butcher] said to him [to Rav]: Are you Abba? Go, I have nothing to say to you.

While he was splitting the head, one of the bones flew out and struck him in the throat.



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

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? How do you understand the expression "a certain butcher"?

? Why did Rav go to the butcher on the eve of Yom Kippur?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Bonus ? How do we know -from our story- that Rav wanted to appease the butcher? How is Rav represented in the story?

? How do we know -from our story- that the butcher wasn't interested in effecting a reconciliation? How is the butcher represented in the story?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Bonus ? Why did Rav Huna say: "Abba [i.e. Rav] is going to kill someone!"?

"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from the Text

- ! I came looking for peace but, if it is war that you want...



In this strange, story, Rav, the greatest Talmudic Sage of all times, goes – against the accepted norms of etiquette - to appease a certain butcher on the eve of Yom Kippur.

Rav, who wants to usher the holiest day of the year with no unresolved issues, goes to see the butcher, who is not only not ready for appeasement, but he insults Rav by telling him to go. Rav original openness and vulnerability metamorphoses into a silent anger, rage, and thirst for revenge, which ultimate takes the life of the butcher.

The only one who seems to understand that the time was not ripe for appeasement is Rav Huna, who perhaps, out of a false sense of humility and respect for his teacher, doesn't prevent him from walking straight into a tragic situation.

Analysis by Rabbi Guido Cohen

This story, like the previous one, has a tragic ending. Like the majority of the stories we have studied, the eve of Yom Kippur shows us the protagonist leaving his habitual place and going somewhere else, in this case to visit the butcher. Rav is convinced that the butcher owes him some words of apology, and the butcher is convinced that he has nothing to apologize for. From the context in which the paragraph in the Tractate Yoma is located, we can even imagine that Rav had already been several times to try to forgive this man who was unwilling to be forgiven. Rav believed himself to be so good that he would go forgive someone who was not even aware of his error. For the butcher, there was a long road to travel before asking for forgiveness. First he had to be aware of having committed a transgression against Rav, if he indeed had done so. Next he had to want to obtain Rav's forgiveness, and then he would go there to apologize. But Rav did not understand the butcher's sense of time. He lived only in his own time, which indicated that the day of Yom Kippur had to be welcomed with no grievance pending, and with no dispute to resolve. So he decided to rush the time that every relationship requires. Just the opposite of Rav Rechumi, who delayed too long, Rav hurried more than he had to and deprived the butcher of the opportunity to make the internal journey that Teshuvah requires. And in that zeal to do the work that was not required of him and make the other man face the evidence of his error, Rav ended up putting an end to the life of the man whom he was trying to help. The meeting with Rav Huna on the way is premonitory. Perhaps knowing the grievance his teacher had against the butcher, Huna tried to make him see reason, and to cause him to lose a little time and hope that the butcher on his own would take advantage of the day of Yom Kippur to acknowledge his error. But Rav was determined to forgive what he considered an offense that ought to be cleared up before Yom Kippur. As in Plimo's case, the most sacred day of the year was supposed to begin with nothing untidy, with everything resolved. And like Plimo, he ended up by starting Yom Kippur in the place where he least expected, in the presence of the most different thing there can be from the purity and beauty to which some aspire on that imposing day.

Rav thinks it is more important to have his accounts in order than to have his relationships with his fellow men in harmony. He prefers to comply with the formal requirement that he have no one needing to forgive him or needing his forgiveness, even if the cost of it exceeds the time that each person needs and forces something that has not been processed yet. The only thing that matters to Rav is being able to say without worry that he is reaching the day of Yom Kippur with no pending grievances. Like Plimo's white, pure house, like the Talmudic discussion of Rechumi, like the employer who thought he might be judged by his employee. And the Talmudic message does not spare criticism of this attitude. The essence of the day lies precisely in managing to reach the place that only the poor servant reaches, the man who had not yet collected his wages but understood that the timing of other people sometimes is not the same as his own. That before judging, you have to know that you too will be judged eventually. And above all things, that the true preparation for this day does not lie in the white house, or in the precise and detailed understanding of the Law, or even in the obtaining of apologies to cover formalities; rather, it lies essentially in the challenge of understanding that only someone who is prepared to face his fellow man generously and without resentment can go in peace through the tremendous holiness of that marvelous day.

At the Threshold of Forgiveness: A Study of Law and Narrative in the Talmud

By [Moshe Halbertal](#)
[Fall 2011](#)

Near the end of tractate *Yoma*, the Mishnah limits the scope of the Day of Atonement:

For sins between man and God, Yom Kippur atones. But for sins between a man and his fellow, Yom Kippur does not atone until he appeases his fellow.

