

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [5]

The Fall of Rabbi Rehum (Insights into Babylonian Talmud Ketubot 62b)



Background to Our Story

Marital Rights

Exodus Chapter 21: 7-11

⁷ If a man sells his daughter as a servant, she is not to go free as male servants do.⁸ If she does not please the master who has selected her for himself, he must let her be redeemed. He has no right to sell her to foreigners, because he has broken faith with her. ⁹ If he selects her for his son, he must grant her the rights of a daughter.¹⁰ If he marries another woman, he must not deprive the first one of her food, clothing and marital rights.¹¹ If he does not provide her with these three things, she is to go free, without any payment of money.

Kosher Sex



<http://www.jewfaq.org/sex.htm>

Sex is the woman's right, not the man's. A man has a duty to give his wife sex regularly and to ensure that sex is pleasurable for her. He is also obligated to watch for signs that his wife wants sex, and to offer it to her without her asking for it. The woman's right to sexual intercourse is referred to as onah, and it is one of a wife's three basic rights (the others are food and clothing), which a husband may not reduce. The Talmud specifies both the quantity and quality of sex that a man must give his wife. It specifies the frequency of sexual obligation based on the husband's occupation, although this obligation can be modified in the [ketubah](#) (marriage contract). A man may not take a vow to abstain from sex for an extended period of time, and may not take a journey for an extended period of time, because that would deprive his wife of sexual relations. In addition, a husband's consistent refusal to engage in sexual relations is grounds for compelling a man to [divorce](#) his wife, even if the couple has already fulfilled the [halakhic](#) obligation to procreate.

Although sex is the woman's right, she does not have absolute discretion to withhold it from her husband. A woman may not withhold sex from her husband as a form of punishment, and if she does, the husband may divorce her without paying the substantial divorce settlement provided for in the [ketubah](#).

Frequency of Conjugal Duty

Mishnah Ketubot 5:6

MISHNA With regard to one who vows that his wifeⁿ may not derive benefit from marital relations^h with him, Beit Shammai say: He may maintain this situation for up to **two weeks**, but beyond that he must divorce her and give her the payment for her marriage contract. Beit Hillel say: He must divorce her if it continues beyond **one week**.

Apropos the husband's obligation to his wife regarding marital relations, the Gemara mentions other aspects of this issue: **Students may leave** their homes and travel in order to **learn Torah without** their wives' permission for up to **thirty days**, and **laborers** may leave their homes without their wives' permission for up to **one week**. The **set interval** defining the frequency of a husband's conjugal obligation to his wife **stated in the Torah** (see Exodus 21:10),^h unless the couple stipulated otherwise, varies according to the man's occupation and proximity to his home: **Men of leisure**, who do not work, must engage in marital relations **every day**, **laborers** must do so **twice a week**, **donkey drivers** once a week, **camel drivers** once every thirty days, and **sailors** once every six months. This is the statement of Rabbi Eliezer.

Babylonian Talmud Ketubot 62b

§ When is the ideal time for Torah scholars to fulfill their conjugal obligations?^h Rav Yehuda said that Shmuel said: The appropriate time for them is from Shabbat eve to Shabbat eve, i.e., on Friday nights. Similarly, it is stated with regard to the verse "that brings forth its fruit in its season" (Psalms 1:3): Rav Yehuda said, and some say that it was Rav Huna, and some say that it was Rav Nahman: This is referring to one who engages in marital relations, bringing forth his fruit, from Shabbat eve to Shabbat eve.

Babylonian Talmud Ketubot 62b

§ The mishna stated: For sailors, the set interval for conjugal relations is once every six months. This is the statement of Rabbi Eliezer. Rav Berona said that Rav said: The *halakha* is in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi Eliezer. Rav Adda bar Ahava said that Rav said: This is the statement of Rabbi Eliezer, but the Rabbis say: Students may leave^h their homes to study Torah for as long as two or three years without permission from their wives. Rava said: The Sages relied on Rabbi Adda bar Ahava's opinion and performed an action like this themselves,ⁿ but the results were sometimes fatal.

