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## Stories with a Twist [52]

### Does Master Not Have Mercy on the Poor? Insights into the Babylonian Talmud, Moed Katan 28a Revised November 2022



### Background to Our Story

#### Rabbi Hiyya



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Berakhot. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 272.

Rabbi Hiyya ben Abba from the city of Kafri in Babylonia was among the last *tanna'im*, a colleague-disciple of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi. Rabbi Hiyya descended from a family of distinguished lineage that traced its ancestry back to King David and produced many Sages. While he was still in Babylonia, Rabbi Hiyya was considered a Torah luminary. When he ascended to Eretz Yisrael from Babylonia with his family, some, engaging in hyperbole, said that the Torah was about to be forgotten until he came from Babylonia and reestablished it. When he came to Eretz Yisrael, he became a disciple and a colleague of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, with whom he had a very close relationship. He was especially close to Rabbi's son, Shimon, who was also his business partner.

Rabbi Hiyya was among the prominent Torah scholars in his generation and was the right hand man of his nephew, Rav, who, although he was known as the Rabbi of all Israel, received certain traditions from Rabbi Hiyya. In addition to his prominence as a Torah scholar, Rabbi Hiyya was outstanding in his piety, as reflected in several anecdotes throughout the Talmud.

His most significant project was the redaction he did together with his own colleague-disciple, Rabbi Oshaya, of an anthology of external *mishnayot* to complement the Mishna redacted by Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi. Their anthology was considered to be most authoritative, to the point that it was said that any *baraita* that was not reviewed by them is unfit to enter the study hall. Some believe that he edited the *Tosefta*.

Apparently, upon his arrival in Eretz Yisrael, he received financial support from the house of the *Nasi*; however, his primary livelihood was from international trade, primarily of silk. He had twin daughters, Pazi and Tavi, who were the matriarchs of significant families of Torah scholars. He also had twin sons, Yehuda, the son-in-law of Rabbi Yannai, and H̄izkiya. Both were among the leading Torah scholars in the transitional generation between *tanna'im* and *amora'im*, and they apparently replaced him at the head of his private yeshiva in the city of his residence, Tiberias. All of the students of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi were his friends, and he was even close with the *tanna* Rabbi Shimon ben H̄alafta. The younger students of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, Rabbi H̄anina, Rabbi Oshaya, Rabbi Yannai, and others, studied Torah from him and were, to a certain degree, his students as well.

His brothers' sons, Rabba bar H̄ana, and above all, the great *amora*, Rav, were his primary disciples. He also appears as a central character in the *Zohar*.

Rabbi H̄iyya was buried in Tiberias and later his two sons were buried beside him.

## The Angel of Death



The angel sent by God to bring about death is known as malakh ha-mavet in Hebrew. There are no references in the Bible to a specific angel of death but the concept is found frequently in rabbinic literature and in Jewish folklore.

In the latter, for instance, the practice of pouring out all the water in pots and so forth when a death occurs is said to be based on the belief of that the Angel of Death dips his sword in the water and poisons it. Maimonides (Guide of the Perplexed, 3. 22) demythologizes the concept, understanding it as the life-denying, evil force that lurks in the human psyche. Maimonides quotes with much approval the Talmudic saying (tractate [Bava Batra16a](#)) that Satan, the evil inclination, and the Angel of Death are one and the same. In Yiddish slang a man with destructive tendencies or one who is always running down others is called an Angel of Death.



<http://www.wikipedia.org>

According to the Midrash, the angel of death was created by God on the first day. His dwelling is in Heaven, whence he reaches earth in eight flights, whereas pestilence reaches it in one. He has twelve wings. "Over all people have I surrendered thee the power," said God to the angel of death, "only not over this one which has received freedom from death through the Law". It is said of the angel of death that he is full of eyes. In the hour of death he stands at the head of the departing one with a drawn sword, to which clings a drop of gall. As soon as the dying man sees the angel, he is seized with a convulsion and opens his mouth, whereupon the angel throws the drop into it. This drop causes his death; he turns putrid, and his face becomes yellow. The expression "to taste of death" originated in the idea that death was caused by a drop of gall.

Talmud teachers of the fourth century associate quite familiarly with him. When he appeared to one on the street, the teacher reproached him with rushing upon him as upon a beast; whereupon the angel called upon him at his house. To another he granted a respite of thirty days, that he might put his knowledge in order before entering the next world. To a third he had no access, because he could not interrupt the study of the Talmud. To a fourth he showed a rod of fire, whereby he is recognized as the angel of death (M. K. 28a). He often entered the house of Bibi and

conversed with him (Ḥag. 4b). Often he resorts to strategy in order to interrupt and seize his victim (B. M. 86a; Mak. 10a).

