

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 [33]

“May it be His Will That Those Above Overcome Those Below” (Insights into Babylonian Talmud Ketubot 104a)

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Background to Our Story

Nasi



[Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Sanhedrin Part 1. Koren publishers Jerusalem](#)

Nasi: Initially the position of the Nasi, the president of the Sanhedrin, was significant only relative to the proceedings of the Sanhedrin. Then, as the Hasmonean dynasty entered a period of decline, the position of Nasi became that of leader of the Jewish community, whose authority was not subject to the approval of the Roman authorities or Herod. The office's power increased during the Great Revolt, as the Nasi Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel was one of the revolt's official leaders, and its power grew even stronger after the revolt was crushed. After the revolt, when Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai renewed the Sanhedrin at Yavne, the position of Nasi was the highest office recognized by the Jewish people, and there was no other independent institution of Jewish leadership. This position, which was passed down from father to son in the family of Hillel for about one hundred years, took on the trappings of an inherited position of sovereignty. Since the Nesi'im of the house of Hillel were also indirectly connected to the House of David, the position carried an aura of royalty. Furthermore, the authority of the Nesi'im over the Jews was recognized by the Roman authorities, although in most cases they were not granted governmental powers. As such, the authority of the Nasi in Eretz Yisrael was not enforced, but rather willingly accepted by the people who wanted to live under even a limited Jewish rule.

Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi (also known as “Rabbi”)



[Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Sanhedrin Part 1. Koren publishers Jerusalem](#)

Rabbi closed the tannaitic period with his arrangement of the Mishna. The son of Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel II, and a seventh-generation descendant of Hillel the Elder, Rabbi Yehuda lived in 135–220 CE during the fifth, and last, generation of tanna'im. According to tradition, Rabbi Yehuda was born on the day of Rabbi Akiva's death, leading people to later proclaim: "the sun sets, and the sun rises" (Ecclesiastes 1:5). Indeed, Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi was a successor to Rabbi Akiva, who had begun to assemble the statements of the Oral Law into a format that later became the Mishna. During his youth, Rabbi Yehuda studied under the five great students of Rabbi Akiva: Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yehuda bar Elai, Rabbi Yosei, Rabbi Shimon, and Rabbi Elazar. In addition, he learned Torah from his father Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel. In an effort to collect all the statements of the previous generations, Rabbi Yehuda moved from yeshiva to yeshiva, obtaining most of his knowledge from Rabbi Ya'akov bar Krashai. The wide breadth of his learning and his position as Nasi, to which he was appointed at age thirty upon his father's death, gave him the standing to undertake the greatest Torah enterprise of the era, the compilation of the Mishna. Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi surrounded himself with the most prominent Sages of his time, who assisted him in establishing the accuracy of the corpus he wanted to produce. Fortunately for him, the relative political calm of the time, and his favorable relationship with the Roman government, permitted the development of such an ambitious project. Due to his position as head of the community, the Mishna of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi was universally accepted, and earlier and other collections of halakha were set aside. This phenomenon unified the nation, as all of the Jewish people began to study the identical corpus of Oral Law. Due to poor health in his later years, Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi moved to Tzipori. His students were the Sages of the first generation of amora'im, including Rabbi Yoĥanan, Rabbi Ĥiyya, bar Kappara and Rav. The Gemara reports (Gittin 59a) that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi was the first individual since Moses to have such a broad mastery of Torah, and his great scholarship led him to be referred to in the Talmud as simply: Rabbi, or: Our holy Rabbi.

The Maidservant of the Household of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Ketubot Part 2. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 241.

The maidservant of the household of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi is mentioned here and in several other contexts in the Gemara. She famously spoke in the purest, most ancient form of the Hebrew language, including words with which the Sages themselves were no longer familiar. It seems that she was a unique servant who was perhaps raised in the family of the *Nesi'im*. The Gemara recounts her wise conduct and her witty and wise manner of speech.

The Mitzvah of Tefillin



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The Torah tells us "And you shall bind them as a sign on your arm, and they shall be as frontlets on your head between your eyes" (Deuteronomy 6:8). This is the Mitzvah of Tefillin, though of course the details are much more complex than that.

Here are some of the Laws you should know about wearing tefillin.

