

From the Rabbi's Desk
Rabbi Manes Kogan
Hillcrest Jewish Center
183-02 Union Turnpike, Flushing, NY 11366
rabbikogan@hillcrestjc.org

Stories with a Twist [314]

A Gnat Came, Entered His Nostril, And Picked at His Brain for Seven Years

Insights into Babylonian Talmud Gittin 56b



Background to Our Story

Vespasian spares Yavne and sends Titus.



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Gittin. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 316-317

Vespasian then said to Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai: I will be going to Rome to accept my new position, and I will send someone else in my place to continue besieging the city and waging war against it. But before I leave, ask something of me that I can give you. Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai said to him: Give me Yavne and its Sages and do not destroy it and spare the dynasty of Rabban Gamliel and do not kill them as if they were rebels, and lastly give me doctors to heal Rabbi Tzadok.

Rav Yosef read the following verse about him, and some say that it was Rabbi Akiva who applied the verse to Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai: "I am the Lord...Who turns wise men backward and makes their knowledge foolish" (Isaiah 44:25), as he should have said to him to leave the Jews alone this time. And why didn't Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai make this request? He maintained that Vespasian might not do that much for him, and there would not be even a small amount of salvation. Therefore, he made only a modest request, in the hope that he would receive at least that much.

? What do you think about Rabbi Akiva's criticism of Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai?

The Wicked Titus



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Berakhot. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 317.

Titus was the eldest son of Vespasian, replacing him as Caesar after his death for a short reign of approximately two years. Although Roman sources praise him for his positive attributes, prior to his rise to power he displayed great cruelty and was steeped in promiscuity. The many negative references to him in the Talmud are due to his having ordered the destruction of the Second Temple. The destruction of the Temple after Jerusalem had been captured was not necessary from a military standpoint, and it even contradicted the prevailing Roman policy of respecting the sacred sites of conquered countries.

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Gittin 56b

אזל שדריה לטיטוס. "ואמר אי אלהימו צור חסיו בו" – זה טיטוס הרשע שחירף וגידף כלפי מעלה.

מה עשה? תפש זונה בידו ונכנס לבית קדשי הקדשים, והציע ספר תורה ועבר עליה עבירה, ונטל סויה וגידף את הפרוכת, ונעשה גם והיה דם מבצבץ ויוצא, וכסבור הרג את עצמו, שנאמר "שאגו צורריך בקרב מועדיך שמו אותם אותות".

אבא חנן אומר: "מי כמוך חסין זה" – מי כמוך חסין וקשה, שאמה שומע ניאוצו וגידופו של אותו רשע ושותק דבי רבי ישמעאל תנא: "מי כמוך באלים ה'" – מי כמוך באלמים.

מה עשה? נטל את הפרוכת ועשאו כמין גרגותני, והביא כל פלים שבמקדש והניחו בהו, והושיבו בספינה לילה להשתבח בעירו, שנאמר: "ובכן ראיתי רשעים קבורים וכו' וממקום קדוש הלכו וישתכחו בעיר אשר פן עשו", אל תיקרי "קבורים" אלא "קבוצים", אל תיקרי "וישתכחו" אלא "וישתכחו". איכא דאמרי: קבורים ממש, דאפילו מילי דמטמין איגליא להון.

עמד עליו ונחשול שבים לטובעו, אומר: כמדומה אני שאלהיהם של אלו אין גבורתו אלא במים, בא פרעה טבעו במים, בא סיסרא טבעו במים, אף הוא עומד עלי לטובעני במים, אם גבור הוא יעלה ליבשה ויעשה עמי מלחמה!

יצתה בת קול ואמרה לו: רשע בן רשע בן בנו של עשו הרשע, בריה קלה יש לי בעולמי ויתוש שמה: אמאי קרי לה בריה קלה? דמעלנא אית לה ומפקנא לית לה.

