

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [68]

Rabbi, Is This Not What I Told You - Do I Not Need to Return the Deposit to Its Owner?

Insights into Midrash Mishlei (Proverbs), ad 31:10

Revised June 2025



Background to Our Story

Rabbi Meir



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

60.

One of the greatest *tanna'im* of the generation that preceded the redaction of the Mishna. There is no clear information available concerning Rabbi Meir's parents, though it is told that he descended from a family of converts from the house of the Roman emperors.

His exceptional brilliance in Torah study was evident from a very early age, and he was a student of the two greatest scholars of the generation, Rabbi Yishmael and Rabbi Akiva. He was also the lone Sage who continued to study with Elisha ben Avuya, despite the latter's estrangement from Judaism. His primary teacher was Rabbi Akiva, who ordained him at a very young age, which is the reason that he was ordained a second time by Rabbi Yehuda ben Bava.

In recognition of his outstanding scholarship, Rabbi Meir was officially appointed *hakham*, literally, wise man, the third level below *nasi*, head of the Sanhedrin. The halakhic discussions between him and his colleagues Rabbi Yehuda, Rabbi Yosei, Rabbi Shimon, and Rabbi Elazar form one of the most important foundations of the Mishna.

Rabbi Meir's greatest undertaking appears to have been a structured, oral redaction of the Oral Law, including establishing specific formats for the *halakhot*. Apparently, Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi followed in Rabbi Meir's footsteps and incorporated his work in the Mishna. Consequently, it is a well-known principle that the author of an unattributed statement in the Mishna is Rabbi Meir, as the assumption is that this was one of the *mishnayot* he formulated.

Due to his involvement in the attempt to depose Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, the head of the Sanhedrin, he was punished by the latter, and for a long period his teachings were not cited in his name but were introduced with the words: Others say.

His private life was full of suffering. His two sons died during his lifetime, and his extraordinary wife Beruria also died in painful circumstances. Nevertheless, it is known that a daughter of his survived. He was eventually forced into exile to Asia Minor, where he died, with the order that his coffin be transferred to Eretz Yisrael and that he be temporarily interred on the shore of the sea whose waves reach the Holy Land.

Rabbi Meir was famous in his lifetime, not only for his sharp intellect, which exceeded that of all his peers, but also for his personal attributes, his efforts as a peacemaker, and his willingness to relinquish personal honor for the good of others. He was known as a magnificent public speaker. It is said that following his death, those who composed parables ceased. Several of his animal parables were repeated for many generations. He was also renowned as a miracle worker, and for many years a charity fund named after him, Rabbi Meir the Miracle Worker [*Ba'al HaNes*] served as the main source of funding for the Jews in Eretz Yisrael.

Berurya



[Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Pesahim Part 1. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 324.](#)

Berurya was the wife of the *tanna* Rabbi Meir and the daughter of the *tanna* Rabbi Ḥanina ben Teradyon, who was one of the ten martyrs. Berurya was renowned not only for her character and personality, but also for her extensive Torah knowledge. Her aptitude for Torah study exemplified her exceptional genius. She occasionally disagreed with several Sages of her generation, and the *halakha* was ruled in accordance with her opinion in certain disputes. As a result of decrees of persecution, nearly all of Berurya's family was martyred. Calamity continued to afflict her throughout her life. The Gemara relates how she conducted herself with exceptional courage when her two children died in a single day. From a story that is only alluded to in tractate *Avoda Zara* (18b) and explained in greater detail by Rashi, we know that her own death also came about in the wake of a series of painful events. Aside from a few halakhic statements, we find several places in the Talmud where Berurya's modest and considerate characteristics are manifest even through sharp responses to various people.

Havdalah



<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Havdalah>

Havdalah (meaning 'separation') is a Jewish religious ceremony that marks the symbolic end of Shabbat and holidays, and ushers in the new week. In Judaism, Shabbat ends—and the new week begins—at nightfall on Saturday. Havdalah may be recited as soon as three stars are visible in the night sky. Havdalah is normally recited over kosher wine or kosher grape juice, although other beverages (except for water) may be used if wine or grape juice are not available. On completion of the Shabbat, a special braided Havdalah candle with more than one wick is lit, and a prayer is recited, and it is customary to gaze at one's fingernails reflecting the light of the candle. Spices, often stored in a decorative spice container, are handed around so that everyone can smell the fragrance. In many Sephardi and Mizrahi communities, branches of aromatic plants are used for this purpose.