When putting on tefillin it is very important to have a clean body. In addition to general cleanliness, one must be especially careful to be clean after going to the bathroom.

Someone who has no control over what comes out of his body is forbidden to wear tefillin. Anyone in that situation should discuss it with his Rabbi to find out when and how he may wear tefillin.

One should go to the bathroom before putting on tefillin, or at least be absolutely sure he will not have to go while wearing the tefillin. If while wearing tefillin you feel the need to go to the bathroom, you must immediately remove the tefillin and go.

If you feel the need to pass gas while wearing tefillin, you must first remove your tefillin.

Never take tefillin or any holy item into a bathroom.

While wearing tefillin, one should think no thoughts at all except thoughts of Hashem, Torah or prayer. All the more so should he be careful about what he says out loud.

We may wear tefillin only during the day.

Always treat your tefillin with the greatest of respect and reverence. Do not remove them from the bag by shaking them out of the bag, for example. Always take them out carefully, and put them back carefully.

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Ketubot 104a

ההוא יומא דנח נפשיה דרבי גזרו רבנן תעניתא, ובעו רחמי, ואמרי: כל מאן דאמר "נח נפשיה דרבי" – ידקר בתרב.

סליקא אמתיה דרבי לאיגרא, אמר: ה עליונים מבקשין את רבי, והתחתונים מבקשין את רבי – יהי רצון שיכופו תחתונים את העליונים. כיון דחזאי כמה זימני דעייל לבית הכסא, וחליץ תפילין, ומנח להו, וקמצטער, אמרה יהי רצון שיכופו עליונים את התחתונים. ולא הו שתיקי רבנן מלמיבעי רחמי. שקלה פוזא שדייא מאיגרא [לארעא], אישתיקו מרחמי, ונח נפשיה דרבי.

אמרו ליה רבנן לבר קפרא: זיל עיין. אזל, אשפחיה דנח נפשיה. קרעיה ללבושיה, ואהדריה לקרעיה לאחוריה. פתח ואמר אראלים ומצוקים אהוון בארון הקדש, נצחו אראלים את המצוקים, ונשבה ארון הקדש. אמרו ליה: נח נפשיה? אמר להו: אתון קאמריתו, ואנא לא קאמינא.

On the day that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi died, the Sages decreed a fast, and begged for divine mercy so that he would not die. And they said: Anyone who says that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi has died will be stabbed with a sword.

The maidservant of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi ascended to the roof and said: The upper realms are requesting the presence of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, and the lower realms are requesting the presence of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi. May it be the will of God that the lower worlds should impose their will upon the

upper worlds. When she saw how many times he would enter the bathroom and remove his phylacteries, and then exit and put them back on, and how he was suffering with his intestinal disease, she said: May it be the will of God that the upper worlds should impose their will upon the lower worlds.

And the Sages, meanwhile, would not be silent, i.e., they would not refrain, from begging for mercy. So she took a jug [*kuza*] and threw it from the roof to the ground. Due to the sudden noise, the Sages were silent and refrained from begging for mercy, and Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi died.

The Sages said to bar Kappara: Go and ascertain the condition of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi. He went and found that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi had died. He tore his clothing and reversed them so that the tear would be behind him.

When he returned to the Sages he opened his remarks and said: The angels [*erelim*] and righteous mortals [*metzukim*] both clutched the sacred ark. The angels triumphed over the righteous, and the sacred ark was captured. They said to him: Has he died? He said to them: You have said it and I did not say it.



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

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Why did the Rabbis decree a fast?

? Why did the maidservant of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi ascend to the roof?

? Who are the *upper realms*? Who are the *lower realms*?

Bonus ? Why did the maidservant of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi pray that the upper worlds should impose their will upon the lower worlds?

? Why did Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi remove his Tefilin when he entered the bathroom?

? Why did the maidservant of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi throw a jug from the roof to the ground?

? Why did Bar Kappara tear his clothing?

Bonus ? Why did Bar Kappara shift the tear to the back?

? By what other name are “those above” and “those below” referred to in the story?

Analysis Questions

Bonus ? Why do you think the Rabbis said: “Anyone who says that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi has died will be stabbed with a sword”?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? What prompted Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi’s maidservant to change her prayer?

? Why didn’t the Sages change their prayer?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

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

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