

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [310]

They Will Say: Meir is Dead, Yehuda is Angry, and Yosei Remained Silent. What Will Become of the Torah? Insights into Babylonian Talmud Nazir 49b



Background to Our Story

Nazir – Nazarite



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Nazir. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Introduction.

A nazirite vow is a special form of a vow that one accepts upon himself. It obligates him in the rules and regulations established for a nazirite in the Torah. At its best, when accepted with pure intentions, naziriteship is considered a way to achieve holiness, as the Torah states: "All the days of his naziriteship he is holy to the Lord" (Numbers 6:8). The main halakhot of a nazirite are stated explicitly in the Torah. A nazirite is prohibited from cutting his hair, eating or drinking anything originating from a grapevine, and becoming ritually impure through contact with a corpse.

K'zait – Olive-bulk

This is one of the most significant halakhic units of volume. By Torah law, eating is defined as swallowing one olive-bulk, and in every Torah law that either commands or prohibits eating, this measure defines eating. The measure is defined in terms of the water displacement of a particular genus of olive, and the precise size of this measurement is not clear. From one talmudic passage it appears to be almost half an egg-bulk, and from another it appears to be less than a third of an egg-bulk. Given the wide range of the opinions with regard to an egg-bulk (see p. 490), the opinions with regard to an olive-bulk range from 15 cc. to 50 cc.

Rabbi Yehuda



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Nazir. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 226.

When the Mishna refers to Rabbi Yehuda without any addition, it means Rabbi Yehuda, son of Rabbi Ilai, one of the greatest of the fourth-generation *tanna'im*.

Rabbi Yehuda was one of the last five disciples of Rabbi Akiva, while his father, Rabbi Ilai, was a student of Rabbi Eliezer. Rabbi Yehuda studied Rabbi Eliezer's wisdom from his father. In his youth, he studied with Rabbi Tarfon, in whose name he cites *halakhot*, in addition to the other Sages of Yavne: Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya, Rabbi Yishmael, and Rabbi Yosei HaGelili. Nevertheless, Rabbi Yehuda's foremost teacher was Rabbi Akiva, and it was in accordance with his opinion that he laid the foundations for the halakhic exegesis of Leviticus known as the *Sifra*, or *Torat Kohanim*.

According to tradition, any unattributed statement in the *Sifra* is authored by Rabbi Yehuda. Rabbi Yehuda was ordained by Rabbi Yehuda ben Bava and is frequently quoted in aggadic statements alongside Rabbi Neĥemya. When there are differences of opinion between Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Meir, or between Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Shimon, the *halakha* is in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi Yehuda. His disciples included Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon; Rabbi Yishmael, son of Rabbi Yosei; and Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi. His son, Rabbi Yosei, was also a renowned Sage.

Sumakhos



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Nazir. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 226.

The full name of this *tanna* is Sumakhos ben Yosef. He lived in the last generation of *tanna'im*. Sumakhos was the outstanding disciple of Rabbi Meir and transmitted much of Rabbi Meir's knowledge to the subsequent generations. As Rabbi Meir's foremost disciple, Sumakhos made great efforts to explain Rabbi Meir's statements and clarify his opinions after his death. Like his master before him, Sumakhos was known for his fierce intellect, as the Talmud relates that he would provide forty-eight proofs for every *halakha* he discussed. It can be argued that he was the greatest Sage of his generation, as he would dispute even the greatest of *tanna'im*, including Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yosei, and Rabbi Eliezer ben Ya'akov.

Rabbi Meir



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Nazir. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 226.

Rabbi Meir was one of the greatest *tanna'im* of the generation that preceded the redaction of the Mishna. There is no clear information available concerning Rabbi Meir's parents, although it is told that he descended from a family of converts from the house of the Roman emperors.

Rabbi Meir's exceptional brilliance in Torah study was evident from a very early age, and he was a student of the two greatest scholars of the generation, Rabbi Yishmael and Rabbi Akiva. He was also the lone Sage who continued to study with Elisha ben Avuya, despite the latter's estrangement from Judaism. His primary teacher was Rabbi Akiva, who ordained him at a very young age, for which reason he was ordained a second time by Rabbi Yehuda ben Bava.

In recognition of his outstanding scholarship, Rabbi Meir was officially appointed *hakham*, literally, wise man, a position third in importance after the *Nasi*, or the head of the

Sanhedrin, and the president of the court. The halakhic discussions between him and his colleagues, Rabbi Yehuda, Rabbi Yosei, Rabbi Shimon, and Rabbi Elazar, form one of the most important foundations of the Mishna.

