

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [75]

"...and we saw a certain fish..."
(Insights into Babylonian Talmud, Bava Batra 73b)



Background to Our Story

Rabbah bar Bar Chanah



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rabbah_bar_bar_Hana

Rabbah bar Bar Hana was a [Jewish Talmudist](#) who lived in [Babylonia](#), known as an [Amora](#) of the second generation. He was the grandson of Hana and the brother of Hiyya. He went to Palestine and became a pupil of [Rav Yochanan](#), whose sayings he transmitted. Rabbah Bar Bar Hana is especially well known for a collection of [aggadic](#) stories about him recorded in the Babylonian [Talmud](#) in the fifth chapter of [Bava Batra](#).

Rabbah bar Bar Hana (Rabbah bar Rabbah bar Hana) does not seem to have enjoyed high regard in his adopted country, for it was taken as a matter of course that Rav [Shimon ben Lakish](#) should not do him the honor of addressing him in public.^[1] After a somewhat prolonged sojourn in Palestine he returned to Babylonia, residing both at [Pumbedita](#) and at [Sura](#). In the former city he at first refused to attend the lectures of Rav [Judah ben Ezekiel](#),^[2] but he soon became his friend, and was consulted by him in difficult cases.^[3] Judah and his pupil Rabbah b. Nahmani once visited Rabbah, who was ill, and submitted a [halakic](#) question to him. While they were there a [Zoroastrian](#) priest ("geber") suddenly appeared and extinguished the lamp, the day being a festival of Ormuzd, on which Jews were forbidden to have fire in their houses.^[4] Rabbah thereupon sorrowfully exclaimed: "O God, let us live either under Thy protection, or at least under the protection of the children of Esau [the Romans]".^[5]

The persecutions of the Babylonian Jews by the Sassanids caused Rabbah to resolve to return to Palestine,^[6] although it is nowhere said that he carried out that intention. During his residence at Sura he wished to introduce the recitation of the [Ten Commandments](#) into the daily prayer, but was dissuaded by [Rav Chisda](#).^[7] Later he visited Maḥoza, and he tells of the wonderful feats he saw performed there by a juggler.^[8]

Some haggadic sayings by Rabbah bar bar Hana have been preserved. Citing [Jeremiah 23:29](#), he compares the [Torah](#) to fire, in that as fire does not start of itself neither does the Law endure in solitary study.^[9] His interpretations of [Proverbs 9:3,14](#) and [Isaiah 28:26](#)^[10]

also are noteworthy; his saying that "the soul of one pious man is worth the whole world"^[11] is especially memorable.

Rabbah bar bar Hana's stories of his marvelous experiences during his voyages and his journeys through the desert have become famous. These accounts may be divided into two classes. In the first he records his observations, generally beginning with the words "I have seen." Among these are his remarks regarding the identity of the most fertile part of Palestine—"the land flowing with milk and honey";^[12] the distance between Jericho and Jerusalem;^[13] the area of the district in the plains of Moab mentioned in [Numbers 33:49](#) as the camp of the children of Israel;^[14] the castor-oil plant cultivated in Palestine, or the gourd of Jonah.^[15] Here also belong his accounts of his relations with the Arabs, one of whom once used a term which explained to him the word in [Psalms 55:23](#).^[16]

The other group of the narratives of Rabbah bar bar Hana includes his fantastic adventures on the sea and in the desert. In these stories one of the most conspicuous figures is the Arab who was the guide of Rabbah and his companions on their journey through the desert. This Arab knew the route so well that he could tell from the odor of the sand when a spring was near.^[17] The travelers passed through the desert in which the children of Israel wandered for forty years, and the Arab showed Mount Sinai to Rabbah, who heard the voice of God speaking from the mountain and regretting Israel's exile. The Arab likewise pointed out the place where Korah and his followers had been swallowed by the earth, and from the smoking abyss Rabbah heard the words, "Moses is truth and his teachings are truth, but we are liars".^[18] He was shown the gigantic bodies of the Israelites who had died in the desert, lying face upward, and the place where heaven and earth almost touched, so that he could watch the rotation of the heavenly spheres around the earth in twenty-four hours.^[18]

