

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist
[78]

On That Day, What Will You Say?
Insights into Babylonian Talmud Moed Katan 25b
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Background to Our Story

Eulogy, or Hespel

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By *Rabbi Louis Jacobs*

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[Eulogies are] funeral orations in which the praises of the departed are sung (in the older Jewish tradition, literally "sung," in a special mourning chant). [In Hebrew, a eulogy is called a] hesped. There are references to eulogies in the Bible; the two best known are Abraham's lament over Sarah (Genesis 23:2) and David's lament over Saul and Jonathan (II Samuel 1:17-27). The Talmud (Moed Katan 21b) gives a list of eulogies over famous rabbis from which it appears that eulogies were in poetic form.

The Talmud has a lengthy discussion (Sanhedrin 46b-47a) on whether the eulogy is in honor of the dead or of the living. The practical difference here is seen where the deceased left in his will that he was not to be eulogized. If the eulogy is out of respect for the living, the man's instructions can be disregarded since the honor being paid is not to him but to his family. The conclusion is that the eulogy is to pay respect to the dead, so that if such an instruction is made it must be heeded. One hears, occasionally, of prominent scholars who, out of humility, left instruction that no eulogies were to be recited over them.

The Talmud contains advice for those who deliver the eulogy. Its aim should be to call attention to the achievements of the deceased. A little exaggeration was felt to be in order. In a eulogy, it is permitted to imply that the deceased was rather more generous and pious than he really was, but the kind of insincere praise which everyone present knows to be false must be avoided. One Talmudic rabbi said to a man well known as a gifted eulogizer: "Give warm expression to your feelings when you eulogize me, for I shall be present there." Nowadays the eulogy is delivered in the [synagogue or in the] hall of the [funeral home or] cemetery, or sometimes, at the graveside. In ultra-Orthodox circles it is not unusual for many eulogies to be given over a famous scholar.

Eulogizers

Where professional eulogizers are employed, the heirs of the deceased can be forced to defray the costs of the eulogy (Sanhedrin. 46b).

As the Talmud teaches (Shabbat 105b), there is merit in reaching a state of mourning, in crying for a good person, and so Jews of millennia past would hire professional eulogizers whose task it would be to bring the listener to tears (Moed Katan 8a).

In antiquity, the funeral procession left immediately from the house of the deceased, accompanied by professional wailers, eulogizers, and flute players, with family members or students of the deceased being the preferred pallbearers.

Ravina



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Moed Katan. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 169.

Ravina was a sixth-generation Babylonian sage, whose major work was assisting Rav Ashi in editing the Babylonian Talmud. In his youth he studied under the direction of Rava. He passed away in the year 422. Ravina and Rav Ashi discuss matters of *halakha* in many places throughout the Talmud.

Rav Ashi



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Moed Katan. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 170.

Rav Ashi was a sixth-generation Babylonian sage whose major work was editing the Babylonian Talmud, together with Ravina. He was born in the year 352 and studied with Rav Kahana. Rav Ashi reestablished the academy in Sura, which had not functioned since the days of Rav H̄isda, and he led that yeshiva for sixty years.

Rav Ashi and Ravina were not the first ones to edit the oral traditions, as there are many discussions in the Talmud whose language and style show that they were prepared long before Rav Ashi. Rav Ashi arranged the material that he received from previous generations, which emanated from different academies and was written in different styles, to produce an organized and uniform Talmud.

Various factors helped Rav Ashi undertake this great project, which ultimately was completed over a period of several hundred years. It is likely that Rav Ashi was assisted by a committee of scholars who gathered in the academy in Sura. It was due to the unique political environment and economic conditions at that time that a mission of this scope could be launched. The Babylonian king Yazdegerd I treated all of his citizens fairly and showed particular interest in the Jewish community, whose Sages he respected. Under his reign, the economic situation of the Jews of Babylonia was excellent, and they enjoyed relative freedom. These conditions allowed the Babylonian Sages to commit themselves to this the vast enterprise of redacting the Gemara.

Babylonian Talmud. Moed Katan 25b

כי נח נפשיה דרבינא פתח עליה ההוא ספדנא: תמרים הניעו ראש על צדיק פתמר, נשים לילות כנמים – על משים לילות כנמים.
אמר ליה רב אשי לבר קיפוק: ההוא יומא מאי אמרת? אמר ליה, אמיןא: אם בארזים נפלה שלתבת – מה יעשו איזובי קיר, לונתו בתפה הועלה – מה יעשו דגי רקה, בנתל שוטף נפלה חפה – מה יעשו מי גבים.
אמר ליה בר אבין: חס ושלום דחפה ושלתבת בצדיקי אמיןא. ומאי אמרת?
אמיןא: בכו לאבלים ולא לאבדה, שהיא למנוחה ואנו לאנחה.

When Ravina passed away, a certain eulogizer opened his eulogy for him with the following words: Date-palms, hang your heads in sadness over the righteous man who may be likened to a date-palm. Let us render our nights like days in weeping, over he who rendered his nights like days studying the Torah.

Rav Ashi said to bar Kippok, who was a famous eulogizer: On that day, what will you say?

He [Bar Kippok] said to him [to Rav Ashi]: I shall say as follows: If the cedars went up in flame, what shall the hyssop of the wall do? If the leviathan was lifted by a hook, what shall the tiny fish of the marsh do? If a fish hook was cast into the flowing river, what can the water of the puddles do?

Bar Avin, who was also a eulogizer, said to him [to Bar Kippok]: God forbid that the words hook and flame should be said with regard to the righteous, as these are not expressions of honor.

[Rav Ashi] asked him [to Bar Avin]: And what will you say?

I [Bar Avin] shall say: Cry for the mourners and not for that which was lost, as that which was lost [the soul] has gone to its eternal rest, while we, the mourners, are left with our sighs.

Rav Ashi was offended, and consequently, their feet [Bar Kippok and Rav Avin's feet] turned inward and became crooked.

On that day neither of them came to eulogize him [Rav Ashi].



Explaining the Story

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

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Which day is "that day"?

Bonus ? Why does Rav Ashi call it that way?

Bonus ? Why do you think Rav Ashi is interested in knowing what Bar Kippok would say at his funeral?

Bonus ? What prompted Rav Ashi to ask the question, at this point?

Bonus ? Why is Bar Kippok answering Rav Ashi's question?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Bonus ? How could Bar Kippok have replied to Rav Ashi if he didn't want to answer his question?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Please summarize Bar Kippok's eulogy.

? What fault did Bar Avin find in Bar Kippok's eulogy?

? Please summarize Bar Avin's eulogy.

Extra Bonus ? Why do you think Bar Avin is finding fault in Bar Kippok's eulogy?

Bonus ? Why do you think Rav Ashi felt dejected by the remarks of the eulogists?

? Why did the feet of Bar Kippok and Bar Avin become inverted?

? "On that day neither of them came." (Again) What day is "that day"?

Extra Bonus ? Why didn't Bar Kippok and Bar Avin come to eulogize Rav Ashi?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

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

! When conceit meets flattery...



Rav Ashi, after listening to Ravina's eulogy, becomes curious on how people would speak about him after his death (when the day arrives).

Bar Kippok and Bar Avin, two professional eulogizers, instead of wishing Ravina a long life, or respectfully declining to acquiesce to his request, are only very eager to compete for the Sage's "prize" to the best eulogy.

Rav Ashi felt dejected (for one who seeks praise, no praise is good enough) and Bar Kippok and Bar Avin are punished.

On "that day," both Rav Ashi and the euologizers, are left without their "moment of glory," reminding all of us of the pitfalls of conceit and flattery.