

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [39]

"The Parchment is Burning and the Letters Are Taking Flight"

(Insights into Babylonian Talmud Avodah Zarah 18a)

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Background to Our Story

Rabbi Hanina ben Teradyon



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

Rabbi Haninah ben Teradion or Hananiah ben Teradion was a teacher in the third [Tannaitic](#) generation (2nd century). He was one of the [Ten Martyrs](#) murdered by the [Romans](#) for ignoring the ban on teaching [Torah](#).

His residence was at Siknin, where he directed religious affairs as well as a school. The latter came to be numbered among the distinguished academies with reference to which a [baraita](#) says: "The saying ([Deuteronomy](#) 16:20), 'That which is altogether just shalt thou follow' may be construed, 'Follow the sages in their respective academies. ... Follow Rabbi Haninah ben Teradion in Siknin'" ([Sanhedrin](#) 32b).

Haninah administered the communal charity funds, and so scrupulous was he in that office that once when money of his own, designed for personal use on [Purim](#), chanced to get mixed with the charity funds, he distributed the whole amount among the poor. [Eleazar ben Jacob](#) so admired Haninah's honesty that he remarked, "No one ought to contribute to the charity treasury unless its administrator is like Haninah ben Teradion" ([Bava Batra](#) 10b; [Avodah Zarah](#) 17b).

During the [Hadrianic](#) persecutions decrees were promulgated imposing the most rigorous penalties on the observers of the Jewish law, and especially upon those who occupied themselves with the promulgation of that law. Nevertheless, Hananiah conscientiously followed his chosen profession; he convened public assemblies and taught Torah.

For this he and his wife were condemned to death, and their daughter to degradation. His death was terrible. Wrapped in the scroll, he was placed on a pyre of green brush; fire was set to it, and wet wool was placed on his chest to prolong the agonies of death. "Woe is me," cried his daughter, "that I should see thee under such terrible circumstances!" Haninah serenely replied, "I should indeed despair were I alone burned; but since the scroll of the Torah is burning with me, the Power that will avenge the offense against the law will also avenge the offense against me."

Of the surviving members of Haninah's family are mentioned two daughters: the learned [Bruriah](#), who became the wife of [Rabbi Meir](#); and the one marked for degradation, whom Rabbi Meir succeeded in rescuing (Avodah Zarah 18a).

Rabbi Yosei ben Kisma



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Avoda Zara. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 93

Rabbi Yosei ben Kisma was a fifth-generation *tanna*, from the same generation as Rabbi Akiva's disciples. Apparently, Rabbi Yosei ben Kisma lived in Tiberias, where he taught Torah. It is known that he had a son named Rabbi Yoĥanan. There are no records of Rabbi Yosei's halakhic rulings, but several aggadic statements are cited in his name in the Talmud and elsewhere. Various sources indicate that he was considered a holy man who could foretell the future, and this is presumably the reason that Rabbi Ĥanina ben Teradyon consulted with him. From his comments to Rabbi Ĥanina ben Teradyon, as well as from the fact that the Roman dignitaries participated in his funeral, it is apparent that he was on good terms with the Roman government.

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Avodah Zarah 18a

תנו רבנן: כִּשְׁתֵּלָה רַבִּי יוֹסֵי בֶן קִיסְמָא, הֵלֵךְ רַבִּי חֲנִינְא בֶן תְּרַדְיוֹן לְבַקְרוּ. אָמַר לוֹ: חֲנִינְא אָחִי, אֵי אַתָּה יוֹדֵעַ שְׂאוּמָה זֶה מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם הַמְּלִיכוּתָהּ? שֶׁהֲחִרִיבָה אֶת בֵּיתוֹ וְשָׂרְפָה אֶת הַיְכָלוֹ, וְהָרְגָה אֶת חֲסִידָיו וְאֵבְדָה אֶת טוֹבָיו, וְעַדְיוֹן הִיא קַיִימָת, וְאֲנִי שְׂמַעְתִּי עָלֶיךָ שְׂאוּמָה יוֹשֵׁב וְעוֹסֵק בַּתּוֹרָה [וּמִקְהֵיל קְהֵלוֹת בְּרַבִּים] וְסֵפֶר מוֹנֵחַ לָךְ בְּחִיקָךְ!

אָמַר לוֹ: מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם יִרְחַמוּ. אָמַר לוֹ: אֲנִי אוֹמֵר לָךְ דְּבָרִים שֶׁל טַעַם, וְאַתָּה אוֹמֵר לִי "מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם יִרְחַמוּ", תִּמְנֶה אֲנִי אִם לֹא יִשְׂרְפוּ אוֹתָךְ וְאֶת סֵפֶר תּוֹרָה בְּאֵשׁ! אָמַר לוֹ: רַבִּי, מָה אֲנִי לַחֲיֵי הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא? אָמַר לוֹ: כְּלוּם מַעֲשֵׂה בָא לְדָךְ? אָמַר לוֹ: מַעֲוֹת שֶׁל פּוֹרִים נִתְחַלְפוּ לִי בְּמַעֲוֹת שֶׁל צְדָקָה וְחִלְקֵתִים לְעֻנְיִים, אָמַר לוֹ: אִם כֵּן, מִחֻלְקָה יְהִי חֻלְקִי וּמִגּוֹרֶלךְ יְהִי גּוֹרְלִי.