In a sense, the injured party becomes the master of his injurer's future, for only his pardon can make atonement possible. R. Elazar ben Azariah is quoted as having derived this principle from a biblical verse that describes the purifying force of the Temple service on Yom Kippur: "For on this day atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you of all your sins; you shall be cleansed before the Lord." (Leviticus 16:30)

In its plain sense, the phrase "before the Lord" simply refers to a place, the Temple, where atonement occurs. It probably also indicates that it is God who grants this atonement. But R. Elazar ben Azariah treats "before the Lord" as a restrictive clause, understanding it to mean that only sins against God—those that are "before the Lord"—are atoned for by Yom Kippur. Atonement for transgressions committed against other people depends not on God but on reconciliation with the injured party.

The Talmud develops this requirement for human forgiveness into a full-fledged legal institution. First, the request for forgiveness must be public: "R. Chisda said that he must placate his fellow before three lines of three people." This is, again, tied to the creative reading of a biblical verse, but the clear intent is to make the request for forgiveness a social fact. A single, casual encounter involving only the injurer and the injured will not suffice. The next talmudic statement ensures that, on the other hand, the injurer does not become a permanent hostage to the injured party: "R. Yosi bar Chanina said, 'whoever seeks forgiveness from his friend should not seek it more than three times.'"

The Talmud then emphasizes the centrality of the moral community to this process of effecting atonement for an offense against someone who has died:

And if [the injured person] has died, [the injurer] brings ten people, and has them stand next to his grave; he then says, "I have sinned against the Lord, God of Israel, and against so-and-so, whom I injured."

Here, the community serves as a substitute for the injured party, but there must also be the sense of a real encounter.

There are ethical and religious systems in which an encounter, public or otherwise, between the injurer and the injured party is not central to the idea of forgiveness. The Stoic, for instance, grants forgiveness as an expression of autonomy, foregoing what is properly due him. The point is not to restore a relationship but rather to free oneself from one, since the toxic force of a grudge might harm his inner life. In

contrast, one who forgives as an act of Christian grace is concerned with the injurer's soul, ideally extending forgiveness in advance of any expressed remorse. The absence of any necessary encounter between injurer and injured makes these models of forgiveness quite different from the one formulated by the Talmud.

The juxtaposition of law and narrative is a characteristic and important feature of the Talmud. After discussing the formal requirements for requesting forgiveness, the Talmud presents four brief stories of encounters in which rabbinic masters attempt to reconcile with those they have injured. Each of the stories raises the question of the power and limits of the law to structure such a complex human moment. I will focus on the first three of these stories, setting them down, as did the editors of the Talmud, one after another.

R. Jeremiah injured R. Abba. R. Jeremiah went and sat at R. Abba's doorstep. When R. Abba's maidservant poured out wastewater, some drops sprayed on R. Jeremiah's head. He said, "they have made me into a trash heap," and he recited, the verse "[God] lifts up the needy from the trash heap," (Psalms 113:7) as being about himself. R. Abba heard him and went out to him. He said to him, "Now it is I who must appease you, as it is said, 'Go abase yourself; and importune your fellow' (Proverbs 6:3)."

When a certain person injured R. Zera, he would repeatedly pass before him and invite himself into his presence, so that the injurer would come and appease him.

A certain butcher injured Rav, and he did not come before him [to seek forgiveness]. On the day before Yom Kippur, [Rav] said, "I will go and appease him." R. Huna met him. He asked, "Where is my master going?" He said, "To appease so-and-so." [R. Huna] said [to himself] "Abba [i.e. Rav] is going to kill a man!" Rav went and stood over him. The butcher was seated, cleaning the head [of an animal]. He raised his eyes and saw him [Rav]. He said to him, "Abba, go; I have nothing to do with you." While he was still cleaning the animal's head, a bone shot out, struck the butcher's neck, and killed him.

A simple historical observation will help us to see the issues that the editors of the Talmud were exploring in these anecdotes: Rav lived before R. Zera. The ordering of these stories is not chronological; it's conceptual.

In the first incident, R. Jeremiah, who has come to ask forgiveness from R. Abba, is seated at the threshold, probably finding it difficult to enter, fearing that R. Abba will rebuff him, or worse, that his appearance will renew the injury. The humiliation he suffers at the hands of the maidservant suddenly reverses the situation; now, having been sprayed with dirty water, he is R. Abba's victim. His ironic recitation of the verse brought R. Abba out to ask *his* pardon, and the threshold (literal and figurative) was crossed.

The story seems intended to point out a serious problem with institutionalizing the requirement that forgiveness be requested. One can formulate rules that dictate how to ask for forgiveness, but these rules can only come into play when an encounter between the injurer and injured is possible. This requires a kind of preliminary appeasement. The narrative thus demonstrates the limitations of the law as it appears before us. One might say it places the law itself at the threshold. Every request for forgiveness is preceded by some forgiveness that makes the request

possible. But how does the Talmud deal with the forgiveness that must precede forgiveness?