עלה ליבשה ותעשה עמה מלחמה. עלה ליבשה, בא יתוש ונכנס בחוטמו, ונקר במוחו שבע שנים. יומא חד הוה קא חליף אבבא דבי נפחא, שמע קל ארזפתא אישתיה, אומר: איכא תקנתא. כל יומא מייתו נפחא ומחו קמיה, לגוי יהיב ליה ארבע זוזי, ישראל אומר ליה: מיסתיה דקא חזית בסנא. עד תלתין יומין עבד תכי, מפאן ואילך כיון דדש דש.

תנא, אומר רבי פנחס בן ערוכא: אני הייתי בין גדולי רומי, וכשמת פצעו את מוחו, ומצאו בו כצפור דרור משקל שני סלעים. במתניתא תנא: כגוזל בן שנה משקל שני ליטריו. אומר אבני, נקטינו: פיו של נחושית וצפורניו של ברזל.

פי הוה קא מיית, אומר להו: ליקליות לההוא גברא ולבדרי לקיטמיה אשב ימי, דלא לשפחיה אלהא דיהודאי ולוקמיה בדינא.

What did Titus do when he conquered the Temple? He took a prostitute with his hand and entered the Holy of Holies with her. He then spread out a Torah scroll underneath him and committed a sin, i.e., engaged in sexual intercourse, on it.

Afterward he took a sword and cut into the curtain separating between the Sanctuary and the Holy of Holies. And a miracle was performed, and blood spurted forth. Seeing the blood, he mistakenly thought that he had killed himself. Here, the term himself is a euphemism for God. Titus saw blood issuing forth from the curtain in God's meeting place, the Temple, and he took it as a sign that he had succeeded in killing God Himself. As it is stated: "Your enemies roar in the midst of Your meeting place; they have set up their own signs for signs" (Psalms 74:4).

Abba H̄anan says: The verse states: "Who is strong like You, O Lord?" (Psalms 89:9). Who is strong and insensitive like You, as You hear the abuse and the blasphemy of that wicked man and remain silent. Similarly, the school of Rabbi Yishmael taught that the verse: "Who is like You, O Lord, among the gods [*elim*]" (Exodus 15:11), should be read as: Who is like You among the mute [*ilmim*], for You conduct Yourself like a mute and remain silent in the face of Your blasphemers.

What else did Titus do? He took the curtain and formed it like a large basket and brought all of the sacred vessels of the Temple and placed them in it. And he put them on a ship to go and be praised in his city that he had conquered Jerusalem, as it is stated: "And so I saw the wicked buried and come to their rest; but those that had done right were gone from the holy place and were forgotten in the city; this also is vanity" (Ecclesiastes 8:10). Do not read the word as "buried [*keburim*]." Rather, read it as collected [*kevutzim*]. And do not read the word as "and were forgotten [*veyishtakehu*]." Rather, read it as: And they were praised [*veyishtabehu*]. According to this interpretation, the verse speaks of those who will gather and collect items "from the holy place," the Temple, and be praised in their city for what they had done.

There are those who say that the verse is to be read as written, as it is referring to items that were actually buried. This is because even items that had been buried were revealed to them, i.e., Titus and his soldiers, as they found all of the sacred vessels.

It is further related about Titus that he was once traveling at sea and a wave rose up against him and threatened to drown him. Titus said: It seems to me that their God, the God of Israel, has power only in water. Pharaoh rose against them and He

drowned him in water. Sisera rose against them and He drowned him in water. Here too, He has risen up against me to drown me in water. If He is really mighty, let Him go up on dry land and there wage war against me.

A Divine Voice issued forth and said to him: Wicked one, son of a wicked one, grandson of Esau the wicked, for you are among his descendants and act just like him, I have a lowly creature in My world and it is called a gnat.

The Gemara interjects: Why is it called a lowly creature? It is called this because it has an entrance for taking in food, but it does not have an exit for excretion.

The Gemara resumes its story about Titus. The Divine Voice continued: Go up on dry land and make war with it. He went up on dry land, and a gnat came, entered his nostril, and picked at his brain for seven years.

