

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [49]

Were You Not Hōni, I Would Have Decreed That You Be Ostracized!

Insights into the Babylonian Talmud, Ta'anit 19a



Background to Our Story

Climate and Rains in the land of Israel



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

Israel has a [Mediterranean climate](#) with long, hot, rainless summers and relatively short, cool, rainy winters. The climate is as such due to Israel's location between the [subtropical](#) aridity of the [Sahara](#) and the [Arabian](#) deserts, and the subtropical humidity of the [Levant](#) and Eastern Mediterranean. The climate conditions are highly variable within the state and modified locally by altitude, latitude, and the proximity to the Mediterranean.

On average, January is the coldest month with average temperatures ranging from 6 °C (43 °F) to 15 °C (59 °F), and July and August are the hottest months at 22 °C (72 °F) to 33 °C (91 °F) on average across the country. Summers are very humid along the Mediterranean coast but dry in the central highlands, the Rift Valley, and the [Negev](#) Desert. In Eilat, a desert city, summer daytime-temperatures are often the highest in the state, at times reaching 44 °C (111 °F) to 46 °C (115 °F). More than 70% of the average rainfall in Israel falls between November and March; June through September are usually rainless.

Hōni (or Choni) HaM'agel (Hōni the Circle-drawer)



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

Honi HaM'agel ([Hebrew](#) for Honi the Circle-drawer) ([First century BCE](#)) was a [Jewish](#) scholar prior to the age of the [Tannaim](#), the scholars from whose teachings the [Mishnah](#) (the first part of the [Talmud](#)) was derived.

During the first century BCE, a variety of religious movements and splinter groups developed amongst the Jews in [Judea](#). A number of individuals claimed to be miracle workers in the tradition of [Elijah](#) and [Elisha](#), the ancient Jewish prophets.

The Talmud provides some examples of such Jewish miracle workers. Mishnah [Ta'anit](#) 3:8 tells of Honi HaM'agel' ("Honi the Circle-drawer") who was famous for his ability to successfully pray for rain.

Charismatic Galilean Holy Men

Geza Vermes compared Jesus with other Galilean holy men known as hasidim - pious, charismatic figures who had a reputation as miracle-workers and operated outside the usual channels of religious power and authority. Two such persons were Honi the Circle-Drawer and Hanina ben Dosa, both of whom are reported in the Talmud to have healed the sick and had power over demons. Honi, in case you are wondering, got called the title Circle-Drawer because he once drew a circle on the ground, stood in it, and insisted to God that he wouldn't leave the circle until God blessed the people with a decent fall of rain.

Charisma



Max Weber: *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. New York: Free Press, 1947. Pages 358-59.

The term "charisma" will be applied to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded of divine origin, or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader.

In primitive circumstances this peculiar kind of deference is paid to prophets, to people with a reputation for therapeutic or legal wisdom.... It is very often thought of as resting on magical powers.... What is alone important is how the individual is actually regarded by those subject to charismatic authority, by his "followers" or "disciples."

Grace



Grace, in Christian theology, the spontaneous, unmerited gift of the divine favor in the salvation of sinners, and the divine influence operating in individuals for their regeneration and sanctification. The English term is the usual translation for the Greek *charis*, which occurs in the New Testament about 150 times (two-thirds of these in writings attributed to St. Paul).

Grace - Χάρις



The Greek word *Χάρις* - *charis* is packed with meaning in the Bible. *Charis* can be succinctly defined as "grace," as in "the unmerited favor of God." The term *charis* and the theme of grace permeate the New Testament in a variety of ways. Of the approximate 150 occurrences of *charis*, the vast majority appear in the letters of the apostle Paul.

Charis sometimes refers to the quality and practical demonstration of a favorable disposition toward someone. It denotes undeserved actions of love and compassion that originate from within the heart and will of the giver.

Shimon ben Shetaĥ



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Ta'anit I. Koren publishers Jerusalem.

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The *Nasi* of the Sanhedrin during the reign of Alexander Yannai, Shimon ben Shetaĥ was one of the most important Jewish leaders and exponents of the Oral Law. He was an authoritative leader who insisted on observing the minutiae of Torah law. He took vigorous action against anyone who challenged the authority of the accepted *halakha*, whether the challenge came from outside the Jewish community or from sectarians of all kinds within. In his time, witchcraft was expunged from the land by means of special decrees, and he firmly established the *halakhot* of testimony. He also improved and reinforced marriage contracts. Since he insisted on the overarching power of the Sanhedrin, he even summoned the king to judgment, and demanded that he respect the court like an ordinary citizen. For this and many other reasons, he came into conflict with Alexander Yannai and was forced to go into hiding on several occasions. However, as evident from the account in *Berakhot* (48a), he did not succumb to threats, honor, or flattery. When people took revenge against him and testified falsely against his son, he and his son accepted punishment so as not to invalidate the established *halakhot*.

