

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [32]

A Fire at Rav Amram's House! (Insights into Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 81a)



Background to Our Story

Mishna Kiddushin 4:12

A man may not be secluded with two women lest he sin with them, but one woman may be secluded with two men. Rabbi Shimon says: Even one man may be secluded with two women when his wife is with him, and in that situation he may even sleep in the same inn with two women, because his wife guards him from sinning with them.

They further said that a man may be secluded with his mother, and with his daughter, and sleep alongside them with bodily contact without clothes, since there is no concern that they will engage in sexual intercourse. And when they, the son or daughter, have grown up, this one sleeps in her garment and that one sleeps in his garment, but they may share a bed.

Rav Amram the Pious



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Kiddushin. Koren publishers Jerusalem. 458.

Rav Amram the Pious was a third-generation Babylonian *amora*. It is unclear whether Talmudic citations in the name of Rav Amram refer to Rav Amram the Pious. He was apparently a judge in his hometown and was even the halakhic decisor for the house of the Exilarch. Apparently he took great care to glorify the mitzva of having sky blue wool on his ritual fringes, and he may have sold sky blue wool to the public, which is a profession that requires a high level of credibility.

Pidyon Shvuyim



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

The Mitzvah of Pidyon Shvuyim (literally: Redemption of Prisoners) is considered an important commandment in the Jewish Halakha. The aim of this Mitzvah, which is the most important of the Mitzvot of Tzedakah^[1], is to bring about the release of any Children of Israel held captive by gentiles. The Mitzvah carries a great humanitarian value in the framework of functional community life.

The [Rambam](#) writes:

"The redeeming of captives takes precedence over supporting the poor or clothing them. There is no greater mitzvah than redeeming captives for the problems of the captive include being hungry, thirsty, unclothed, and they are in danger of their lives too. Ignoring the need to redeem captives goes against these Torah laws:

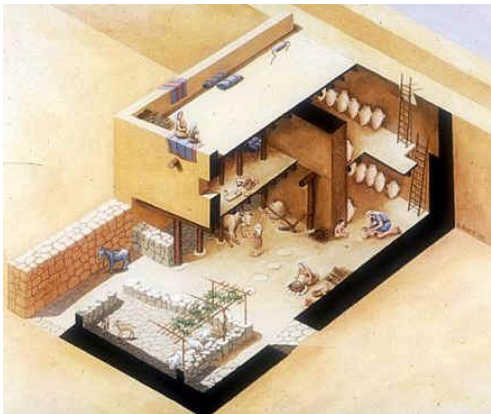
"Do not harden your heart or shut your hand against your needy fellow" ([Devarim](#) 15:7); "Do not stand idly by while your neighbor's blood is shed" ([Vayikra](#) 19:16). And misses out on the following mitzvot: "You must surely open your hand to him or her" ([Devarim](#)15:8); "...Love your neighbor as yourself" ([Vayikra](#) 19:18); "Rescue those who are drawn to death" ([Proverbs](#) 24:11) and there is no mitzvah greater than the redeeming of captives."^[2]

The [Shulchan Aruch](#) adds:

"Every moment that one delays in freeing captives, in cases where it is possible to expedite their freedom, is considered to be tantamount to murder."^[3]

1. Maimonides, Hilchot Matanot Aniyim 8:10 , Mishneh Torah
2. Maimonides, Hilchot Matanot Aniyim 8:10 , Mishneh Torah
3. Shulchan Aruch (Y"D 252:3),

Houses in Talmudic Times



Yetzer Harah – The Evil Inclination



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

Yetzer is the inclination towards either good or evil in [Judaism](#). *Yetzer HaTov* is the inclination towards good and *Yetzer HaRah* is the inclination towards evil.

According to Judaism, [human beings](#) have a dual nature. Humanity is neither fundamentally good nor evil but had a tendency in both directions. Judaism teaches that by doing good, or by overcoming temptation to do evil, humans prove their value to God.

