

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [321]

A Guest Who Comes to Town, Does One Ask Him About Matters Concerning Eating and Drinking, Or Does One Ask Him About Matters Concerning His Wife?

Insights into Babylonian Talmud, Bava Kamma 92a



Background to Our Story

Genesis, Chapter 20

¹ Now Abraham moved on from there into the region of the Negev and lived between Kadesh and Shur. For a while he stayed in Gerar, ² and there Abraham said of his wife Sarah, "She is my sister." Then Abimelech king of Gerar sent for Sarah and took her.

³ But God came to Abimelech in a dream one night and said to him, "You are as good as dead because of the woman you have taken; she is a married woman."

⁴ Now Abimelech had not gone near her, so he said, "Lord, will you destroy an innocent nation? ⁵ Did he not say to me, 'She is my sister,' and didn't she also say, 'He is my brother'? I have done this with a clear conscience and clean hands."

⁶ Then God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know you did this with a clear conscience, and so I have kept you from sinning against me. That is why I did not let you touch her. ⁷ Now return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live. But if you do not return her, you may be sure that you and all who belong to you will die."

⁸ Early the next morning Abimelech summoned all his officials, and when he told them all that had happened, they were very much afraid. ⁹ Then Abimelech called Abraham in and said, "What have you done to us? How have I wronged you that you have brought such great guilt upon me and my kingdom? You have done things to me that should never be done." ¹⁰ And Abimelech asked Abraham, "What was your reason for doing this?"

¹¹ Abraham replied, "I said to myself, 'There is surely no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.' ¹² Besides, she really is my sister, the daughter of my father though not of my mother; and she became my wife. ¹³ And when God had me wander from my father's household, I said to her, 'This is how you can show your love to me: Everywhere we go, say of me, "He is my brother.'"

¹⁴ Then Abimelech brought sheep and cattle and male and female slaves and gave them to Abraham, and he returned Sarah his wife to him. ¹⁵ And Abimelech said, "My land is before you; live wherever you like."

¹⁶ To Sarah he said, "I am giving your brother a thousand shekels of silver. This is to cover the offense against you before all who are with you; you are completely vindicated."

¹⁷ Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, his wife and his female slaves so they could have children again, ¹⁸ for the LORD had kept all the women in Abimelech's household from conceiving because of Abraham's wife Sarah.

? What is your impression of Abraham, Sarah, and Abimelech after reading the above story?

? Why did Abraham say about Sarah, "she is my sister" according to the biblical story?

Mishnah Bava Kamma, Chapter 8:1

החובל בתברו חייב עליו משום חמשה דברים, בנזק, בצער, ברפוי, בשבת, ובבשת.

בנזק כיצד. סמא את עינו, קטע את ידו, שבר את רגלו, רואין אותו כאלו הוא עבד נמכר בשוק ושמין כמה היה ו כמה הוא יפה. צער, כואו בשפוד או במסמר, ואפלו על צפרנו, מקום שאינו עושה חבורה, אומדין כמה אדם כיוצא בזה רוצה לטל להיות מצטער כד. רפוי, הפהו חייב לרפואתו. עלו בו צמחים, אם מחמת המכה, חייב. שלא מחמת המכה, פטור. חיתה ונסתרה, חיתה ונסתרה, חייב לרפואתו. חיתה כל צרפה, אינו חייב לרפואתו. שבת, רואין אותו כאלו הוא שומר קשואין, שכבר נתן לו דמי ידו ודמי רגלו. בשת, הכל לפי המבייש והמתבייש. המבייש את הערם, המבייש את הסומא, והמבייש את הישן, חייב. וישן שבביש, פטור. נפל מן הגג, והזיק ובייש, חייב על הנזק ופטור על הבשת, שונאמר (דברים כה) ושלחה ידה והחזיקה במבשיו, אינו חייב על הבשת עד שיהא מתפון:

One who injures another is liable to pay compensation **for that injury due to five types** of indemnity: He must pay **for damage, for pain, for medical costs, for loss of livelihood, and for humiliation.**

How is payment **for damage** assessed? If **one blinded** another's **eye, severed his hand, broke his leg**, or caused any other injury, the court **views** the injured party **as though he were a slave** being **sold in the slave market**, and the court **appraises how much he was worth** before the injury **and how much he is worth** after the injury. The difference between these two sums is the amount that one must pay for causing damage. How is payment for **pain** assessed? If **one burned** another **with a skewer or with a hot nail, or even** if one burned another **on his fingernail**, which is **a place where he does not cause a bruise** that would affect the victim's value on the slave market, the court **evaluates how much** money **a person** with **a similar** threshold for pain **as** the victim **is willing to take** in order to be made **to suffer in this way**. The one who burned the victim must then pay this amount. How is payment for **medical costs** assessed? If one **struck** another, then he is **liable to heal him** by