Rabbah's stories of his adventures on the sea resemble tales of other navigators concerning the immense size of various marine animals. As an example the following one may be cited: "Once, while on a ship, we came to a gigantic fish at rest, which we supposed to be an island, since there was sand on its back, in which grass was growing. We therefore landed, made a fire, and cooked our meal. But when the fish felt the heat he rolled over, and we would have drowned had not the ship been near".^[17] Here the resemblance to the later voyage of [Sindbad](#) is obvious. Rabbah himself tells how his tales were received. In regard to two of them his colleagues remarked, "All *Rabbahs* are asses and all *bar bar Hanas* fools".^[18] Rabbah's stories have called forth an entire literature; in addition to the numerous commentaries on the [aggadahic](#) portions of the Talmud which dwell by preference on these accounts, more than twenty essays interpreting and annotating them have appeared in various periodicals.

This article incorporates text from the 1901–1906 *Jewish Encyclopedia*, a publication now in the *public domain*.

1. Babylonian [Talmud Yoma](#) 9b
2. Babylonian [Talmud Shabbat](#) 148a
3. Babylonian [Talmud Mo'ed Katan](#) 17a
4. Grätz, "Gesch." 2d ed., iv. 292
5. Babylonian [Talmud Gittin](#) 16b-17a
6. Babylonian [Talmud Pesachim](#) 51a
7. Babylonian [Talmud Berakhot](#) 12a
8. Babylonian [Talmud Bava Batra](#) 73a, b
9. Babylonian [Talmud Ta'anit](#) 7a
10. Babylonian [Talmud Sanhedrin](#) 38a, 105a
11. Babylonian [Talmud Sanhedrin](#) 103b
12. Babylonian [Talmud Ketubot](#) 111b-112a
13. Babylonian [Talmud Yoma](#) 39b
14. Babylonian [Talmud Yoma](#) 75b
15. Babylonian [Talmud Shabbat](#) 21a
16. Babylonian [Talmud Ketubot](#) 72b, 75a; [Yevamot](#) 120b; [Rosh Hashanah](#) 26b
17. Babylonian [Talmud Bava Batra](#) 73b
18. Babylonian [Talmud Bava Batra](#) 74a

The Stories of Rabbah bar Bar Chanah

These stories demonstrate the wondrous works of God. Some of the stories explain verses of Job concerning gigantic birds, animals and fish. Others tell of the rewards that await the righteous in the World to Come. Even the seemingly trivial words of the Sages require careful study (Rashbam).

The stories related here are tales of astonishing and incomprehensible incidents. The commentaries differ as to whether or not these accounts are to be taken literally. Some commentators (e.g. Ritva, Maharsha) maintain that at least some of the events actually happened, although the Gemara sometimes resorts to hyperbole in its account. Nonetheless, the very fact that the Gemara relates these stories indicates that they must also be understood metaphorically as teaching a moral lesson. Other incidents are either visions in a dream which are laden with significance (Ritva), or else they are parables conveying messages (Rambam, Introduction to Mishnah).

Rambam (ibid.) maintains that, generally, Aggadata (non-halachic parts of the Talmud) contains many sublime ideas not suited for public knowledge. The Sages therefore veiled their ideas in allegories whose true meaning was divulged only to those deemed worthy and capable of its comprehension. (See also R'Moshe Chaim Luzzato's Ma'amar al HaAggados [printed in the preface to the Vilna edition of Ein Yaakov] which repeats this concept.) Nevertheless, every Aggadata also contains a lesson suitable for everyone, and indeed the commentaries offer various interpretations of the Aggadata.