Ttziduk Ha-din (the Justification of Judgment)



<http://www.npr.org/programs/death/readings/spiritual/hammer.html>

Milton Steinberg, a brilliant rabbi who died at the age of forty-six, wrote of the way in which belief in the existence of God can enable one who is to die to take comfort:

Given God, everything becomes more precious, more to be loved and clung to, more embraceable; and yet at the same time easier to give up. For these belong to the universe and the God who stands behind it, I let go of them the more easily because I know that as parts of the divine economy they will not be lost. When they slip from my hands they will pass to hands better, stronger, and wiser than mine. For only when He is given, can we hold life at once infinitely precious and yet as a thing lightly to be surrendered.

This same belief can invest the recitation of the mourning blessing with the power to help us bear our grief.

The words recited at the burial are an elaboration on the same theme. Known as tziduk ha-din (the Justification of Judgment), they represent the willingness of the mourner to accept what has happened and not to challenge God's justice. The roots of this ceremony are to be found in the stories of Jewish martyrs who, at the hour of death, would recite verses indicating their belief in God despite what was happening to them.

The Rock!" His deeds are perfect, yea, all His ways are just (Deut. 32:4). When they apprehended Rabbi Hanina ben Teradion, he was condemned to be burned, together with his Torah scroll. When he was told of this, he recited this verse: The Rock!"His deeds are perfect.

This same verse is also interpreted to mean that Moses told Israel, "I do not tell you merely that He does not justify the guilty or punish the innocent, but that He does not even exchange one for the other. i.e., merit and guilt are not exchanged, but each deed is rewarded or punished appropriately. God's judgments are perfect. In view of these interpretations, it is no wonder that this same verse is the first to be recited in the burial service, which consists entirely of similar verses and verse fragments, together with explanations and poetic expansions, written in rhyming stanzas.

The Rock! "His deeds are perfect,
Yeah, all His ways are just;
A faithful God, never false,
True and upright is He (Deut. 32:4).
The Rock!" Perfect in all His deeds.
Who can say to Him, "What are You doing?
He rules what is below and what is above.
The Lord deals death and gives life,
Casts down into Sheol and raises up (1 Sam. 2:6).
The Rock! Perfect in all actions,
Who can say to Him, "What are You doing? (Eccles. 8:4).
He decrees and acts, freely acting faithfully toward us.
Because of the merit of him who was bound as a lamb,
listen and act! (Dan. 9:19).
Righteous in all His ways (Ps. 145:17).
The Rock! Perfect, long suffering, filled with mercy.

Have pity and mercy upon fathers and sons,
For forgiveness and mercy belong to You, O Master.

The *piyyut* continues in this vein, repeating the key words "righteous, "judge, and "true, and then concludes with two well-known verses.

The Lord has given, and the Lord has taken away;
Blessed be the name of the Lord (Job 1:21)
But He, being merciful, forgave iniquity
and would not destroy;
He restrained His wrath time and again
and did not give full vent to His fury (Ps. 78:38)

The sum total of this burial prayer is an affirmation of God's quality of mercy. Even though we have experienced His quality of justice, or harshness, we accept this and reaffirm our belief in His essential love. The reality of death is not to be allowed to annul our ability to believe in goodness as a divine quality.

From: Rites of Mourning in Entering Jewish Prayer: A Guide to Personal Devotion and the Worship Service by Reuven Hammer. Schocken Books Pages 277-279

A Woman of Valor

About.com <http://judaism.about.com/od/shabbatprayersblessings/f/eshetchayil.htm>

A Woman of Valor, called *Eshet Chayil* in Hebrew, is a hymn which is customarily recited on Friday evenings, after returning from synagogue and singing "Shalom Aleichem" and before sitting down to the Shabbat evening meal.

Eshet Chayil is a twenty-two-verse poem with which King Solomon concludes the book of Proverbs (Proverbs 31). The poem has an acrostic arrangement in which the verses begin with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet in regular order. The poem describes the woman of valor as one who are is energetic, righteous, and capable.