אָמְרוּ: לֹא הָיוּ יָמִים מוֹעֲטִים עַד שֶׁנִּפְטַר רַבִּי יוֹסֵי בֶן קִיסְמָא, וְהִלְכוּ כָּל גְּדוּלֵי רוּמֵי לְקַבְּרוּ וְהִסְפִּידוּהוּ הַסֵּפֶד גְּדוֹל, וּבַחֲזָרְתָן מִצְאוּהוּ לְרַבִּי חֲנִינְא בֶן תְּרַדְיוֹן שֶׁהָיָה יוֹשֵׁב וְעוֹסֵק בַּתּוֹרָה וּמִקְהֵיל קְהֵלוֹת בְּרַבִּים וְסֵפֶר תּוֹרָה מוֹנֵחַ לוֹ בְּחִיקוֹ.

הִבִּיאוּהוּ וּכְרָכוּהוּ בְּסֵפֶר תּוֹרָה, וְהִקִּיפוּהוּ בְּחִבְלֵי זְמוּרוֹת וְהִצִּיתוּ בְּהֵן אֶת הָאוּר, וְהִבִּיאוּ סְפוּגִין שֶׁל צֹמֶר וְשִׂרְאוּם בְּמִים וְהִנִּיחוּם עַל לְבוֹ, כְּדֵי שֶׁלֹּא תִצָּא נִשְׁמַתוֹ מִהֶרָה. אָמְרָה לוֹ בְּתוֹ: אָבָא, אַרְאֵךְ בְּכֶךָ? אָמַר לָהּ: אֵילְמָלִי אֲנִי נִשְׂרַפְתִּי לְבִדִּי, הִיָּה הַדָּבָר קָשָׁה לִּי. עַכְשָׁיו שְׂאוּמָה יוֹשֵׁב וְעוֹסֵק בַּתּוֹרָה עִמִּי, מִי שֶׁמִּבְקֵשׁ עֲלֵבוּנָה שֶׁל סֵפֶר תּוֹרָה הוּא יִבְקֵשׁ עֲלֵבוּנִי.

אָמְרוּ לוֹ תִלְמִידָיו: רַבִּי, מָה אַתָּה רוֹאֵה? אָמַר לָהֶן: גְּלִיוֹן נִשְׂרַפִּין וְאוֹתִיּוֹת פּוֹרְחוֹת. אַף אַתָּה פִּתַח פִּיךָ וְתַכְּנֵס בֶּךָ הָאֵשׁ! אָמַר לָהֶן: מוֹטֵב שִׁיטְלָנָה מִי שְׂוֹתְנָה וְאֵל יַחֲבֵל הוּא בְּעַצְמוֹ

אָמַר לוֹ קְלִצְטוֹנִירִי: רַבִּי, אִם אֲנִי מְרַבֵּה בְּשִׁלְהֶבֶת וְנוֹטֵל סְפוּגִין שֶׁל צָמָר מֵעַל לְבָד, אֲתָה מְבִיאֲנִי לְחַיֵּי הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא? אָמַר לוֹ: הֵן. הַשְּׂבַע לִי! נִשְׂבַּע לוֹ. מִיַּד הַרְבֵּה בְּשִׁלְהֶבֶת וְנוֹטֵל סְפוּגִין שֶׁל צָמָר מֵעַל לְבוֹ, נִצָּאָה נִשְׁמָתוֹ בְּמַהֲרָה. אַף הוּא קָפֵץ וְנָפַל לְתוֹךְ הָאוּר.

נִצָּאָה בַּת קוֹל וְאָמְרָה: רַבִּי חֲנִינָא בֶן תְּרַדְיוֹן וְקְלִצְטוֹנִירִי מְזוּמְנִין הֵן לְחַיֵּי הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא.

בָּכָה רַבִּי וְאָמַר: יֵשׁ קוֹנֵה עוֹלָמוֹ בְּשַׁעַת אַחַת, וְיֵשׁ קוֹנֵה עוֹלָמוֹ בְּכַמָּה שָׁנִים.

First Act

The Sages taught: When Rabbi Yosei ben Kisma fell ill, Rabbi Ḥanina ben Teradyon went to visit him.

Rabbi Yosei ben Kisma said to him: Ḥanina my brother, do you not know that this nation has been given reign by a decree from Heaven? The proof is that Rome has destroyed God's Temple, and burned His Sanctuary, and killed His pious ones, and destroyed His best ones, and it still exists. And yet I heard about you that you sit and engage in Torah study, and convene assemblies in public, and have a Torah scroll placed in your lap, thereby demonstrating complete disregard for the decrees issued by the Romans.

Rabbi Ḥanina ben Teradyon said to him: Heaven will have mercy.