The tales of Rabbah bar bar Chanah that follow are among the most esoteric Aggadata of the whole Talmud. Dozens of works have been published explaining their homiletical allusions. In our commentary here, we have first explained the literal meaning of each story. Then, at the end of most of the stories, we have presented one homiletical interpretation culled from the major commentaries. Six of the stories are explained by the Vilna Gaon [Gra] (cited, slightly shortened, in the Eitz Yosef on Ein Yaakov) and we have condensed his interpretations. (They have been superbly expounded in English by R' Aharon Feldman in The Juggler and the King, to which we have had frequent recourse. The stories are also explained at the end of Olelos Ephraim, a major homiletical work penned by the author of Kli Yakar on Chumash.) For the sake of brevity, we have been forced to omit some points and to condense many of the ideas of the commentaries.

The Text: Babylonian Talmud, Bava Batra 73b

וַאֲמַר רַבָּה בַּר בַּר חַנָּה: זִימְנָא חָדָא הָוָה קָא אֲזַלְיִנּוּ בְּסַפִּינְתָא, וַחֲזִינּוּ הָהוּא פְּוֹרָא דִּיתְבָּא לִיה חֲלָתָא אַגְבִּיָּה וְקָדָה אַגְמָא עִילּוּיָה. סְבָרִינּוּ יִבְשָׁתָא הִיא, וְסָלְקִינּוּ וְאַפִּינּוּ וּבִשְׁלִינּוּ אַגְבִּיָּה, וְכַד חָם גְּבִיָּה אֲתֵהֱפִיד, וְאִי לָאו דְהָוָה מִקְרָבָא סַפִּינְתָא, הָוָה טָבְעִינּוּ.

And Rabba bar bar Hana said: Once we were traveling on a ship and we saw a certain fish upon which sand had settled, and grass grew on it.

We assumed that it was dry land and went up and baked and cooked on the back of the fish, but when its back grew hot it turned over. And were it not for the fact that the ship was close by, we would have drowned.



Explaining the Story

What's going on in our story? (The sequence of events)

Understanding the Story: Two traditional explanations

Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz

Shlomo Ephraim ben Aaron Luntschitz (1550 – 3 March 1619) was a rabbi, poet and Torah commentator, best known for his Torah commentary Keli Yakar. He was born in Lenczyk (also known as Luntschitz) and studied under Solomon Luria in Lublin, and subsequently served as rosh yeshiva (dean) of the yeshiva in Lvov (Lemberg). In 1604 he was appointed rabbi of Prague, a position he filled until his death. In the introduction of his Keli Yakar he relates that the name Shlomo was added to his name during life-threatening illness, a common practice in Judaism.

This story warns against associating oneself with the wicked. Initially, they give the impression of being friendly so as to lure people into their company. But once they have someone in their hands, they exploit him and are even liable to kill him. Thus, the fish in our story gives the false impression of being a safe haven. But once people have made themselves comfortable on his back, his temperament becomes heated and he attempts to drown them. The ship nearby that offers them refuge alludes to the help of God which is never far away, as it is written (Psalms 145:18): God is close to all that call upon Him.

Samuel Eidels (Maharsha)

Samuel Eidels (1555–1631) was a renowned *rabbi* and *Talmudist* famous for his commentary on the Talmud, Chiddushei Halachot. Eidels is also known as Maharsha, a Hebrew *acronym* for "Our Teacher, the Rabbi Shmuel Eidels".

The Jewish people travelling on the sea of their long and anguished galut [exile] sometimes experience periods of tranquility. They think they are on an island of safety, and are lulled into a false sense of security, thinking that they are standing on dry land. Then suddenly, the fish turns around, and their illusion evaporates. Fortunately, God's help is nearby, and Israel realizes that teshuvah is the key to their survival.

? What is the difference between the two traditional interpretations found above?

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

- ?** Why did the travelers get off the ship?
- ?** Why did the passengers of the ship go up and dwell on the back of the fish?
- ?** Why, according to our story, was the ship nearby?

"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from These Texts

- !** Complacency breeds danger or at least mediocrity!
Complacency: self-satisfaction accompanied by unawareness of actual danger or deficiencies.
- !** Always have a "plan B" (or at least a ship nearby)!
- !** Don't judge a book by its cover (or an island by its meadows)!
- !** Circumstances may change suddenly with little or no warning!
- !** Don't take "dry land" for granted!

