

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [79]



Rabbi Meir's Wife, Berurya, said to Him: What is Your Thinking?

Insights into Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berakhot 10a

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Background to Our Story

Rabbi Meir



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Eruvin Part 1. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 66.

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. Berakhot. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 61.

Berurya was the wife of the *tanna* Rabbi Meir. She was the daughter of the *tanna* Rabbi Hanina ben Teradyon, who was one of the ten martyrs. She 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 disagreed with several Sages of her generation, and we find that the *halakha* in that dispute was ruled in accordance with her opinion.

As a result of decrees of persecution, nearly her entire family was martyred. Calamity continued to afflict her throughout her life when her two children died in a single day. The Gemara relates how she conducted herself with exceptional courage. From a story which is only alluded to in the Talmud, 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 her modest and considerate characteristics are manifest even through sharp responses to various people.

Psalms 104:35

יִתְמוּ חַטָּאִים | מִן-הָאָרֶץ וְרָשָׁעִים | עוֹד אֵינָם

"Let sinners/sins cease from the land, and the wicked will be no more..."

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berakhot 10a

הִנֵּהוּ בְּרִיּוֹנֵי דְהוּוּ בְּשִׁבְבוֹתֶיהָ דְרַבִּי מֵאִיר וְהוּוּ קָא מְצַעְרוּ לֵיהּ טוֹבָא, הִנֵּה קָא בְּעֵי רַבִּי מֵאִיר רַחֲמֵי עַלְוֵיהּ
כִּי הִיכִי דְלִימוֹתוּ.

אָמְרָה לֵיהּ בְּרוּרְיָא דְבֵיתָהּ: מֵאִי דַעְתָּךְ? – מִשׁוּם דְכָתִיב: "יִתְמוּ חַטָּאִים", מִי כָּתִיב "חַטָּאִים"?
"חַטָּאִים" כָּתִיב!

וְעוֹד, שְׁפִיל לְסִיפֵיהּ דְקָרָא: "וְרָשָׁעִים עוֹד אֵינָם", כִּיּוֹן דְ"יִתְמוּ חַטָּאִים" – "וְרָשָׁעִים עוֹד אֵינָם"? אֵלָא,
בְּעֵי רַחֲמֵי עַלְוֵיהּ דְלִהְדָרוּ בְּתַשׁוּבָה – "וְרָשָׁעִים עוֹד אֵינָם"

There were these hooligans in Rabbi Meir's neighborhood who caused him a great deal of anguish.

Rabbi Meir prayed that they should die.

Rabbi Meir's wife, Berurya, said to him: What is your thinking? On what basis do you pray for the death of these hooligans? Do you base yourself on the verse, as it is written: "Let sinners cease from the land" (Psalms 104:35), which you interpret to mean that the world would be better if the wicked were destroyed? But is it written, let sinners cease?" Let sins cease, is written. One should pray for an end to their transgressions, not for the demise of the transgressors themselves.

Moreover, go to the end of the verse, where it says: "And the wicked will be no more." If, as you suggest, transgressions shall cease refers to the demise of the evildoers, how is it possible that the wicked will be no more, i.e., that they will no longer be evil?

Rather, pray that they should repent, as if they repent, then the wicked will be no more, as they will have repented.


He [Rabbi Meir] prayed for them, and they repented.



Explaining the Story

What's going on in our story? (*Sequence of events*)

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

Bonus  According to our story, why did the hooligans cause anguish to Rabbi Meir?

 Why did Rabbi Meir pray for the hooligans to die?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

 Please explain Berurya's exegetical analysis.



Berurya's interpretation of the term *h'atta'im* is not literal. It is an interpretation based upon an allusion. The literal meaning of the word is, indeed, sinners. Some explain that the very fact that the verse opted to use the word *h'atta'im*, which is open to various interpretations, as opposed to the unambiguous word *hotim*, opens the door to a more compassionate interpretation of the verse.

? Berurya told Rabbi Meir: "*So pray that they repent and then the wicked will be no more.*" Why do you think Rabbi Meir acquiesced to Berurya's request?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Bonus ? Rabbi Meir was a great sage. Why do you think he didn't come up with Berurya's novel reading of the verse in Psalms?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

?

Bonus Below is a short, albeit unsettling, story from the Book of Kings. How can this biblical story shed light on our Talmudic story?

II Kings 2:19-24

19. And the men of the city said to Elisha, Behold, we beg you, the situation of this city is pleasant, as our lord sees; but the water is bad, and the ground barren. **20.** And he said: bring me a new jar and put salt in it. And they brought it to him. **21.** And he went forth to the spring of the waters, and cast the salt in there, and said, thus said the Lord, I have healed these waters; there shall not be from there any more death or miscarriage. **22.** And the waters were healed until this day, according to the saying of Elisha which he spoke. **23.** And he went up from there to Beth-El; and as he was going up by the way, there came out little children from the city, and mocked him, and said to him, Go up, you bald head; go up, you bald head. **24.** And he turned back, and looked on them, and cursed them in the name of the Lord. And there came out two female bears from the wood and tore forty-two children of them.

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

! "...from where will my help come?" or "How to help Rabbi Meir."

! When your only tool is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail!



In our story, Rabbi Meir, very upset at the behavior of some hooligans in his neighborhood, prays that God will kill them. His wise wife, Berurya, witnessing her husband's reaction, helps him change his approach to solving the problem at hand. Berurya's creative and loving perspective brings wholeness not only to the hooligans but also to her distressed husband, who learns, through love and compassion, that his emotional "tool box" contains far more resources than the single one he has been relying on.