

From the Rabbi's Desk
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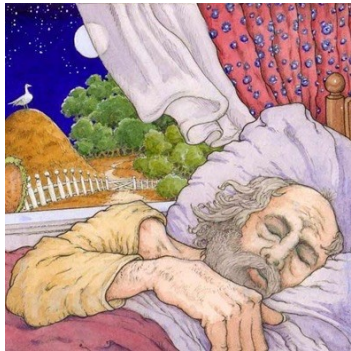
Stories with a Twist [50]

Either Friendship or Death!

(Insights into the Babylonian Talmud, Taanit 23a)

A Tu B'Shvat Story

(Revised: February 2020)



Background to Our Story

Honi (or Choni) HaM'agel (Honi 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.

Carob Tree



Carobs



The Text: Babylonian Talmud, Taanit 23a

אמר רבי יוחנן: כל ימיו של אותו צדיק, היה מצטער על מקרא זה: "שיר המעלות: בשוב ה' את שבת ציון, היינו פחלמים". אמר: מי איפא דגיים שבועין שגין בתלמא?

יזמא חד הוה אזל באורחא, תזייה להווא גברא דהוה נטע חרובא. אמר ליה: האי עד כמה שגין טעין? אמר ליה: עד שבועין שגין. אמר ליה: פשיטא לך דתניית שבועין שגין? אמר ליה: האי גברא עלמא בתרובא אשפחתיה. פי היכי דשתלי לי אבהתי, שתלי גמי לבראי.

יתיב קא כריך ריפתא. אתא ליה שינתא גים. אהדרא ליה משוניתא איפסי מעינא, ונים שבועין שגין. פי קם, תזייה להווא גברא דהוה קא מלקט מינייהו. אמר ליה: אתה הוא דשתלתי? אמר ליה: בר בריה אנא. אמר ליה: שמע מינה דגיימי שבועין שגין. תזא לתמריה דאתילידא ליה רמכי רמכי.

אזל לביתיה אמר להו: בריה דחוני המעגל מי קיים? אמרו ליה: בריה ליתא, בר בריה איתא. אמר להו: אנא חוני המעגל. לא הימנוהו.

אזל לבית המדרש שמעינהו לרבנן דקאמרי: גהירנן שמעתתין כבשגנ חוני המעגל, דכי הוי עייל לבית מדרשא פל קושניא דהוה להו לרבנן הוה מפרק להו. אמר להו: אנא גיהו, ולא הימנוהו, ולא עבדי ליה יקרא כדמבעי ליה. חלש דעתיה, בעי רחמי, ומית.

אמר רבא, היינו דאמרי אינשי: או תברותא או מיתותא.

Rabbi Yoĥanan said: All the days of the life of that righteous man, Ĥoni, he was distressed over the meaning of this verse: "A song of Ascents: When the Lord brought back those who returned to Zion, we were like those who dream" (Psalms 126:1). He said to himself: Is there really a person who can sleep and dream for seventy years?

One day, he was walking along the road when he saw a certain man planting a carob tree. Ĥoni said to him: This tree, after how many years will it bear fruit? The man said to him: It will not produce fruit until seventy years have passed. Ĥoni said to him: Is it obvious to you that you will live seventy years, that you expect to benefit from this tree?

He said to him: I found a world full of carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted for me, I too am planting for my descendants.

Ĥoni sat and ate bread. Sleep overcame him and he slept. A cliff formed around him, and he disappeared from sight and slept for seventy years. When he awoke, he saw a certain man gathering carobs from that tree. Ĥoni said to him: Are you the one who planted this tree? The man said to him: I am his son's son. Ĥoni said to him: I can learn from this that I have slept for seventy years, and indeed he saw that his donkey had sired several herds during those many years.

Ĥoni went home and said to the members of the household: Is the son of Ĥoni HaMe'aggel alive?

They said to him: His son is no longer with us, but his son's son is alive. He said to them: I am Ĥoni HaMe'aggel. They did not believe him.

He went to the study hall, where he heard the Sages say about one scholar: His *halakhot* are as enlightening and as clear as in the years of Ĥoni HaMe'aggel, for when Ĥoni HaMe'aggel would enter the study hall he would resolve for the Sages any difficulty they had.

Ĥoni said to them: I am he, but they did not believe him and did not pay him proper respect.

Ĥoni became very upset, prayed for mercy, and died.

Rava said: This explains the folk saying that people say: Either friendship or death.



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

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Why do you think Honi asked the man how long it takes the carob tree to bear fruit?

? What did Honi imply by questioning if the man was certain he would live another seventy years?

Bonus ? What do you think about the man's reply to Honi?

? By now you should be familiar with Honi's background. How can you explain why he slept for 70 years?

? What do you think was the purpose of Honi's long sleep?

? Why do you think a rocky formation enclosed Honi and kept him out of sight while he slept for 70 years?

? When Honi arose from his sleep, he saw a man gathering the fruit of the carob tree, and he asked him if he was the man who planted the tree? What do you think prompted Honi to ask that question?

Bonus ? Why do you think Honi inquired if his son was still alive?

? Why didn't people believe Honi when he revealed his identity to them after his long sleep?

? What prompted Honi to exclaim "I am he!" when he overheard the scholars say: "His *halakhot* are as enlightening and as clear as in the years of Honi HaMe'aggel"?

? Why did Honi pray for mercy (to die)?

? Why do you think God answered Honi's prayer and let him die?

? How do you understand the saying: "either friendship or death"?

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

! Two Jewels from the Talmudic wisdom:

- "Just as my ancestors planted for me, I too am planting for my descendants!" - Intergenerational responsibility or when the project doesn't start and end with you!
- "Either friendship or death" – In praise of friendship!

! One Story - Three lessons

- Honi's story: The tragic end of a "magical" man, or "when success doesn't pay" or "when life is not a life!"
- Honi, you may not want to hear it, but life goes on without you!
- The loneliness of the winner!



In this story, Honi, a miracle worker, learns a few lessons from the most unlikely people. An old farmer reminds him that our mission in life transcends us. Others planted for us and so it is our responsibility to plant for others. Honi also learns the hard way that life in solitude is not a life worth living. When you make it all the way to the top, you will be there alone. Those who overcome death, live a life of loneliness and despair.¹

We grow and thrive nurtured by the love of family members and friends who know us and care for us. We are also shaped by the relationships we form. Once these relationships are gone, we wither, both physically and emotionally.

Moreover, Honi encounters one of the most difficult lessons to be learned: that life continues without us. Yes, we may feel special and we might even be special, but when we are not here, life will continue without us, the same way life continued while Honi was taking his long nap.

¹ The Lord of the Rings, begins with Bilbo's "eleventy-first" (111th) birthday, 60 years after the beginning of The Hobbit. Bilbo has kept the magic ring, with no idea of its significance, all that time; it has prolonged his life, leaving him feeling "thin and stretched".

"Yes, I am. I feel I need a holiday, a very long holiday, as I have told you before. Probably a permanent holiday: I don't expect I shall return.... I am old, Gandalf. I don't look it, but I am beginning to feel it in my heart of hearts. Well-preserved indeed!" he snorted. 'Why, I feel all thin, sort of stretched, if you know what I mean: like butter that has been scraped over too much bread. That can't be right. I need a change, or something.' ~ Bilbo Baggins, The Fellowship of the Ring by J.R.R. Tolkien.