Satan and the Evil Inclination

Being Jewish

<http://www.beingjewish.com/>

The Hebrew word "Satan" means "Hinderer." To hinder someone means to hold him back, to try to prevent him from doing something. G-d created the Hinderer to give us work to do in this world. Satan is here to make things difficult for us, so we can overcome our evil temptations, and pass the test. That is the purpose of Satan. Satan is an angel whose purpose has been determined by G-d.

Temptation is there to try and deter us. It gives us the ability to do the wrong thing. More importantly, it gives us the ability to look at evil and refuse to do it. By presenting us with the opportunity to do evil, it gives us the ability to choose between good and evil.

The ability to choose between good and evil is what gives us free will.

The truth is that Satan has a job to do, just like every other angel. And angels have no free will. They do as Hashem commands them.

A man once came to a great Rabbi, very troubled. He said to the Rabbi, "Please pray to Hashem to take away my Evil Inclination. I do so many sins, and I want to stop sinning!"

The Rabbi answered, "Then what would be your purpose in this world, if you had no Evil Inclination? Your purpose in life is to overcome your personal Evil Inclination. That is what you were created for! Hashem has enough angels in heaven. He doesn't need one more. He created you human, so that you could improve yourself."

And how do we do it? By constant battle with the Evil Inclination.

So now we have to revise our understanding of Satan. Satan is not a fallen angel. Satan is merely an angel with a dirty job. Satan does not have a rival kingdom. Satan is not in competition with G-d, and Satan does not want followers or worshipers. He's not even happy when people obey him and sin.

Satan is the angel who tempts us, and the angel who prosecutes us in Heaven. He is also the Angel of Death. The angel who tries to make us sin is the same angel who accuses us in the Heavenly Court, and the same angel who carries out the death sentence.

So, no, Satan does not wear a red suit, or carry a trident. Nor does he wear a business suit. Satan is a force of evil in the world that we must resist. Satan most often appears as a desire within *you*. Of course, there is no shortage of things in the world to tempt us to sin.

And Satan has many "helpers," many of whom don't even know they are helping him. A shady-looking character in the street walks over to you and offers to sell you some stolen property, for example.

None of us are capable of destroying Satan. What we are expected and commanded to do is to gain the upper hand over our personal Satans. And Hashem helps us do this, constantly. The Talmud says that the Evil Inclination constantly attempts to destroy us spiritually, and Hashem constantly helps us and gives us the means with which to overcome our Evil Inclinations.

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Kidushin 81a

הַנֶּהוּ שְׂבוּיֵיתָא דְאַתָּאי לְנִתְרָדְעָא, אִסְקִינְהוּ לְבֵי רַב עֲמֶרֶם חֲסִידָא, אֲשֶׁקוּלוּ דְרָגָא מִקְמִייהוּ. בְּהַדִּי
דְקָא חֲלָפָה תְּדָא מְנִייהוּ נֶפֶל נְהוּרָא בְּאִיפּוּמָא.
שְׁקִלִיה רַב עֲמֶרֶם לְדְרָגָא דְלֹא הוּוּ יְכַלִּין בֵּי עֲשָׂרָה לְמַדְלִינָא, דְלִינָא לְחוּדְדִיה, סְלִיק וְאָזְנִיל.
כִּי מָטָא לְפִלְגָא דְרָגָא אִיפְשֵׁת, רָמָא קְלָא: נוּרָא בֵּי עֲמֶרֶם!

אתו רבנן. אמרו ליה: פסיפתינן!
אמר להו: מוטב תיכספו בי עמרם בעלמא הדין, ולא תיכספו מיניה לעלמא דאתי.
אשבועיה דיןפק מיניה, נפק מיניה כי עמודא דנורא. אמר ליה: חזי, דאת נורא ואנא בישרא,
ואנא עדיפנא מינך.

Those captive women who were brought to Nehardea, where they were redeemed, were brought up to the house of Rav Amram the Pious. They removed the ladder from before them.