Although his sister, Salome Alexandra, was the king's wife, Shimon ben Shetaĥ continued to practice his profession, which was apparently tanning leather. After the death of Alexander Yannai, his widow reigned, and internal affairs were handled by Shimon ben Shetaĥ.

Topography of Jerusalem and the Temple



The Stone of the Claims (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 28b)

Our Rabbis taught: There was a "Stone of Claims" in Jerusalem: whoever lost an article went there, and whoever found an article did likewise. The latter would stand and proclaim and the former would present *simanim* and take it.

Cherem & Niddui (Total Excommunication & Temporary Excommunication)



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

Cherem (or **Herem**), is the highest ecclesiastical censure in the [Jewish](#) community. It is the total exclusion of a person from the Jewish community. It is a form of [shunning](#), and is similar to [excommunication](#) in the Catholic Church. The most famous (for Gentiles) case of a cherem is that of [Spinoza](#), a seventeenth century philosopher

The Talmud speaks of twenty-four offenses that, in theory, were punishable by a form of niddui or temporary excommunication.

The Niddui

The "niddui" ban was usually imposed for a period of seven days (in Israel thirty days). If inflicted on account of money matters, the offender was first publicly warned ("hatra'ah") three times, on Monday, Thursday, and Monday successively, at the regular service in the synagogue. During the period of niddui, no one except the members of his immediate household was permitted to associate with the offender, or to sit within four cubits of him, or to eat in his company. He was expected to go into mourning and to refrain from bathing, cutting his hair, and wearing shoes, and he had to observe all the laws that pertained to a mourner. He could not be counted in the number necessary for the performance of a public religious function. If he died, a stone was placed on his hearse, and the relatives were not obliged to observe the ceremonies customary at the death of a kinsman, such as the tearing of garments, etc.

It was in the power of the court to lessen or increase the severity of the niddui. The court might even reduce or increase the number of days, forbid all intercourse with the offender, and exclude his children from the schools and his wife from the synagogue, until he became humbled and willing to repent and obey the court's mandates.

The Text: Babylonian Talmud, Ta'anit 19a

מעשה שאמרו לו לחוני המעגל: התפלל שיירדו גשמים.
אמר להם: צאו והכניסו תנורי פסחים בשביל שלא ימוקו.
התפלל, ולא ירדו גשמים.

מה עשה? עג עוגה ועמד בתוכה, ואמר לפניו: רבוננו של עולם! בניד שמו פניהם עלי, שאני כבן בית לפניך. נשבע אני בשמה הגדול שאיני זז מכאן עד שתרחם על בניך. התחילו גשמים מנטפין. אמר: לא כף שאלתי, אלא גשמי בורות, שיחין, ומערות. התחילו לירד בזעף אמר: לא כף שאלתי, אלא גשמי רצון, ברכה, ונדבה.

ירדו פתקון, עד שיצאו ישראל מירושלים לחר הבית מפני הגשמים. באו ואמרו לו: כשם שהתפללת עליהם שיירדו, כך התפלל שילכו לך. אמר להם: צאו וראו אם נמחית אבן הטועין. שלח לו שמעון בן שטח: אלמלא חוני אתה, גוזרני עליך נידוי. אבל מה אעשה לך, שאמה מתחטא לפני המקום, ועושה לך רצונה, כבן שהיא מתחטא על אביו, ועושה לו רצונו? ועליך הכתוב אומר: "ישמח אביך ואמה, ותגל יולדתך".

An incident occurred in which the people said to H^oni HaMe'aggel (the Circle-drawer): Pray that rain should fall.

He [H^oni] said to them: Go out and bring in the clay ovens used to roast the Paschal lambs, so that they will not dissolve.

He [H^oni] prayed, and no rain fell at all.

What did he [Ĥoni] do? He drew a circle on the ground and stood inside it and said before God: Master of the Universe, Your children have turned their faces toward me, as I am like a member of Your household. Therefore, I take an oath by Your great name that I will not move from here until You have mercy upon Your children.

Rain began to trickle down, but only in small droplets.

He [Ĥoni] said: I did not ask for this, but for rain to fill the cisterns, ditches, and caves with enough water to last the entire year.

Rain began to fall furiously.

He [Ĥoni] said: I did not ask for this damaging rain either, but for rain of benevolence, blessing, and generosity.

Subsequently, the rains fell in their standard manner until all of the Jews exited the residential areas of Jerusalem and went to the Temple Mount due to the rain.

They [the Jews] came and said to him: Just as you prayed over the rains that they should fall, so too, pray that they should stop.

He [Ĥoni] said to them: Go out and see if the Claimants' Stone, a large stone located in the city, upon which proclamations would be posted with regard to lost and found articles, has been washed away. In other words, if the water has not obliterated the Claimants' Stone, it is not yet appropriate to pray for the rain to cease.

Shimon ben Shetaĥ, the *Nasi* of the Sanhedrin at the time, relayed to Ĥoni HaMe'aggel: Were you not Ĥoni, I would have decreed that you be ostracized, but what can I do to you? You nag God and He does your bidding, like a son who nags his father and his father does his bidding without reprimand. About you, the verse states: "Let your father and your mother be glad, and let her who bore you rejoice" (Proverbs 23:25).