Rabbi Meir's greatest undertaking was apparently a structured, oral redaction of the Oral Law, including the establishment of specific formats for the *halakha*. Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi followed in Rabbi Meir's footsteps and incorporated his work in the Mishna. Consequently, it is a well-known principle that the author of an unattributed statement in the Mishna is Rabbi Meir.

Due to his involvement in the attempt to depose the *Nasi* Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, Rabbi Meir was punished, and for a long period his statements were not cited in his name but were introduced with the words: Others say. Rabbi Meir's private life was full of suffering. His two sons passed away during his lifetime, and his extraordinary wife Berurya also died in painful circumstances. Nevertheless, it is known that one of his daughters survived. He was eventually forced into exile in Asia Minor, where he died, with the order that his coffin be transferred to Eretz Yisrael and that he be interred temporarily on the shore of the sea whose waves reach the Holy Land.

Rabbi Meir was famous in his lifetime not only for his sharp intellect, which exceeded that of all his peers, but also for his personal attributes, his efforts as a peacemaker, and his willingness to relinquish personal honor for the good of others. He was known as a magnificent public speaker. It is said that following his death, those who composed parables ceased (*Sota* 49a). Several of his animal fables were retold over the course of many generations. He was also renowned as a miracle worker, and for many years a charity fund named after him, Rabbi Meir Ba'al HaNes, literally, Rabbi Meir the miracle worker, served as the main source of funding for Jews in Eretz Yisrael.

Rabbi Yossei



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Nazir. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 227.

This is Rabbi Yosei ben Halafta, one of the greatest of the *tanna'im*. He lived in the generation prior to the redaction of the Mishna, and his influence is evident throughout tannaitic literature. His father, known as Abba Halafta, was also considered one of the great Sages of his generation, while his family, according to one tradition, was descended from Jehonadab, the son of Rechab (see II Kings 10:15).

In addition to studying with his father, Rabbi Yosei was an outstanding student of Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Yosei and his contemporaries, namely, Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yehuda, and Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai, were students of Rabbi Akiva, and they formed the center of talmudic creativity of that entire generation. In his halakhic approach, as in his way of life, Rabbi Yosei was moderate. He refrained from taking extreme positions on halakhic issues. A well-known principle is that Rabbi Yosei's opinions are based on sound reasoning, and because of his moderation and the logic of his teachings, the *halakha* is in accordance with his opinion in every instance of disagreement with his colleagues.

In addition to being a great master of *halakha*, Rabbi Yosei was also famous for his piety. The Talmud relates many stories about his modesty, humility, and sanctity. It is told that Elijah the prophet would reveal himself to him every day, and several conversations between him and Elijah are related in the Talmud. Rabbi Yosei was apparently the primary redactor of a series on the history of the Jewish people known as *Seder Olam Rabba*. For many years, he lived in Tzipori in the Galilee and earned his living as a tanner. Many of the prominent Sages of the following generation, including Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, the redactor of the Mishna, were his students. However, his main students were his five sons, all of

whom were Sages in their generation. The most famous of them were Rabbi Eliezer, one of the great masters of *halakha*, and Rabbi Yishmael.

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Nazir 49b

מתני' על אלו טומאות הנזיר מגלח: על המת, ועל פזית מן המת, ועל פזית נצל, ועל מלא תרווד רקב, על השדרה, ועל הגולגולת, ועל אבר מן המת ועל אבר מן החי שיש עליו בשר פראוי, ועל חצי קב עצמות, ועל חצי לוג דם, ועל מגעו ועל משאן ועל אהילן. ועל עצם כשעורה, על מגעו ועל משאו.

....

תנו רבנן: אחר פטירתו של רבי מאיר אמר להן רבי יהודה לתלמידיו: אל יפנסו תלמידי רבי מאיר לכאן מפני שקנתרנין הן, ולא ללמוד תורה הן באין אלא לקפחני בהלכות הן באין.

דחק סומכוס ונכנס. אמר להם, כך שנה לי רבי מאיר: על אלו טומאות הנזיר מגלח – על המת ועל פזית מן המת.

כעס רבי יהודה ואמר להן: לא כך אמרתי לכם: אל יפנסו תלמידי רבי מאיר לכאן, מפני שקנתרנין הן? על פזית מן המת מגלח, על המת לא כל שפן?!

אמר רבי יוסי: יאמרו, מאיר שכב, יהודה כעס, יוסי שתק, תורה מה תהא עליה? אמר רבי יוסי: לא נצרכה אלא למת שאין עליו פזית בשר.

Mishna A nazirite shaves for having become impure from these following sources of ritual impurity: For having become impure with impurity imparted by a corpse; and for impurity imparted by an olive-bulk of a corpse; and for impurity imparted by an olive-bulk of fluid [*netzel*] from a corpse; and for impurity imparted by a full ladle [*tarvad*] of dust from a corpse; and for impurity imparted by the spine; and for impurity imparted by the skull; and for impurity imparted by a limb from a corpse or for impurity imparted by a limb severed from a living person, upon either of which there is a fitting quantity of flesh; and for impurity imparted by a half-*kav* of bones from a corpse; and for impurity imparted by a half-*log* of blood.

