

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [34]

Rabbi Akiva's Daughter (Insights into Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 156b) (Revised: January 2020)



Background of Our Story

Chaldeans and Soothsayers

Daniel 2:2-5

ב וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ לְקָרֵא לְחֹרְטָמִים וְלֹאֲשָׁפִים, וְלִמְכַשְׁפִּים וּלְכַשְׁדִּים, לְהַגִּיד לְמֶלֶךְ, חֲלֻמֹתָיו; וַיָּבֹאוּ, וַיַּעֲמְדוּ לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ

"And the king commanded to summon the necromancers, the astrologers, the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans to tell the king his dreams, and they came and stood before the king. And the king said to them, "I dreamed a dream, and my spirit is troubled to know the dream." Then the Chaldeans spoke to the king in Aramaic, "May the king live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we shall tell the interpretation." The king replied and said to the Chaldeans, "The matter has escaped me. If you do not let me know the dream and its meaning, you shall be torn limb from limb, and your houses shall be made into a dungheap."

Soothsayer

A soothsayer is a person who claims to speak [sooth](#): specifically one who predicts the future based upon personal, political, spiritual, or religious beliefs rather than scientific facts. Typically, soothsayers include: [Prophets](#), [Fortune tellers](#), Practitioners of [divination](#), [Oracles](#), [Haruspices](#), [Augurs](#), [Astrologers](#), [Shamans](#).

[vocabulary.com](https://www.vocabulary.com)

A fortune teller is also known as a soothsayer, or someone who claims to be able to predict the future. Long ago, a soothsayer might have been considered a useful consultant, even for a government, but today soothsayers are more likely to be

scoffed at. Still, there are many soothsayers who have successful businesses telling people's fortunes and giving advice. *Soothsayer* comes from the Old English word for "truth," combined with "say," together meaning "an act of speaking the truth."

Jewish Views of Astrology



www.wikipedia.org

In early classical rabbinic works written in the land of Israel ([Jerusalem Talmud](#) and Palestinian [midrash](#) compilations) astrologers are known as *astrologos* and *astrologiyya*. In early classical rabbinic works written in Babylon, astrologers were called *kaldiyyim*, *kalda'ei*, and *iztagninin*.

The Babylonian [Talmud](#) (BT), in Sanhedrin 65, suggests that this means that Jews may not consult an astrologer. Another tractate, BT Pesachim 113b, clearly says that Jews may not consult astrologers.

Samuel of Babylonia (circa 250 CE) is the only sage in the Talmud who seriously studied astrology, yet he held that it was not compatible with Judaism. Quoting Deuteronomy 30:12, "The Law is not in the Heavens", he is reputed to have taught that "Torah cannot go together with the art that studies the heavens" (Midrash Deuteronomy Rabbah 8:6).

R. Johanan, the Palestinian amora, says "there is no *maza!* (literally "star") for Israel, but only for the nations [which recognize the validity of astrology.]" This opinion is shared by Rav (BT Shabbat 156a).

[Rabbinic literature](#) records that [Rabbi Akiva](#) contends against astrological beliefs, e.g., Sifre, Deut. 171; Sifra, Kedoshim, vi.; Sanhedrin 65.

However, other statements in the Talmud and in the [midrash](#) literature show that many Jews had some level of admiration for astrology.

Some hold that the stars generally do control the fate of people and nations, but Abraham and his descendants were elevated by their covenant with God, and thus achieve [free will](#). (Midrash Genesis Rabbah 44:12, Yal., Jer. 285). A statement in the [Tosefta](#) (Kiddushin 5:17) holds that the blessing bestowed on Abraham is the gift of astrology. Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah states that the rulers of some non-Jewish nations were experts in astrology, and that King Solomon too had expertise in this realm. (7:23 no. 1)

There is a story in the Talmud according to which [God](#) showed to [Adam](#) all the future generations, including their scribes, scholars, and leaders (BT Avodah Zarah 5a). According to this source, the biblical Patriarch [Abraham](#) bore upon his breast an astrological tablet on which the fate of every man might be read. Thus, kings are said to have congregated before his door in order to seek advice.

An announcement is found to the effect that it is dangerous to drink water on Wednesday and Friday evenings (Pesachim 112a). Samuel, a physician and astrologer, taught that it was dangerous to bleed a patient on Monday, Tuesday, or Thursday, because on the last-mentioned day Mars reigns at the even-numbered hours of the day, when demons have their play. The new moon was likewise regarded as an unfavorable season for bleeding, as were also the third of the month and the day preceding a festival (BT Shabbat 129b).

Sleeping Beauty



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At the christening of a long-wished-for princess, fairies invited as godmothers offered gifts, such as beauty, wit, and musical talent. However, a wicked fairy who had been overlooked placed the princess under an enchantment as her gift, saying that, on reaching adulthood, she would prick her finger on a spindle and die. A good fairy, though unable to completely reverse the spell, said that the princess would instead sleep for a hundred years, until awakened by the kiss of a prince.

The king forbade spinning on distaff or spindle, or the possession of one, upon pain of death, throughout the kingdom, but all in vain. When the princess was fifteen or sixteen she chanced to come upon an old woman in a tower of the castle, who was spinning. The Princess asked to try the unfamiliar task and the inevitable happened. The wicked fairy's curse was fulfilled. The good fairy returned and put everyone in the castle to sleep. A forest of briars sprang up around the castle, shielding it from the outside world: no one could try penetrate it without facing certain death in the thorns.