Rabbi Yosei ben Kisma said to him: I am saying reasonable matters to you, and you say to me: Heaven will have mercy? I wonder if the Romans will not burn both you and your Torah scroll by fire.

Rabbi Ḥanina ben Teradyon said to him: My teacher, what will become of me? Am I destined for life in the World-to-Come?

Rabbi Yosei ben Kisma said to him: Did any special incident occur to you which might serve as an indication?

Rabbi Ḥanina ben Teradyon said to him: I confused my own coins that I needed for the festivities of Purim with coins of charity, and I distributed them all to the poor at my own expense.

Rabbi Yosei ben Kisma said to him: If that is so, may my portion be of your portion, and may my lot be of your lot.

Second Act

The Sages said: Not even a few days passed before Rabbi Yosei ben Kisma died of his illness, and all of the Roman notables went to bury him, and they eulogized him with a great eulogy. And upon their return, they found Rabbi Ḥanina ben Teradyon, who was sitting and engaging in Torah study and convening assemblies in public, with a Torah scroll placed in his lap.

They brought him to be sentenced, and wrapped him in the Torah scroll, and encircled him with bundles of branches, and they set fire to it. And they brought tufts of wool and soaked them in water, and placed them on his heart, so that his soul should not leave his body quickly, but he would die slowly and painfully.

His daughter said to him: Father, must I see you like this?

Rabbi Ḥanina ben Teradyon said to her: If I alone were being burned, it would be difficult for me, but now that I am burning along with a Torah scroll, He who will seek retribution for the insult accorded to the Torah scroll will also seek retribution for the insult accorded to me.

His students said to him: Our teacher, what do you see? Rabbi Ḥanina ben Teradyon said to them: I see the parchment burning, but its letters are flying.

They [the students] said to him: You too should open your mouth and the fire will enter you, and you will die quickly. Rabbi Ḥanina ben Teradyon said to them: It is preferable that He who gave me my soul should take it away, and one should not harm oneself to speed his death.

The executioner [*kaltzatoniri*] said to him: My teacher, if I increase the flame and take off the tufts of wool from your heart, so that you will die sooner and suffer less, will you bring me to the life of the World-to-Come?

Rabbi H̄anina ben Teradyon said to the executioner: Yes.

The executioner said: Take an oath for me, that what you say is true.

Rabbi H̄anina ben Teradyon took the oath for him, and the executioner immediately increased the flame and took off the tufts of wool from his heart, causing his soul to leave his body quickly.

The executioner too leaped and fell into the fire and died.

A Divine Voice emerged and said: Rabbi H̄anina ben Teradyon and the executioner are destined for the life of the World-to- Come.

Epilogue

Upon hearing this, Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi wept and said: There is one who acquires his share in the World-to-Come in one moment, such as the executioner, and there is one who acquires his share in the World-to-Come only after many years of toil.



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

Comprehension Questions

? What was the relationship between Rabbi Yosei ben Kisma and Rabbi H̄anina ben Teradyon?

? When did our story happen (approximately)?

? What was the nature of the relationship between Rabbi Yosei ben Kisma and the Romans?

? What was Rabbi Hânina ben Teradyon's inadvertent sin? Why was it dismissed by Rabbi Yosei ben Kisma?

? Why did the great men of Rome go to bury and eulogize Rabbi Yosei ben Kisma?

? Why did the Romans place tufts of wool soaked in water on Rabbi Hânina's heart?

? What was Rabbi Hânina's source of solace when being tortured to death?

? Why did the students ask Rabbi Hânina: "Our teacher, what do you see" when he was dying?

? Why did Rabbi Hânina refuse to open his mouth to let the fire consume him quicker?

? Why did Rabbi Hânina accept the offer from the executioner to increase the flame and to remove the tufts of wool soaked in water from his chest?

Bonus ? Why did the executioner jump into the fire after increasing the flame of the fire and removing the tufts of wool soaked in water from the chest of Rabbi Hânina?

? Why did Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi cry upon hearing how the executioner made it into the world to come?

Analysis Questions

Bonus ? Why didn't Rabbi Hânina follow Rabbi Yosei ben Kisma's advice regarding public teaching of Torah?

? What is the meaning of Rabbi Hânina's answer to his students: "I see the parchment burning, but its letters are flying"?

? What prompted the executioner to act the way he acted?

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

⊙ The value of principles and the price we must pay to sustain them!
(Do you know of anybody who paid with his or her life for the principles they believed in?)

⊙ Inspiring others by truly believing in our principles!



Our story is among the best known ones, describing the Jewish oppression by the hands of the Romans, especially in the aftermath of the Bar Kochva revolt. Yes, our story is about the martyrdom of Rabbi Hânina ben Teradyon, but it is also a story about believing in one’s principles and values and being ready to pay a price when defending them. It is also a story about how our actions –more than our words- can inspire others.

Last but not least, it is a story about the Torah, an everlasting and indestructible Torah, that can overcome myriads of tyrants and oppressors, and even its physical destruction itself, as long as there are Jews who believe in its principles and values.