Titus suffered greatly from this until one day he passed by the gate of a blacksmith's shop. The gnat heard the sound of a hammer and was silent and still. Titus said: I see that there is a remedy for my pain. Every day they would bring a blacksmith who hammered before him.

He would give four dinars as payment to a gentile blacksmith, and to a Jew he would simply say: It is enough for you that you see your enemy in so much pain. He did this for thirty days and it was effective until then. From that point forward, since the gnat became accustomed to the hammering, it became accustomed to it, and once again it began to pick away at Titus's brain.

It is taught in a *baraita* that Rabbi Pineñas ben Arova said: I was at that time among the noblemen of Rome, and when Titus died they split open his head and found that the gnat had grown to the size of a sparrow weighing two *sela*.

It was taught in another *baraita*: It was like a one-year-old pigeon weighing two *litra*. Abaye said: We have a tradition that its mouth was made of copper and its claws were fashioned of iron.

When Titus was dying, he said to his attendants: Burn that man, i.e., me, and scatter his ashes across the seven seas, so that the God of the Jews should not find me and stand me for judgment.



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

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Why do you think Titus showed such contempt for the Temple and the Jewish people?

Answer 1 _____

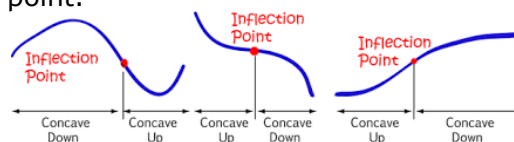
Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

? Abba Hanan gives a new interpretation to the verse "Who is strong like You, O Lord?" calling God insensitive, indurate, thick-skinned. Likewise, the School of Rabbi Yishmael calls God, *mute*. What do you think of these statements? What do these statements tell us about how these Sages saw their relationship with God?

Bonus ? There are those who say that when Titus and his soldiers collected the vessels from the Temple to take them to Rome, even the hidden vessels that were buried were revealed to them. What do you think is the Sages' teaching/message involved in their statement?

inflection point. Noun. Mathematics. A point of a curve at which a change in the direction of curvature occurs. US (in business) a time of significant change in a situation; a turning point.



Extra Bonus ? In our story there is an inflection point. What is it?

Extra Bonus ? Why does God choose to punish Titus through a gnat as opposed to striking him with lightning or an earthquake?

Extra Bonus ? The last part of our story relates Titus' excruciating punishment, which can be seen as a make-believe by the Sages to "get even" with Titus for destroying and desecrating the Temple. God doesn't seem to respond to Titus' vile acts to the extent that the Sages called Him *insensitive* and *mute*. What is the only sin that God doesn't seem to tolerate?

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

- ! Pride Comes Before the Fall! If you don't believe me, ask Titus the wicked!



Our story, the average reader will agree, contains a great deal of fantasy and exaggeration. A huge gnat, which flew into Titus's nose and picked at his brain for seven years seems more the creation of a suffering and resentful people than what happened in the real course of events. Titus' excruciating punishment can be seen as a make-believe by the Sages to "get even" with the Roman emperor for destroying and desecrating the Temple.

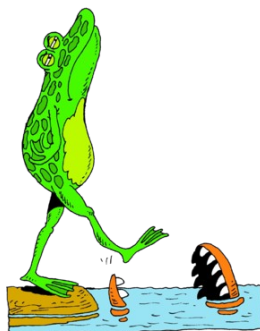
Our fantastic story, however, contains a strong warning for the reader to beware of hubris and false pride. God might be able to tolerate the destruction of His Temple and even the desecration of His name but can't tolerate arrogant people.

The teaching from the Book of Proverbs 16:18, Pride Comes before the Fall, comes to life in our story, serving as a lesson not only to Titus, but to all of us as well.