The next story, which follows immediately after that of R. Jeremiah, suggests an answer to this question. R. Zera used to indirectly invite himself into the presence of one who had injured him, providing an occasion for the injurer to reconcile with him. His action, which is presented as worthy of emulation, creates the conditions in which it will be possible for the injurer to approach him. The injured party extends the forgiveness that precedes forgiveness without any assurance that the injurer will in fact be remorseful and request his pardon. But this act of grace does not obviate the remorse that must precede full reconciliation; it only makes it possible. Nor is it, apparently, legally required. The passage presents us with an exemplary story that expresses the greatness of grace without making it a binding norm.

The third story shows why R. Zera's practice was an act of pure grace that cannot be turned into law. The story tells of Rav, who, on the eve of Yom Kippur, was awaiting the arrival of the butcher who had injured him. When the butcher does not come, Rav decides to go to him. At first blush, Rav's action seems quite similar to R. Zera's. Knowing that Yom Kippur will not expiate the butcher's sin unless he appeases his fellow, Rav decides to waive his honor and go to the butcher himself. In fact, he does more than cross the threshold from the injured party's side to that of the injurer; he also crosses class lines. There is a vast class divide between Rav, the leading scholar of his generation, and the lowly butcher. Moreover, the timing of the story—the eve of Yom Kippur, the last minute for doing what needs to be done to make atonement possible—marks a threshold in time.

The reader's first impression of Rav's action as a model of generosity is undermined by the reaction of R. Huna, Rav's greatest student. Instead of seeing the initiative as an act of great generosity, R. Huna sees it as an act of violence. He says to himself that his master is going to kill the butcher, and events bear him out. This fact compels us to see that the key to interpreting this subtle little story lies in the reaction of R. Huna, who understood exactly what was going to happen.

Perhaps Rav had been waiting all day for the butcher to come to him. Perhaps he had been waiting all year. On the eve of Yom Kippur, the affront remains intense, but the hour grows late, and he decides to go to him. Something about Rav's demeanor or his pace or the very hour, coupled with the disparity in status between Rav and the butcher, suggested to Rav Huna that this was an act of aggression.

The story of Rav and the butcher forces us to confront the ambivalence between sanctity and narcissism that inheres in any act of grace. Rav's appearance before the butcher turns out to be quite different from R. Zera's sensitive and indirect approach. Instead of giving the slaughterer an opportunity to request forgiveness, Rav backed him into a corner and brought about a terrifying opportunity for reciprocal injury. Knowing of Rav's closeness to God, R. Huna knew where this could lead, though he was apparently incapable or unwilling to stop him. The combination of Rav's aggressiveness and Rav Huna's apparent passivity sealed the fate of the stubborn butcher who was not inspired to repent by the appearance of the eminent man in the doorway of his shop.

Jewish law and narrative have been joined since the Bible, and one can identify three paradigms for the relationship between them. The first and simplest is when the narrative provides a basis for the law. The story of the exodus from Egypt, for example, explains the meaning of the paschal sacrifice and the various rules of the

seder. The second paradigm emphasizes the way in which the story permits a transition to a different sort of legal knowledge. A story allows us to see how the law must be followed; we move from "knowing that" to "knowing how." More than a few talmudic stories play that role, showing that it is sometimes no simple matter to move from text to action. The third paradigm is the most delicate. Here, the story actually has a subversive role, pointing out the law's substantive limitations. That is the paradigm for our series of stories of encounter and forgiveness.

The first story, as noted, shows the way in which there has to be a partial reconciliation before the full reconciliation, a forgiveness before the forgiveness. As a result of that limitation, the second story suggests a secondary, even saintly, norm, in which the injured person makes an effort to enable the crossing of the threshold by insinuating himself into the presence of the injurer. The third story then shows that solution to be limited, since the outcome of the intrusion could be a further injury. It may not be as drastic or seemingly supernatural as the butcher's tragic end, but a request for forgiveness can turn into a further insult all too easily.

The Talmud pointedly does not go on to formulate further legislation to resolve this issue. Would it be possible to use a further norm to structure the question of how to make the first step? Can one mark with any degree of generality the distinction between a delicate or indirect meeting and an accusatory intrusion? The law as a process of generalized rulemaking here reaches its limit. Requesting forgiveness ultimately requires tact, sound judgment, and a profound and precise analysis of one's own motives.

In Moses Maimonides' great medieval codification of the laws of repentance in the *Mishneh Torah*, the rules of requesting forgiveness are further formalized, while the stories of R. Jeremiah, R. Abba, R. Zera, Rav, R. Huna, and the butcher are left aside. Separating law and narrative in that way removes a layer of meaning, and flattens our understanding of the process of reconciliation. The Talmud's frequent joining of the two genres embodies a profound expression of humility, for the law thereby acknowledges its own limits. This is especially true in the case of forgiveness, which is a part of the complex and delicate fabric of interpersonal relationships.