

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [57]

The Matter Depends Only On Me! Insights into Babylonian Talmud, Avoda Zarah 17a

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Background to Our Story

Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi (also known as "Rabbi")



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Sanhedrin Part 1. Koren publishers
Jerusalem

Rabbi closed the tannaitic period with his arrangement of the Mishna. The son of Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel II, and a seventh-generation descendant of Hillel the Elder, Rabbi Yehuda lived in 135–220 CE during the fifth, and last, generation of tanna'im. According to tradition, Rabbi Yehuda was born on the day of Rabbi Akiva's death, leading people to later proclaim: "the sun sets, and the sun rises" (Ecclesiastes 1:5). Indeed, Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi was a successor to Rabbi Akiva, who had begun to assemble the statements of the Oral Law into a format that later became the Mishna. During his youth, Rabbi Yehuda studied under the five great students of Rabbi Akiva: Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yehuda bar Elai, Rabbi Yosei, Rabbi Shimon, and Rabbi Elazar. In addition, he learned Torah from his father Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel. In an effort to collect all the statements of the previous generations, Rabbi Yehuda moved from yeshiva to yeshiva, obtaining most of his knowledge from Rabbi Ya'akov bar Krashai. The wide breadth of his learning and his position as Nasi, to which he was appointed at age thirty upon his father's death, gave him the standing to undertake the greatest Torah enterprise of the era, the compilation of the Mishna. Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi surrounded himself with the most prominent Sages of his time, who assisted him in establishing the accuracy of the corpus he wanted to produce. Fortunately for him, the relative political calm of the time, and his favorable relationship with the Roman government, permitted the development of such an ambitious project. Due to his position as head of the community, the Mishna of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi was universally accepted, and earlier and other collections of halakha were set aside. This phenomenon unified the nation,

as all of the Jewish people began to study the identical corpus of Oral Law. Due to poor health in his later years, Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi moved to Tzipori. His students were the Sages of the first generation of amora'im, including Rabbi Yoĥanan, Rabbi Ĥiyya, bar Kappara and Rav. The Gemara reports (Gittin 59a) that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi was the first individual since Moses to have such a broad mastery of Torah, and his great scholarship led him to be referred to in the Talmud as simply: Rabbi, or: Our holy Rabbi.

Denarius (plural: denarii)



The Roman currency system included the denarius (plural: *denarii*) after 211 BC, a small silver coin, and it was the most common coin produced for circulation.

It is problematic to give even rough comparative values for money from before the 20th century, due to vastly different types of products and of the impossibility of making an accurate price index based on vastly different spending proportions. Classical historians regularly say that in the late Roman Republic and early Roman Empire the daily wage for an unskilled laborer and common soldier was 1 denarius without tax, or about US\$20 in bread.

Olam Ha-Ba: The Afterlife



<http://www.jewfaq.org>

Traditional Judaism firmly believes that death is not the end of human existence. However, because Judaism is primarily focused on life here and now rather than on the afterlife, Judaism does not have much dogma about the afterlife, and leaves a great deal of room for personal opinion. It is possible for an Orthodox Jew to believe that the souls of the righteous dead go to a place similar to the Christian heaven, or that they are reincarnated through many lifetimes, or that they simply wait until the coming of the messiah, when they will be resurrected. Likewise, Orthodox Jews can believe that the souls of the wicked are tormented by demons of their own creation, or that wicked souls are simply destroyed at death, ceasing to exist.

Biblical References to the Afterlife

Some scholars claim that belief in the afterlife is a teaching that developed late in Jewish history. It is true that the Torah emphasizes immediate, concrete, physical rewards and punishments rather than abstract future ones. See, for example, Lev. 26:3-9 and Deut. 11:13-15. However, there is clear evidence in the Torah of belief in existence after death. The Torah indicates in several places that the righteous will be reunited with their loved ones after death, while the wicked will be excluded from this reunion.

Olam Ha-Ba: The World to Come

The spiritual afterlife is referred to in Hebrew as Olam Ha-Ba, the World to Come, although this term is also used to refer to the messianic age. The Olam Ha-Ba is another, higher state of being.

The Talmud states that all Israel has a share in the Olam Ha-Ba. However, not all "shares" are equal. A particularly righteous person will have a greater share in the Olam Ha-Ba than the average person. In addition, a person can lose his share through wicked actions. There are many statements in the Talmud that a particular mitzvah will guarantee a person a place in the Olam Ha-Ba, or that a particular sin will lose a person's share in the Olam Ha-Ba, but these are generally regarded as hyperbole, excessive expressions of approval or disapproval.