The death of Joshua ben Levi in particular is surrounded with a web of fable. When the time came for him to die and the angel of death appeared to him, he demanded to be shown his place in paradise. When the angel had consented to this, he demanded the angel's knife, that the angel might not frighten him by the way. This request also was granted him, and Joshua sprang with the knife over the wall of paradise; the angel, who is not allowed to enter paradise, caught hold of the end of his garment. Joshua swore that he would not come out, and God declared that he should not leave paradise unless he was absolved from his oath; if not absolved, he was to remain. The angel of death then demanded back his knife, but Joshua refused. At this point a heavenly voice ("bat kol") rang out: "Give him back the knife, because the children of men have need of it" (Ket. 77b; Jellinek, l.c. ii. 48-51; Bacher, l.c. i. 192 et seq.).

The Rabbis found the angel of death mentioned in Psalms lxxxix. 45 (A. V. 48), where the Targum translates: "There is no man who lives and, seeing the angel of death, can deliver his soul from his hand". Eccl. viii. 4 is thus explained in Midrash Rabbah to the passage: "One may not escape the angel of death, nor say to him, 'Wait until I put my affairs in order,' or 'There is my son, my slave: take him in my stead.'" Where the angel of death appears there is no remedy (Talmud, Ned. 49a; Hul. 7b). If one who has sinned has confessed his fault, the angel of death may not touch him (Midrash Tanhuma, ed. Buber, 139). God protects from the angel of death (Midrash Genesis Rabbah lxviii.).

By acts of benevolence the anger of the angel of death is overcome; when one fails to perform such acts the angel of death will make his appearance (Derek Erez Zuṭa, viii.). The angel of death receives his order from God (Ber. 62b). As soon as he has received permission to destroy, however, he makes no distinction between good and bad (B. K. 60a).

### **The Text: Babylonian Talmud, Moed Katan 28a**

רַבִּי חֵיִיָּא לֹא הָוּה מְצִי לְמִיקְרָבָא לִיהּ.  
יּוֹמָא חַד אִידְמִי לִיהּ כְּעַנְיָא, אֲתָא טְרִיף אַבְבָּא, אָמַר לִיהּ: אֲפִיק לִי רִיפְתָּא.  
אֲפִיקוּ לִיהּ. אָמַר לִיהּ: וְלָאוּ קָא מְרַחֵם מִן אַעֲנִיָּא? אֵהָוּא גְּבָרָא אֲמַאי לֹא קָא מְרַחֵם מִן? גְּלִי  
לִיהּ, אַחֲוֵי לִיהּ שׁוֹטָא דְנִנְרָא, אֲמַצִּי לִיהּ נְפִשִׁיהּ.

The Angel of Death could not come near Rabbi Ḥiyya.

One day the Angel of Death appeared to him as a poor person. He came and knocked on the door. He said to Rabbi Ḥiyya: Bring out bread for me, and he took out bread for him.

The Angel of Death then said to Rabbi Ḥiyya: Master, do you not have mercy on a poor person? Why, then, do you not have mercy upon that man?

The Angel of Death then revealed his identity to him, and showed him a fiery rod.

At this point Rav Ḥiyya surrendered himself to him.



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

### Comprehension and Analysis Questions

**?** Why did the Angel of Death want to come near Rabbi Hiyya?

**Bonus ?** Why couldn't the Angel of Death approach him?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

**Bonus ?** Why did Rabbi Hiyya bring out bread to the Angel of Death?

**Bonus ?** What kind of question is "Master, do you not have mercy on a poor person?"

**?** Who is "that man" in the question "Why does Rabbi Hiyya not have mercy on "that man"?"

**Bonus ?** Why doesn't Rabbi Hiyya have mercy on "that man"?

**Bonus ?** Why isn't the real name of "that man" used?

**Extra Bonus ?** Do you know of anybody else that is referred by the same appellative in rabbinic literature?

**?** What is the point the Angel of Death tries to convey to Rabbi Hiyya?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

**?** Why does Rabbi Hiyya surrender himself to the Angel of Death?

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

**!** How far are you ready to carry on and to live (and die) for the values you preach? Or "When what is required from you is more than bread."



In our short story the Angel of Death is charged with taking Rabbi Hiyya, but he is unsuccessful in his mission due to the Rabbi Hiyya's great piety.

The Angel of Death, after highlighting the kindness of Rabbi Hiyya to the poor, asks for the same kindness towards him, a simple messenger with a job to do.

Rabbi Hiyya takes the kindness that characterized him throughout his life to the ultimate extreme and surrenders himself to the Angel of Death, thus dying by the same values he lived on.