When one of them [one of the women] passed by the entrance to the upper chamber, a light shone in the opening. Rav Amram grabbed a ladder that ten men together could not lift, lifted it on his own and began climbing.

When he was halfway up the ladder, he strengthened his legs against the sides of the ladder to stop himself from climbing further. He [Rav Amram] raised his voice, and cried out: a fire in the house of Amram.

Upon hearing this, the Sages came and found him in that position. They said to him: You have embarrassed us.

Rav Amram said to them: It is better that you be shamed in Amram's house in this world, and not be ashamed of him in the World-to-Come.

He took an oath that his evil inclination should emerge from him, and an apparition similar to a pillar of fire emerged from him. He said to his evil inclination: See, as you are fire and I am mere flesh, and yet, I am still superior to you.



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

Comprehension Questions

? Why were the captive women taken to the house of Rav Amram the Pious?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Why was the ladder removed?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

? "When one of them [one of the women] passed by the entrance to the upper chamber, a light shone in the opening." Please Explain.

? Why was Rav Amram able to lift a ladder that ten men together could not lift?

Bonus ? Why did Rav Amram cry out: "a fire in the house of Amram?"

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? What did the Sages mean by saying to Rav Amram: "You have embarrassed us"?

Analysis Questions

? What did Rav Amram lose by crying out: "a fire in the house of Amram?" What did he gain?

? What is the message of our story regarding the struggle between human beings and the evil inclination?

Extra Bonus ? In the story *Peleimu and the Unexpected Visitor* in Babylonian Talmud Kiddishin 81a – 81b (see below), Peleimu boasts on his power to defeat Satan ("An arrow in your eye, Satan!") and at the end of the story he is proven wrong. In our story, Rav Amram the pious also boasts of his power to defeat Satan ("See, as you are fire and I am mere flesh, and yet, I am still superior to you.") and he is proven to be right. What are the fundamental differences between them?

Peleimu had the habit to say every day: An arrow in the eye of Satan, mocking the temptations of the evil inclination.

One day, it was the eve of Yom Kippur, and Satan appeared to him as a pauper who came and called him to the door, requesting alms. Peleimu brought out bread to him. Satan said to him: On a day like today,

everyone is inside eating, and shall I stand outside? Peleimu brought him inside and gave him bread.

He [Satan] said to him: On a day like today, everyone is sitting at the table, and shall I sit by myself? They brought him and sat him at the table. He was sitting and had covered himself with boils and pus, and he was doing repulsive things at the table.

Peleimu said to the pauper: Sit properly.


Satan then said to him: Give me a cup. They gave him a cup. He coughed up his phlegm and spat it into the cup. They berated him, at which point Satan pretended to sink down and die.

They heard people around them saying: Peleimu killed a man! Peleimu killed a man!



Peleimu fled and hid himself in the bathroom. Satan followed him and fell before him. Upon seeing that Peleimu was suffering, he revealed himself to him. Satan said to him: What is the reason that you spoke this way, provoking me by saying: An arrow in the eye of Satan?

He [Peleimu] replied: But what then should I say?

Satan said to him: Let the Master, i.e., Peleimu, say: Let the Merciful One rebuke Satan.

Extra Bonus  Why do you think Rav Amram is called "Rav Amram the Pious"? When do you think he received his honorific nickname?

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

-  The strength in knowing your weakness.
-  When you have nothing to lose, you have everything to gain!

epilogue

Our story finds Rav Amram the Pious in a fierce struggle against his evil inclination. Despite his piety, he is about to succumb to sin, when he calls for help, exposing his weakness not only to his colleagues, but to the reader of the story as well.

The message of the story seems clear: know your weakness and put it in the open if you need help overcoming it. Having the humility to open yourself and share your challenges and limitations, albeit difficult at first, might get you the help you need. Furthermore, it will allow you to focus your energy in doing what you do best instead of hiding your shortcomings.