Some people look at these teachings and deduce that Jews try to "earn our way into Heaven" by performing the mitzvot. This is a gross mischaracterization of our religion. It is important to remember that unlike some religions, Judaism is not focused on the question of how to get into heaven. Judaism is focused on life and how to live it. Non-Jews frequently ask me, "do you really think you're going to go to Hell if you don't do such-and-such?" It always catches me a bit off balance, because the question of where I am going after death simply doesn't enter into the equation when I think about the mitzvot. We perform the mitzvot because it is our privilege and our sacred obligation to do so. We perform them out of a sense of love and duty, not out of a desire to get something in return. In fact, one of the first bits of ethical advice in Pirkei Avot (a book of the Mishnah) is: "Be not like servants who serve their master for the sake of receiving a reward; instead, be like servants who serve their master not for the sake of receiving a reward, and let the awe of Heaven [meaning G-d, not the afterlife] be upon you."

Nevertheless, we definitely believe that your place in the Olam Ha-Ba is determined by a merit system based on your actions, not by who you are or what religion you profess. In addition, we definitely believe that humanity is capable of being considered righteous in G-d's eyes, or at least good enough to merit paradise after a suitable period of purification.

Do non-Jews have a place in Olam Ha-Ba? Although there are a few statements to the contrary in the Talmud, the predominant view of Judaism is that the righteous of all nations have a share in the Olam Ha-Ba. Statements to the contrary were not based on the notion that membership in Judaism was required to get into Olam Ha-Ba, but were grounded in the observation that non-Jews were not righteous people. If you consider the behavior of the surrounding peoples at the time that the Talmud was written, you can understand the rabbis' attitudes. By the time of Rambam, the belief was firmly entrenched that the righteous of all nations have a share in the Olam Ha-Ba.

The Text: Babylonian Talmud, Avoda Zarah 17a

אָמְרוּ עָלָיו עַל רַבִּי אֱלֵעָזָר בֶּן דִּוְרֵינָא שֶׁלֹּא הִנִּיחַ זִוְנָה אַחַת בְּעוֹלָם שֶׁלֹּא בָּא עָלֶיהָ. פַּעַם אַחַת שָׁמַע שְׂיֵשׁ זִוְנָה אַחַת בְּכַרְכֵּי הַיָּם וְהִיתָה נוֹשֶׁלֶת פִּיס דִּינְרִין בְּשַׁכְרָה, נָטַל פִּיס דִּינְרִין וְהִלֵּךְ וְעָבַר עָלֶיהָ שְׂבָעָה נְהָרוֹת. בְּשַׁעַת הַרְגָּל דְּבַר הַפִּיחָה, אָמְרָה: כָּשֵׁם שֶׁהַפִּיחָה זֶה אֵינָה חוֹזְרַת לְמַקּוּמָהּ, כִּד אֱלֵעָזָר בֶּן דִּוְרֵינָא אִין מְקַבְּלִין אוֹתוֹ בְּתַשׁוּבָה.

הִלֵּךְ וַיֵּשֶׁב בֵּין שְׁנֵי הָרִים וַיְגַבְעוֹת, אָמַר: הָרִים וַיְגַבְעוֹת, בִּקְשׁוּ עָלַי רַחֲמִים! אָמְרוּ לוֹ: עַד שְׂאֲנוּ מִבְּקָשִׁים עָלֶיךָ, נִבְקַשׁ עַל עַצְמָנוּ, שְׂאֲנוֹמֵר: "כִּי הָהָרִים יִמּוּשׁוּ וְהַגְּבָעוֹת תִּמּוּטְיִנָה."

אָמַר: שְׂמִים וְאַרְץ, בִּקְשׁוּ עָלַי רַחֲמִים! אָמְרוּ: עַד שְׂאֲנוּ מִבְּקָשִׁים עָלֶיךָ, נִבְקַשׁ עַל עַצְמָנוּ, שְׂאֲנוֹמֵר: "כִּי שְׂמִים כְּעֵשׂוֹן נִמְלָחוּ וְהָאָרֶץ כְּבָגַד תִּבְלָה."

אָמַר: חֲמָה וְלִבְנָה, בִּקְשׁוּ עָלַי רַחֲמִים! אָמְרוּ לוֹ: עַד שְׂאֲנוּ מִבְּקָשִׁים עָלֶיךָ, נִבְקַשׁ עַל עַצְמָנוּ, שְׂאֲנוֹמֵר: "וְיַחְפְּרָה הַלִּבְנָה וּבּוֹשָׁה הַחֲמָה."