And a nazirite shaves in each of these cases for becoming impure by coming into contact with them; and for becoming impure by carrying them; and for becoming impure by their tent, i.e., if he was positioned like a tent over them, or if he entered a tent that contains them, or if they served as a tent over him. And as for a bone that is a barley-grain-bulk, he shaves for becoming impure by coming into contact with it and by carrying it. However, he is not rendered impure with the impurity imparted in a tent, i.e., by being under the same roof as the bone.

...

Rabbi Yehuda said to his students: Do not let the students of Rabbi Meir enter here, into the house of study, because they are vexatious and they do not come to study Torah, but they come to overwhelm me with their *halakhot*.

Sumakhos, a student of Rabbi Meir, forced his way and entered the house of study. When they reached the topic of the mishna, Sumakhos said to them: Rabbi Meir taught me like this: A nazirite shaves for becoming impure from these following sources of ritual impurity: For impurity imparted by a corpse and for impurity imparted by an olive-bulk from a corpse.

Rabbi Yehuda grew angry and said to his disciples: Didn't I say to you like this: Do not let the students of Rabbi Meir enter here because they are vexatious? He explained his annoyance. The clause: For a corpse, is unnecessary, as, if a nazirite must shave for impurity imparted by an olive-bulk from a corpse, is it not all the more so that he must shave for impurity imparted by an entire corpse?

Rabbi Yosei said [to himself]: Now they will say: Meir is dead, Yehuda is angry, and Yosei remained silent. If so, what will become of the Torah?

Rabbi Yosei therefore said: It is not necessary to teach that a nazirite must shave for impurity imparted by a corpse, but only that he must shave even for impurity imparted by a corpse upon which there is not an olive-bulk of flesh.



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

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Why didn't Rabbi Yehuda want the students of Rabbi Meir to enter the house of study?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Why did Sumakhos force his way into the house of study?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Bonus ? How do we know that the halakha in our Mishna quoted by Sumakhos was issued by Rabbi Meir?

Extra Bonus ? Why does Sumakhos quote Rabbi Meir in the house of study of Rabbi Yehuda?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

? Please explain why according to Rabbi Yehuda, Rabbi Meir's statement quoted by Sumakhos didn't make any sense?

Bonus ? Why did Rabbi Yehuda grow angry?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Bonus ? Why do you think Rabbi Yosei was thinking of remaining silent before he finally decided to speak up?

Extra Bonus ? "Meir is dead, Yehuda is angry, and Yosei remained silent." Why doesn't Rabbi Yosei use the honorific title "Rabbi" to refer to his colleagues and himself when thinking in his mind what to do?

? Why did Rabbi Yosei decide to speak up?

? How did Rabbi Yosei solve the seemingly flawed statement by Rabbi Meir?

Bonus ? Why didn't Rabbi Yosei rebuke Rabbi Yehuda about his anger?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

Answer 5 _____

Bonus ? Why didn't Rabbi Yosei tell Sumakhos to be more respectful and not annoy Rabbi Yehuda with his challenges?

“The Twist” – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from This Text

! “Now they will say: Meir is dead, Yehuda is angry, and Yosei remained silent.” The wisdom of Rabbi Yosei in getting the “big picture,” understanding the personalities involved, and being proactive and creative in de-escalating the conflict.



By Special Guest: Miriam Anzovin



Miriam Anzovin is a writer, visual artist, and TikTok creator, exploring the juxtaposition of pop culture, nerd culture, and Jewish culture. Her work as a Jewish learning influencer and content creator encourages her audience to engage with Jewish literature, history, and tradition in creative and dynamic ways authentic to each individual, no matter their level of knowledge, belief, or observance.

In her viral "[Daf Reactions](#)" TikTok series, Miriam shares comedic Millennial commentary on her daily Talmud study, through a modern lens. She is represented by the [Jewish Speakers Bureau](#) for workshops and speaking engagements.

Miriam is thrilled to be the first artist in residence at [Moishe House](#), a global organization bringing Judaism to life for young adults throughout the world. Previously, Miriam was the host of [The Vibe of the Tribe podcast](#), where she interviewed authors, rabbis, artists, activists, comedians, educators, athletes, chefs, political commentators, and one presidential speechwriter.

Miriam exists at the [intersection of Sefaria and Sephora](#). She can also be found on [TikTok](#), [Instagram](#), [Mastodon](#), [Twitter](#), and [Youtube](#).

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