Appendix

Burling, Darryl: 5 Reasons Pride Comes Before the Fall and How to Avoid It. In: <https://darrylburling.com>

5 Reasons Pride Comes Before the Fall and How to Avoid It Dr. Darryl Burling



Pride goes before a fall

We've all heard the saying, "pride comes before the fall." We find this saying in Proverbs 16:18. But how does this happen? What is this "fall" and how can we avoid it? There are at least 5 reasons pride comes before the fall.

From the beginning, it is important to distinguish between pride and the sense of satisfaction that comes from a job well done. Work is a God-ordained good that He designed us to engage in, and so it makes sense that it is good and right to feel a sense of satisfaction when we accomplish tasks or achievements. This satisfaction is not the same as pride or arrogance, and it's not the subject of this article. Pride or arrogance is self-exalting tendency that we all have. Our sense of satisfaction might fuel it, but frankly, almost anything can fuel our pride – even negative events and circumstances. But whatever it is fueled by, there are good reasons that pride comes before the fall. Here are 5 reasons drawn from the book of Proverbs.

1. Pride comes before the fall because God hates pride

There are things that God enjoys and things that He doesn't enjoy. In the category of things that God doesn't take pleasure in is pride or arrogance. In Proverbs 6:16-17 we read, *There are six things which the LORD hates, Yes, seven which are an abomination to Him. Haughty eyes...*

What follows in the next few verses is a list of those seven things. The author attributes the first five to parts of the human body, the eyes, tongue, hands, heart, and feet. Significantly, the first in the list is, "Haughty eyes." The word translated "haughty" simply means high, and has the idea of self-exaltation over another person. However pride is more than that, it exalts itself against the Lord. Pride is a settled determination to steal the honor due to the Lord for ourselves. God sees it this way, and his response recognizes this. Therefore God hates haughty eyes. Pride is a settled determination to steal the honor due to the Lord for ourselves. When explaining that "the fear of the Lord is to hate evil," the writer of proverbs adds, *Pride and arrogance and the evil way and the perverted mouth, I hate. (Proverbs 8:13)*. God can't love everyone and be a good God.

Many are tempted to think of God as all loving, but there are many things that He hates. In fact, God would not be good if He did not hate things. The things that God hates are the things we would do well to avoid and to develop a hatred of when we see it in ourselves. Isaiah 2:11 speaks of a day when, *"The proud look of man will be abased, and the loftiness of man will be humbled, and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day."* This verse is a warning that while we think we might get away with pride now, there is coming a day when the most powerful people who have ever lived will be abased and when those who raise their hand or eyes above God will be humbled. An arrogant heart will not stand if it is something that God hates. This warning is also a comfort. It warns us not to allow pride and arrogance to characterize us. However, it also comforts us because those who are arrogant often cause others to suffer.

2. Pride comes before the fall because it is sin

Hebrew poetry employs parallelism to make its point. We find this parallelism in almost every proverb. Proverbs 21:4 is no exception: *Haughty eyes and a proud heart, the lamp of the wicked, is sin.*

This verse has three layers of parallelism. First there is a parallelism between "haughty eyes" and "a proud heart." The first depicts the outward aspect of pride, and the second speaks of what is going on inside the person. In other words, pride is all-consuming. It determines how we view ourselves and how we view the world. Because it is rooted in the heart, it flows into every aspect of our life (Proverbs 4:23).

Proud hope will be extinguished.

But there is a second layer of parallelism here. "The lamp of the wicked is sin." The lamp in passages such as Proverbs 13:7, 2 Sam 21:17, 22:29 and 1 Kings 11:36 seems to represent life and hope. So the idea of the lamp here summarizes the prideful heart and haughty eyes. Pride or arrogance sets its hope on personal exaltation. This hope (or even expectation) is entirely self-centered and is in itself a fruitless sin. Therefore, because sin cannot endure, and because the Lord will one day remove all sin, pride comes before the fall.