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Why was Ĥoni asked to pray for rain?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

? Why did H^oni tell the people: "Go out and bring in the clay ovens used to roast the Paschal lambs, so that they will not dissolve"?

Bonus ? Why do you think rain didn't descend upon H^oni's first prayers?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Bonus ? H^oni said to God: "Master of the Universe, Your children have turned their faces toward me, as I am like a member of Your household." What did H^oni mean by these words?

? Why were the Jews of Jerusalem obliged to seek refuge from the city to the Temple Mount, on account of the rain?

? Why did H^oni tell the people "Go out and see if the Claimants' Stone has been washed away" when he was asked to pray so the rains would stop?

? Shimon ben Sheta^h wanted to pronounce a ban upon H^oni. What was his sin?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

? Why didn't Shimon ben Sheta^h at the end pronounce a ban upon H^oni?

Answer.1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? What was the greatness of Shimon ben Sheta^h?

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

! Grace: the gift you can't buy!

When You Believe lyrics by Stephen Schwartz

Many nights we pray
With no proof anyone could hear
In our hearts a hopeful song
We barely understood

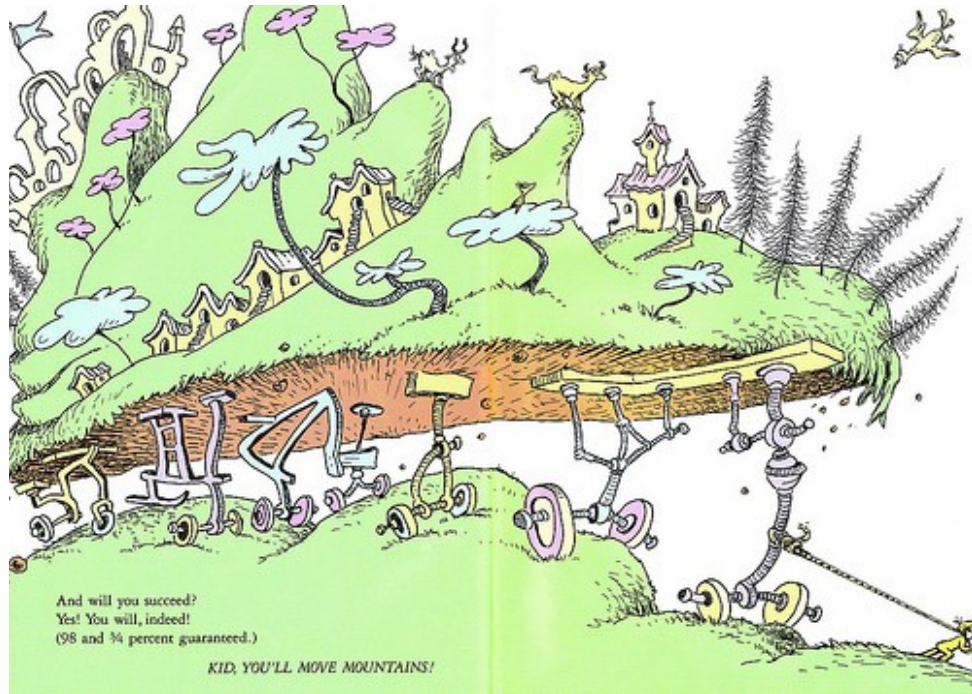
Now we are not afraid
Although we know there's much to fear
We were moving mountains long
Before we knew we could

There can be miracles
When you believe
Though hope is frail
It's hard to kill
Who knows what miracles

You can achieve
When you believe
Somehow you will
You will when you believe

! Who knows what miracles you can achieve, when you believe!

Kid, you'll move mountains! - If you don't believe in your own project, well, who else is going to?



Our story is about faith, but also about self-confidence, charisma, and leadership. Hōni has a gift and he knows it. His extreme self-confidence and audacious relationship with God seem to be intertwined and make Hōni a character who marches to the beat of a different drummer.

The average modern reader as well as Hōni's contemporaries feel uneasy witnessing Hōni's impertinence, and yet, he gets the job done and delivers. Shimon ben Shetaḥ embodies the formal authority, the rules, and the boundaries that shouldn't be crossed. He dislikes Hōni's *unorthodox* methods, and yet he knows they work, not because of the methods themselves but because of the specially endowed individual who embodies them.

Shimon ben Shetaḥ's greatness as a leader is to recognize that Hōni possesses a gift that cannot be learned or taught, or acquired through wealth

or influence. He also understands that the needs of the community take precedence over his own preferences and that there are exceptions to the rule, especially when dealing with exceptional circumstances and exceptional individuals.

Appendix 1: Tu B'shvat Tale: Honi Comes Full Circle for the Jewish Birthday of the Trees

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hRfV7XrGfBo>

Appendix 2: First Children: Caroline and John Jr. in the Kennedy White House

https://youtu.be/_ohUjrZiY6k