paying for his medical costs. In a case where **growths**, e.g., blisters or rashes, **appeared on** the injured party, **if** the growths are **due to the blow**, the one who struck him is **liable**; if the growths are **not due to the blow**, the one who struck him is **exempt**. In a case where the wound **healed, and then reopened**, and again **healed, and then reopened**, the one who struck him remains **liable to heal** the injured party by paying for his medical costs, as it is apparent that the current wound resulted from the original injury. If the injury **healed fully**, the one who struck him is **not liable to heal him** by paying for any subsequent medical costs. How is payment for **loss of livelihood** assessed? The court **views** the injured party **as though he were a watchman of cucumbers**, and the one who caused him injury must compensate him based on that pay scale for the income that he lost during his convalescence. This indemnity does not take into account the value of the standard wages of the injured party **because** the one who caused him injury **already gave him compensation for his hand or compensation for his leg**, and that compensation took into account his professional skills. How is payment for **humiliation** assessed? **It all depends on** the stature of **the one who humiliates** the other **and the one who is humiliated**. **One who humiliates a naked person, or one who humiliates a blind person, or one who humiliates a sleeping person is liable, but a sleeping person who humiliates another is exempt**. If one **fell from the roof** onto another person, **and** thereby **caused** him **damage and humiliated** him, then the one who fell is **liable for the** indemnity of **damage**, since a person is always considered forewarned, **and exempt from the** indemnity of **humiliation, as it is stated: "and putting out her hand, she takes hold of his private parts"** (Deuteronomy 25:11); a person is not liable for humiliation **unless he intends** to humiliate the other person.

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Bava Kamma 92a

Mishna

אף על פי שהוא נותן לו, אין נמחל לו עד שיבקש ממנו, שנאמר (בראשית כ) ועתה השב אשת וגו'. ומנין שלא יהא המוחל אכזרי, שנאמר (שם) ויתפלל אברהם אל האלהים וירפא אלהים את אבימלך וגו'...

Despite the fact that the assailant gives to the victim all of the required payments for the injury, his transgression is not forgiven for him until he requests forgiveness from the victim, as it is stated that God told Abimelech after he had taken Sarah from Abraham: "Now therefore restore the wife of the man; for he is a prophet, and he shall pray for you, and you shall live" (Genesis 20:7). And from where is it derived that if the victim does not forgive him that he is cruel? As it is stated: "And Abraham prayed to God; and God healed Abimelech, and his wife, and his maidservants; and they bore children" (Genesis 20:17).

Bonus ? According to the above Mishna, who is the victim in the biblical story involving Abraham, Sarah, and Abimelech?

Gemara

תנו רבנן: כל אלו שאמרו – דמי בושתי; אבל צערו – אפילו הביא כל אילי נביות שבועולם, אין נמחל לו עד שיבקש ממנו. שנאמר: "השב אשת האיש פי נביא הוא, ויתפלל בעדך".

דאשת נביא בעי אהדורי, אשת אחר לא בעי אהדורי?
אמר רבי שמואל בר נחמני אמר רבי יונתן: "השב אשת האישה" – מפל מקום. ודקא אמרת: "הגוי
גם צדיק תהרג?! הלא הוא אמר לי אחתי היא, והיא גם היא אמרה אחי הוא!" נביא הוא, וכבר
לימד: אכסנאי שבא לעיר – על עסקי אכילה ושתיה שואלין אותו, או על עסקי אשתו שואלין
אותו – "אשתך היא?" "אחותך היא?"

The Sages taught: All these sums that in the previous mishna they said one is liable to pay for humiliating another are the compensation for his humiliation, for which there is a set amount. But for the victim's pain caused by the assailant, even if the assailant brings as offerings all the rams of Nebaioth (see Isaiah 60:7) that are in the world, which are of the best quality, his transgression is not forgiven for him until he requests forgiveness from the victim, as it is stated: "Restore the wife of the man; for he is a prophet, and he shall pray for you" (Genesis 20:7).

Having quoted the verse, the Gemara asks: Shall one infer from here that the wife of a prophet needs to be returned, but the wife of another individual need not be returned?

The Gemara answers. Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahmani says that Rabbi Yonatan says: This is how the verse should be understood: "Restore the wife of the man" in any case, since she is his wife. And with regard to that which you, Abimelech, said: "Will you slay even a righteous nation? Did he not say himself to me: She is my sister, and she, even she herself, said: He is my brother?" (Genesis 20:4–5), the answer is that you, Abimelech, are not so righteous, since the reason Abraham said that Sarah was his sister is that he is a prophet, and he already learned how to conduct himself based on your behavior. As with regard to a guest who comes to town, does one ask him about matters concerning eating and drinking, or does one ask him about matters concerning his wife? Does one ask a guest: Is she your wife? Is she your sister?



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

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

Bonus ? How do you learn from the biblical verse above (Genesis 20:7) that the assailant must ask for forgiveness from his victim?

Extra Bonus ? How does Rabbi Shmuel bar Naḥmani in the name of Rabbi Yonatan understand the expression “for he is a prophet” in the biblical verse? How is Abraham a prophet according to Rabbi Shmuel bar Naḥmani in the name of Rabbi Yonatan?

? Abimelech tries to exculpate himself by saying: *“Lord, will you destroy an innocent nation? Did he not say to me, ‘She is my sister,’ and didn’t she also say, ‘He is my brother’? I have done this with a clear conscience and clean hands.”* What is Abraham’s argument to expose Abimelech’s guilt, if not wickedness?

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

- ! Tell me what your question is, and I will tell you what you are thinking.



Rabbi Shmuel bar Naḥmani, in the name of Rabbi Yonatan, exposes Abimelech’s true intentions in the biblical story, while teaching us that we can learn a lot about a person’s character from the questions he or she asks.

Our story reminds us that questions or comments that seem harmless and innocent, can indeed be very hurtful, even to people we confess we care for; and invites us to discern the true intentions and subliminal agendas in our words.

? Can you think of some seemingly harmless or innocent questions or comments that carry an ulterior motive, or that have the potential to hurt other people?