After a hundred years had passed, a prince who had heard the story of the enchantment braved the wood, which parted at his approach, and entered the castle. He trembled upon seeing the princess' beauty and fell on his knees before her. He kissed her, then she woke up, then everyone in the castle woke to continue where they had left off... and, in modern versions, starting with the [Brothers Grimm](#) version, they all lived happily ever after.

Proverbs 10:1-2

1. Proverbs of Solomon: A wise son makes his father happy, but a foolish son is the grief of his mother. **2.** Treasures of wickedness will not avail, but charity will save from death.

Hair Brooch

A relatively large decorative pin or clasp



The Text: Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 156b

דְּרַבֵּי עֲקִיבָא הָוּיָא לִיה בְּרַתָּא, אָמְרִי לִיה פְּלִדְאִי: הֵהוּא יוֹמָא דְעֵיילָה לְבֵי גִנְנָא – טְרִיק לָה חִוּיָא וּמִיתָא. הָוּה דְאִיגָא אֲמִילְתָּא טוֹבָא.
הֵהוּא יוֹמָא שְׁקֵלְתָּה לְמַכְבָּנְתָּא, דְצִתָּא בְּגוּדָא, אִיתְרַמִּי אִיתִיב בְּעֵינֵיה דְחִוּיָא. לְצַפְרָא פִי קָא שְׁקֵלְתָּה לָה – הָוּה קָא סְרִיד וְאִתִּי חִוּיָא בְתַרְהּ.
אָמַר לָה אָבוּה: מָאי עֲבַדְתָּ? אָמְרָה לִיה: בְּפִנְיָ אֲתָא עֵנְיָא, קָרָא אֲפָבָא, וְהוּו טְרִידי פּוּלִי עֲלָמָא בְּסַעוּדָתָא, וְלִיכָא דְשִׁמְעִיהּ. קָאִימְנָא, שְׁקֵלְתִי לְרִיסְתַּנְאִי דִיהֲבִית לִי, יְהֲבִיתִיה גִּיהֲלִיָּה. אָמַר לָה: מַצּוּה עֲבַדְתָּ! נִפְק רַבֵּי עֲקִיבָא וְדַרְשׁ: "וַאֲדָקָה תַּצִּיל מִמּוֹת" וְלֹא מִמִּיתָה מְשׁוּנָה, אֲלֹא מִמִּיתָה עֲצֻמָּה.

Rabbi Akiva had a daughter. The astrologers told him: The day she enters her bridal chamber, a snake will bite her and she will die. [Rabbi Akiva] was extremely worried over this matter.

That day she took her brooch and stuck it in the wall. It happened that [the needle] lodged in the eye of a snake. In the morning, when she took [the brooch] the snake followed, stuck to [the brooch].

Her father said to her: What have you done?

She said to him: In the afternoon, a pauper came and called out from the doorway, but everyone was busy at the banquet and no one heard him. I stood up and took my portion that had been given me and I gave it to him.

[Rabbi Akiva] said to her: You have done a mitzvah [an act of true charity].

Rabbi Akiva went out and expounded: "And Charity saves from death;" and not from an unusual death, but from death itself.



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

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? How do we know that Rabbi Akiva took the prediction of the astrologers seriously?

? From the story, do you get the impression that the rabbis considered astrology to be a reliable science or not?

Bonus ? Did Rabbi Akiva's daughter know about the existence of the snake when she stuck her brooch in the wall?

Extra Bonus ? Did Rabbi Akiva tell his daughter about the astrologers' prediction? Please explain.

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? For how long do you think was Rabbi Akiva worried about his daughter's fate?

? What did Rabbi Akiva mean by the question [to his daughter]: "what have you done?"

Bonus ? What was so special about Rabbi Akiva's daughter's mitzvah?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

Answer 5 _____

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

! "Worriers" and "Doers"

! When kindness is not "a project" but an intrinsic part of who you are.



Much like the fairy tale of Sleeping Beauty, Rabbi Akiva is foretold by the astrologers that his daughter will die on her wedding day. Astrology in Rabbi Akiva's time was a full-fledged science and Rabbi Akiva takes the prediction to heart and is extremely worried about the matter.

His daughter, unaware of the prediction, understands that kindness and compassion do not take vacation, even on your own wedding day. Her unique sensitivity contrasts with everybody's unresponsiveness to the suffering of the pauper who calls out from the doorway. Even the great sage, Rabbi Akiva, does not pay attention to the pauper, being too worried about his daughter's fate.

Our story is about the power of genuine, innocent, and unadulterated love, kindness and compassion, which can literally overcome everything, including death itself.

Appendix: How to Kill a Story.

? Read the Koren's (Steinsaltz) Translation or of our story (below). How does this alternative translation "ruin" our story?

Koren's (Steinsaltz) Translation of Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 156b

Rabbi Akiva had a daughter, and Chaldean astrologers told him that on the same day that she enters the wedding canopy, a snake will bite her and she will die.

She was very worried about this. On that day, her wedding day, she took the ornamental pin from her hair and stuck it into a hole in the wall for safekeeping, and it happened that it entered directly into the eye of the snake.

In the morning, when she took the pin, the snake was pulled and came out with it.

Her father Rabbi Akiva said to her: What did you do?

She told him: In the evening a poor person came and knocked on the door, and everyone was preoccupied with the feast and nobody heard him. I stood and took the portion that you had given me and gave it to him.

Rabbi Akiva said to her: You performed a mitzvah, and you were saved in its merit.

Rabbi Akiva went out and taught based on this incident: "And charity will save from death" (Proverbs 10:2), it does not mean that it will save a person only from an unusual death, but even from death itself.