

From the Rabbi's Desk  
Rabbi Manes Kogan  
Hillcrest Jewish Center  
183-02 Union Turnpike, Flushing, NY 11366  
[rabbikogan@hillcrestjc.org](mailto:rabbikogan@hillcrestjc.org)

## Stories with a Twist [81]

### No One Should Give Him Lodging! Insights into Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 29b

Revised: January 2026



## Background to Our Story

### Rav Aña bar Ya'akov



*Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Kiddushin. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 155.*

Rav Aña bar Ya'akov was a student of Rav Huna. He apparently lived to an old age, as he discussed halakhic matters with Abaye and Rava, who were part of a later generation. He lived in the city of Pappunya, which is the source of his nickname: Pappuna'ei. Rav Aña was the foremost Sage of the city, where he enacted numerous decrees. In addition to his greatness in Torah, which earned Rava's and Rav Nahman's praise, Rav Aña was renowned for his piety, and it is related that miracles often occurred for him. Several Sages of his generation studied Torah from him. Aside from his son, Rav Ya'akov, who is mentioned here, it is known that his sister's son was Rav Aña, son of Rav Ika, while his daughter's son was also called Rav Ya'akov.

### Abaye



<http://www.ou.org/about/judaism/rabbis/abaye.htm>

Abaye (Circa. 278 C.E. - 338 C.E.) was an orphan, and was raised by his uncle, Rabbah bar Nachmani, and his wife. He had enormous respect and affection for Rabbah, and Sukkot 53a records that Abaye would entertain him at the Simchat Bait HaShoeva, the Water-Drawing Celebration that was held during Sukkot, (a particularly joyous celebration within the Festival which is itself known as the Time of our Joy) by juggling, at which he was a master.

Of course, Abaye was a master not only of juggling, but also of the study of Torah and the art of teaching Torah. He studied at the Yeshiva (Torah Academy) of Pumbeditha, near the

Euphrates. There his good friend and study-partner was Rava (not to be confused with Rabbah, the Head of the Academy), with whom he often engaged in debates on various aspects of Torah Law. Great as Abaye was in Torah, Rava was even greater, and over the course of time, beginning in their student years and continuing into their careers as teachers of Torah, many of their disputes are recorded in the Talmud, and of the hundreds of such disputes, the Law is decided according to the opinion of Rava in all but six cases.

Abaye assumed the position of Head of the Yeshiva of Pumbeditha shortly after the retirement of his uncle. He served with distinction in that position, serving as a role model in being one of the greatest Torah scholars of his generation, but also being imbued with refined character traits. He would rejoice when one of his students achieved notable success in his studies.

Abaye was a Scholar and a Gentleman; one of his favorite sayings is recorded in Berachot 17a, One should always strive to be friendly with his brothers, his relatives, and everyone else, and even with the non-Jew in the marketplace, in order that he be loved Above (by HaShem) and Below (by his fellow human beings).

He realized the power of parental influence on the child and said, What is heard from a child's mouth in the street is merely a repetition of what he has heard from his parents (Sukkah 56b), and he realized the imprint left by what one learns as a child, the girsa d'yankusa, in determining a person's strongest memories.

Abaye was also a Kohen, a Priest, descending from the Family of Eli, and he was caught up in the curse that was placed on that family by HaShem, that no one would ever live out his full years, because of the Desecration of G-d's Name caused by the misdeeds of Eli's sons, Chofni and Pinchas, when they were in charge of the Mishkan, the spiritual center that preceded the Temple. Abaye's righteous behavior staved off the curse for many years but he succumbed to edema at the relatively young age of sixty.

## **Do Jews Believe in Demons? - By Rabbi Louis Jacobs**

my

JEWISH  
LEARNING

<http://www.myjewishlearning.com/index.shtml>

Reprinted from [The Jewish Religion: A Companion](#), published by Oxford University Press.

Though the idea of demons raises concerns about divine providence, belief in demons developed among some Jews throughout history.

Demons are supernatural, malevolent beings with the power to cause hurt to humans. Belief in demons, though not very pronounced in Jewish life and thought, is still prevalent, in a semi-comical way, at the level of folklore. Even some of the learned feel compelled to accept, perhaps not too seriously, belief in demons because this belief is implied in the Talmud in many places.

The Babylonian Talmud, in particular, produced against a Zoroastrian background in which the belief was strongly rooted, contains stories of visitations by demons and spells to ward them off. There is even a report of a rabbi conversing with a demon prince.

It is completely unhistorical to maintain, as did [Krochmal](#), that all these references were inserted into the Talmud by ignorant copyists or by those influenced by folk-beliefs said to have been repudiated by the rabbis themselves.

## **Medieval Rationalists**

Some of the medieval thinkers accepted the belief in demons. Others rejected the belief as contrary to the doctrine of divine providence. Why should God have surrendered His control of the universe, on some occasions, into the power of such creatures?

[Abraham Ibn Ezra](#) rejects entirely the notion that demons really exist. Maimonides either ignores the talmudic references to demons or gives these a rationalistic explanation; as, for example, when he understands the mishnaic reference to an 'evil spirit' against which a light can be put out even on the [Sabbath](#), to mean a spirit of melancholy.