Women's Tears and the Power of Tears (Bava Metzia 59a)

"Rav said: A man should always be careful about distressing his wife, for since her tears are close at hand [the punishment for] distressing her is near."

"Rabbi Elazar said: From the day the Temple was destroyed the gates of prayer have been locked, as it is said: "Also when I cry and shout, He shuts out my prayer." But even though the gates of prayer have been locked, the gates of tears have not been locked, as it is said: "Hear my prayer, Lord, and give ear to my cry. You will not hold Your peace at my tears."

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Ketubot 62b)

פִּי הָא דָּרַב רַחֲמוּמִי הָוָה שְׂכִיחַ קַמִּיה דְּרַבָּא בְּמַחֲזֵזָא. הָוָה רַגִּיל דְּהוּוּ אֶתִּי לְבֵיתִיה כֹּל מַעְלֵי יוֹמָא דְּכִיפּוּרִי. יוֹמָא חַד מְשַׁכְּתִיה לְשִׁמְעָתָא, הָוָה מְסַכְּיָא דְּבֵיתָהּ: הֲשַׁמָּא אֶתִּי, הֲשַׁמָּא אֶתִּי. לֹא אֶתָּא. חָלַשׁ דְּעָתָה, אֶחֱתִית דְּמַעְתָּא מְעִינָה. הָוָה יְתִיב בְּאִיגְרָא – אֶפְחִית אִיגְרָא מִתּוֹתִיהּ, וְנָח נַפְּ שִׂיָּה :

As it is related about Rav Reḥumi, who would commonly study before Rava in Meḥoza: He was accustomed to come back to his home every year on the eve of Yom Kippur.

One day he was particularly engrossed in the *halakha* he was studying, and so he remained in the study hall and did not go home.

His wife was expecting him and continually said to herself: Now he is coming, now he is coming. But in the end, he did not come.

She was distressed and a tear fell from her eye. At that exact moment, Rav Reḥumi was sitting on the roof. The roof collapsed under him and he died.



Explaining the Story - What's going on in our story? (The sequence of events)

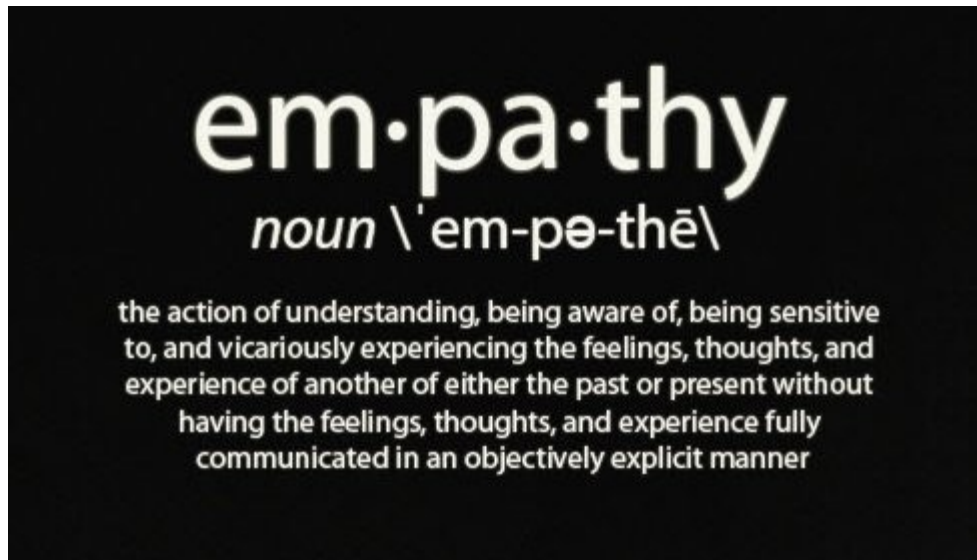
Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? What was the frequency of marital duties established by Rav Reĥumi, and his wife?