The Text: Midrash Mishlei (Proverbs), ad 31:10

מעשה היה ברבי מאיר, שהיה יושב ודורש בבית המדרש בשבת במנחה, ומתו שני בניו. מה עשתה אמו? הניחה שניהם על המטה ופרשה סדין עליהם. במוצאי שבת בא ר' מאיר מבית המדרש לביתו. אמר לה 'היכן שני בני?' אמרה 'לבית המדרש הלכו', אמר לה 'צפיתי לבית המדרש ולא ראיתי אותם', נתנו לו כוס של הבדלה והבדיל, חזר ואמר 'היכן שני בני?' אמרה לו 'הלכו למקום אחר ועכשיו הם באים', הקריבה לפניו המאכל ואכל ובירך, לאחר שבירך אמרה לו 'רבי, שאלה אחת יש לי לשאול לך', אמר לה 'אמרי שאלתך', אמרה לו 'רבי, קודם היום בא אדם אחד ונתן לי פקדון, ועכשיו בא ליטול אותו, נחזיר לו או לא?' אמר לה 'בתי, מי שיש פקדון אצלו, הוא צריך להחזירו לרבו', אמרה לו 'רבי, חוץ מדעתך לא הייתי נותנת אצלו', מה עשתה? תפשתו בידה, והעלה אותו לאותו חדר, והקריבה אותו למטה, ונטלה סדין מעליהם, וראה שניהם מתים ומונחים על המטה, התחיל בוכה ואומר 'בני! בני! רבי! בני בדרך ארץ, ורבי שהיו מאירין פני בתורתך!', באותה שעה אמרה לו לרבי מאיר 'רבי, לא כך אמרת לי - אני צריך להחזיר הפקדון לרבו?', אמר (איוב א כא): 'ה' נתן וה' לקח, יהי שם ה' מבורך'. אמר רבי חנינא: בדבר הזה נחמתו ונתיישבה דעתו, לכך נאמר "אשת חיל מי ימצא".

There was a story about Rabbi Meir who was sitting and expounding in the study hall on Shabbat afternoon, when two of his sons died.

What did his mother [Beruryah] do? She placed both of them on the bed and spread a sheet over them. At the end of Shabbat, Rabbi Meir came home from the study hall. He said to her: where are my two sons? She said [back]: They went to the study hall. He said to her: I scanned the study hall, and I did not see them.

They gave him the cup of Havdalah, and he separated [the days of the week with the closure of Shabbat].

He repeated and said: Where are my two sons?

She [Beruryah] said: They went elsewhere, and they are coming now (soon).

She placed food in front of him, and he ate and blessed.

After he [Rabbi Meir] blessed, she [Beruryah] said to him: I have a question to ask you. He said to her: Say your question. She said to him: Rabbi, before today, a man came and deposited something with me, and now he is coming to take it. Should we return it to him or not? He said: My daughter, one who has a deposit with him must return it to its owner. She said to him: Were it not for your consent, I would not have given it to him.

What did she do? She grabbed his hand, brought him up to that room, had him approach the bed and took off the sheet from upon them. When he saw both of them dead and laying upon the bed, he began to cry and say: My sons, my sons, my teachers, my teachers - my sons in the way of the world, my teachers in that they would enlighten my eyes with their Torah.

At that time, she said to Rabbi Meir: Rabbi, is this not what I told you - do I not need to return the deposit to its Owner?


He said: *The Lord has given, and the Lord has taken; may the name of the Lord be blessed* (Job 1:21).


Rabbi Chanina said: With this thing, she consoled him, and his mind became composed - that is why it states (Proverbs 31:10): *A virtuous woman, who can find.*



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

Comprehension and Analysis Questions


Extra Bonus  Why did the two sons of Rabbi Meir die?

 Why did Beruryah lay them on a bed and spread a sheet over them?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Bonus  Why did Beruryah tell her husband that their sons went to the study hall when Rabbi Meir asked for them?

Answer 1 _____


Answer 2 _____


Answer 3 _____

Bonus  Why did Beruryah give her husband a cup of Havdalah?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

 Why did Beruryah tell her husband that their sons went elsewhere and that they would come soon when he asked for them a second time?

 Why did Beruryah set food for her husband and only after he ate and blessed, did she ask him her question?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? After he [Rabbi Meir] blessed, she [Beruryah] said to him: I have a question to ask you. He said to her: Say your question. She said to him: Rabbi, before today, a man came and deposited something with me, and now he is coming to take it. Should we return it to him or not? What type of question is Beruryah asking her husband?

Bonus ? Why does Beruryah call her husband "Rabbi"?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Why does Rabbi Meir address Beruryah as "my daughter"?

Understanding Beruryah's Case

Rabbi, before today, a man came and deposited something with me, and now he is coming to take it. Should we return it to him or not?

? Who is "the man" in Beruryah's case?

? What is the deposit?

? Who are the safekeepers of the deposit?

Bonus ? Why is "the man" coming to retrieve "the deposit"?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

More Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Why do you think Beruryah drew on a legal case to prepare her husband for the dreadful news?

Bonus ? How was Beruryah able to comfort her husband?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

Answer 5 _____

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

- ! Rabbi Meir’s Journey: From “where are my two sons?” to “The Lord has given...”
- ! Beruryah: The Master’s Loving Teacher.



Our sad story, is a story of love and transformation. Beruryah understands the inevitability of death and makes use of her wisdom to, as much as possible, ease her husband into the fateful news.

Thanks to his loving wife, Rabbi Meir is able to move from “where are my sons?” to “the Lord has given,” reminding us that all our blessings were given to us as a deposit to be -eventually- returned.