3. Pride comes before the fall because it demeans others

We've seen in the previous reasons that pride comes before the fall in an ultimate sense – God will one day eliminate sin and humble the proud. However, it is also true that pride comes before the fall even in our day to day lives. We've already seen that we are to watch over our hearts for from it flows the springs of life (Proverbs 4:23). Therefore it should be no surprise that one who is proud in heart, will act a certain way.

"Proud," "Haughty," "Scoffer," are his names, Who acts with insolent pride.

Labelled according to pride.

Others see our pride, and they label it, and us accordingly. The words used in this proverb indicate that our pride is aggressive toward others. The “proud” here could also be said to be insolent or presumptuous, which means such a person lacks respect and is rude. One who is “haughty” acts with “fury and pride.” The scoffer is one whose heart is exposed in his words. This verse explains that the actions and the reception of one who is proud flow from their exaggerated opinion of themselves and their sense of self-importance. The result of this way of acting is that others name us according to our actions, we gain a reputation based on what is flowing out of our heart. The proud person exalts themselves over others, and this leads to social failure. Pride comes before the fall because our proud heart leads us to act accordingly, demeaning others. The result is that they label us according to our words and actions.

4. Pride comes before the fall because it leads to dishonor

The way we speak and act affect those around us. We’ve seen that people will label us, but the word of God also tells us that wearing a label is not the ultimate end. We read in Proverbs 11:2 *When pride comes, then comes dishonor, but with the humble is wisdom.*

The idea behind pride here is presumptuousness or over-confidence. It speaks of those who have to have everything their own way and who have an exaggerated opinion of themselves that does not correspond with what others think. This proverb, again using parallelism, teaches that this disconnect between the social reality and the internal beliefs leads to dishonor. The dishonor here is a form of social failure. Proud people fail to honor the authority that the Lord has instituted. Not only civil authority, but even much finer authority structures based on wisdom, age, knowledge, etc. The proud person exalts themselves over others, and this leads to social failure. This social failure has a catastrophic impact because it results in dishonor. When we exalt ourselves over others, dishonoring social structures and authority, the result will not be their dishonor, but our own. Pride comes before the fall because dishonor follows pride.

5. Pride comes before the fall because it creates strife

Not only does pride result in being labeled as a proud person, or a scoffer, neither does it stop at dishonor. There is another stage – strife or discord.

An arrogant man stirs up strife, but he who trusts in the Lord will prosper (Proverbs 28:25, NASB)

This verse uses a Hebrew phrase that means “wide of appetite,” which in the NASB is translated as “arrogant” though in most translations it is translated as “greedy” or similar. But behind the appetite is a heart that has little regard for others and a sense of personal entitlement. The heart of the proud person believes that they should have certain things. It could be respect, or success, or love, or affection, or honor, or attention. Entitlement exists regardless of social or financial status because it comes from a proud heart. Whatever they want, they are not content with what they have and become disruptive and destructive. Their demands conflict with the demands or even the well-being of others. They strive to take what doesn’t belong to them, denying those same things to those who better deserve them.

Pride leads to destruction.

Before destruction the heart of man is haughty (Proverbs 18:12)

The result is destruction. Relationships are destroyed. Personal property is destroyed. Families are destroyed. Communities are destroyed. Wealth is destroyed. Businesses are destroyed. All this comes from arrogantly seeking to obtain what we have not earned and what the Lord has not given. But Proverbs 18:12 isn’t just saying pride is destructive – though this is true. It is saying that the proud person is destroyed. The arrogant desire to take what we have not earned rather than to trust in the Lord ultimately destroys us. We hope in what we cannot have, and our hope is destroyed. All our effort to be regarded as something or someone leads to destruction.

How to avoid the fall

A man’s pride will bring him low, but a humble spirit will obtain honor (Proverbs 29:23)

Pride will destroy us. We have also seen that God will destroy the proud. Either we go to war against our pride to trust in the Lord and humble ourselves before Him, or God will destroy our pride and us with it. The irony is that while pride seeks to honor self and reaps dishonor, humility doesn’t seek to honor self, but obtains it.