אָמַר: פּוֹכְבִּים וּמְזֻלוֹת, בְּקִשׁוֹ עָלַי רַחֲמִים! אָמְרוּ לוֹ: עַד שְׂאֲנוּ מִבְּקָשִׁים עָלֶיךָ, גְּבַקֵּשׁ עַל עַצְמָנוּ, שְׂנֵאֲמַר: "וְנִמְקוּ כָּל צָבָא הַשָּׁמַיִם".

אָמַר: אֵינִי הַדְּבָר תְּלוּי אֱלֹא בִּי. הַנִּיחַ רֵאשׁוּ בֵּין בְּרַכְיוֹ וְגַעַה בְּבִכְיָה עַד שִׁיצְתָה גִּשְׁמָתוֹ. יִצְתָה בַּת קוֹל וְאָמְרָה: רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן דוּרְדַיָּא מְזוּמָן לְחַיֵּי הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא.

בָּכָה רַבִּי וְאָמַר: יֵשׁ קוֹנָה עוֹלָמוֹ בְּכִמְהָ שָׁנִים, וְיֵשׁ קוֹנָה עוֹלָמוֹ בְּשָׁעָה אַחַת. וְאָמַר רַבִּי: לֹא דִיּוּן לְבַעֲלֵי תְּשׁוּבָה שְׂמַקְבְּלִין אוֹתָן, אֱלֹא שְׂקוּרִין אוֹתָן "רַבִּי".

They said about Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaiya that he did not leave one prostitute in the world with whom he did not engage in sexual intercourse.

Once, he heard that there was one prostitute in one of the cities overseas who would take a purse full of dinars as her payment. He took a purse full of dinars and went and crossed seven rivers to reach her. When they were engaged in the matters to which they were accustomed, she passed wind and said: Just as this passed wind will not return to its place, so too Elazar ben Durdaiya will not be accepted in repentance.

This statement deeply shocked Elazar ben Durdaiya, and he went and sat between two mountains and hills and said: Mountains and hills, pray for mercy on my behalf, so that my repentance will be accepted. They said to him: Before we pray for mercy on your behalf, we must pray for mercy on our own behalf, as it is stated: "For the mountains may depart, and the hills be removed" (Isaiah 54:10).

He [Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaiya] said: Heaven and earth, pray for mercy on my behalf. They said to him: Before we pray for mercy on your behalf, we must pray for mercy on our own behalf, as it is stated: "For the heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall wax old like a garment" (Isaiah 51:6).

He [Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaiya] said: Sun and moon, pray for mercy on my behalf. They said to him: Before we pray for mercy on your behalf, we must pray for mercy on our own behalf, as it is stated: "Then the moon shall be confounded, and the sun ashamed" (Isaiah 24:23).

He [Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaiya] said: Stars and constellations, pray for mercy on my behalf. They said to him: Before we pray for mercy on your behalf, we must pray for mercy on our own behalf, as it is stated: "And all the hosts of heaven shall molder away" (Isaiah 34:4).

Elazar ben Durdaiya said: the matter depends only on me. He placed his head between his knees and cried loudly until his soul left his body. A Divine Voice emerged and said: Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaiya is destined for life in the World-to-Come.

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When Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi heard this story of Elazar ben Durdaiya, he wept and said: There is one who acquires his share in the World-to-Come only after many years of toil, and there is one who acquires his share in the World-to-Come in one moment. And Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi further says: Not only are penitents accepted, but they are even called: Rabbi, as the Divine Voice referred to Elazar ben Durdaiya as Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaiya.



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

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

- ?** What is the beginning of our story telling us about Elazar ben Durdaiya?
- ?** "Once, he heard that there was one prostitute in one of the cities overseas who would take a purse full of dinars as her payment. He took a purse full of dinars and went and crossed seven rivers to reach her." What is this sentence adding to our story?
- ?** Why did the prostitute pass wind?

Extra Bonus ? “Just as this passed wind will not return to its place, so too Elazar ben Durdaiya will not be accepted in repentance.” Why did the prostitute say what she said?

? How do we know that Elazar ben Durdaiya’s repentance was accepted by God?

Bonus ? How do we know that Elazar ben Durdaiya’s repentance was accepted by the Sages?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Bonus ? Please explain Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi’s reaction at the end of our story.

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Extra Bonus ? What are the two points of inflection in our story?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Why do you think Elazar ben Durdaiya’s soul departed?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

Extra Bonus ? What do you think prompted Elazar ben Durdaiya’s change?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

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

! When the insight comes from someone who has nothing to lose, or to gain...

! Radical change: when the matter depends only on us!

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