? How do we know that there was an agreement between them on the frequency of marital duties?

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

! The importance and impact of empathy (or lack of thereof): ignore it at your own peril!



In our story, we see that lack of empathy on behalf of Rav Reĥumi, brings lack of mercy on behalf of God. Rav Reĥumi's wife was holding her tears while God was holding the punishment. The journey of the one tear falling down is Rav Reĥumi's journey down as well.

In a different, albeit related reading of our story, Rav Reĥumi is presented as an adulterous man, who finds tremendous pleasure in his study and leaves his wife behind; not unlike many of us, who often prioritize the excitement of our profession, our study, and our hobbies, over the relationship with our

spouses and children, laden with the minutia of our daily routine and the mundane obligations. Our story reminds us that when you follow your passions to the end you will end paying a price, perhaps a heavy one. While many times it is difficult to strike a balance, working on our empathy seems to be the key to avoid Rav Reĥumi's fall.

Analysis by Rabbi Guido Cohen

Again there is that peculiar moment, but this time with a tragic result. The first thing that stands out when we read this story is the name of the sage who authorized the disciples to stay away from home for two or three years: Ada bar Ahava, that is, Ada Son of Love. Evidently we are confronted with one of those sharp ironies that are so common in Talmudic discourse. The person who authorizes the students to leave their wives for their books is called the "son of love." Nevertheless, this story contains a rather sharply pointed criticism of the sages. It may be comparable in some way to the criticism that the Tractate Kiddushin makes of Plimo and his white, pure religiosity. In this case, the attack is not directed against religiosity but against those who dedicate their life to study. Certainly, Jewish tradition is very emphatic when it comes to enunciating the precept of Talmud Torah (studying Torah), but everything has its limits. And Rav Rechumi seems to be ignorant of or perhaps to defy those limits. The discussion or teaching that kept him in the Beth Midrash is so anecdotal that the narrator does not even want to spend his energy on telling us its contents. Nothing is important next to what Rav Rechumi was leaving aside. Returning home, or as the ambiguity of Talmudic Aramaic permits us to translate it, returning to his wife was more important than any discussion that took place in Rabbah's academy. His wife was still waiting, of course, trusting that her husband would not disappoint her, but when the wait became prolonged she could not keep from crying. And the tears that Rechumi's wife shed over her husband's absence caused the fall and ensuing death of this man, who chose not to return home because he found study more appealing. The stronghold of Plimo was inside the four walls of his home, and the refuge of Rechumi was in the letters of the books in the Beth Midrash. Both leave during the eve of Yom Kippur, abandoning the places that they never chose to abandon. In the case of Rechumi, delay is transformed into a lethal element. Whoever wrote this Midrash does not hesitate to criticize a man who aspires to attain erudition even when that involves renouncing wisdom. The household of Rechumi weeps over the absence of this man, who has not visited his wife for a year but instead of hastening to meet her elects to spend a few more minutes studying. The advice of Rav Ada, "son of love," ends up destroying the love between Rechumi and his wife and thus depriving Rechumi of his wife, his home, and his life. The power of tears is even stronger than the merit of the last paragraph of some text that delayed the return of the studious ignoramus. And whoever tells us the story, perhaps familiar with the vain promises we are apt to make on important days, takes away from Rav Rechumi the possibility of spending Yom Kippur at home, close to his family, and promising again to be present more during the next year. Rav Rechumi does not arrive in time to recite the Kol Nidre and try to renounce the vow to visit his children more often, which he may have made to them the past year. The disciple of the sages has no opportunity to beat his breast and ask forgiveness or to cry out for his King and Father to free him. He had until the last few hours to repent and thus manage to reach the Day of Atonement with some opportunity, but when his wife started to weep, the time of grace had expired.