Menahem Meiri generally follows a similar demythologizing tendency when he understands the talmudic reference to warding off the demons by reciting the Shema before retiring as meaning that evil thoughts invade the mind at bedtime and these can successfully be dispelled through the recitation of the [Shema](#). Meiri also understands the talmudic reference to Joseph the demon, who was able to traverse great distances through the air, to mean that there was a skilled acrobat who could vault over great distances and who was known as 'Joseph the devil' in the sense that he was a devil-may-care character.

### **From the Kabbalah**

The Kabbalah has a vast demonology of its own. The demonic powers constitute an unholy parody of the sacred realms against which they are in constant battle. In a very revealing illustration, the Zohar compares the "Other Side," the domain of the evil powers, to a vicious dog held by its owner on a long lead. The dog, though it appears to enjoy independent power, is pulled back whenever it is in danger of getting out of control.

Under the influence of the Kabbalah, especially, belief in the existence of demons became widespread. Although there is no official Jewish rite of exorcism, there are numerous tales of saintly men exorcising demons from houses and persons.

Belief in demons is thus generally present but very peripheral in the Jewish scheme. No representative thinker, for instance, ever thought of dubbing Ibn Ezra a heretic because he refused to believe in demons. Needless to say, sophisticated Jewish thinkers who did believe in the existence of demons did not think of these as little devils with forked tails breathing fire but as spiritual forces which God has unleashed in the world for purposes of His own, or as harmful psychological processes which take place in the human mind.

Rabbi Dr. Louis Jacobs (1920-2006) was a Masorti rabbi, the first leader of Masorti Judaism (also known as Conservative Judaism) in the United Kingdom, and a leading writer and thinker on Judaism.

### **Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Kiddushin 29b**

תנו רבנן: הוא ללמוד ובנו ללמוד – הוא קודם לבנו. רבי יהודה אומר: אם בנו זריז וממולח ותלמודו מתקיים בידו – בנו קודמו. פי הא דרב יעקב בריה דרב אחא בר יעקב, שזריה אבויא לקמיה דאבני. פי אהא, חזייה דלא הוה מיתדדין שמעתיה. אמר ליה: אנה עדיפא מינה, טוב את, דאיזיל אנה.

שמע אבני דקא הוה אתי. הוה ההוא מזיק בי רבנו דאבני, דכי הווי עייליבתרין אפילו ביממא הווי מיתזקי. אמר להו: לא ליתבי ליה אינש אושפיזא, אפשר דמתרחיש ניסא.

על, בת בההוא בי רבנו, אידמי ליה כתנינא דשבועה רישוותיה; כל כריעה דכרע נתר חד רישיה. אמר להו למחר: אי לא איתרחיש ניסא ספינתין.

The Sages taught: If one wishes to study Torah himself and his son also wants to study, he takes precedence over his son. Rabbi Yehuda says: If his son is

diligent and sharp, and his study will endure, his son takes precedence over him.

This is like that anecdote, which is told about Rav Ya'akov, son of Rav Aña bar Ya'akov, whose father sent him to Abaye to study Torah. When the son came home, his father saw that his studies were not sharp. Rav Aña bar Ya'akov said to his son: I am preferable to you, and it is better that I go and study. Therefore, you sit and handle the affairs of the house so that I can go and study.

Abaye heard that Rav Aña bar Ya'akov was coming.

There was a certain demon in the study hall of Abaye, which was so powerful that when two people entered the study hall, they would be harmed, even during the day.

Abaye said to the people of the town: No one should give him (Rav Aña bar Ya'akov) lodging [ushpiza], perhaps a miracle will occur.

Rav Aña found no place to spend the night, and he entered and spent the night in that study hall of the Sages. The demon appeared to him like a serpent with seven heads. Rav Aña bar Ya'akov began to pray, and with every bow that he bowed, one of the demon's heads fell off, until it eventually died.

The next day Rav Aña said to the townspeople: If a miracle had not occurred, you would have placed me in danger.



### **Explaining the Story**

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

### **Comprehension and Analysis Questions**

**?** Why did Rav Aña bar Ya'akov originally send his son to study Torah with Abaye?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

**?** Why did Rav Aña bar Ya'akov decide later on to go study Torah himself with Abaye instead of sending his son?

**Bonus ?** Why didn't both Rav Aña bar Ya'akov and his son go to study Torah with Abaye together?

**Extra Bonus ?** How do we know that the demon at the house of study of Abaye was very powerful?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 4 \_\_\_\_\_

**?** For how long do you think did the demon terrorize Abaye and his students?

**?** Why did Abaye say to his students: "Do not give Rav Aña bar Ya'akov lodging [ushpiza]?"

**?** Why did Why did Rav Aña bar Ya'akov spend the night in the study hall?

**Bonus ?** How did Abaye know that Rav Aña bar Ya'akov was a pious man?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 4 \_\_\_\_\_

**Bonus ?** Why did the demon appear to Rav Aña bar Ya'akov?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

**?** Which shape did the demon take?

**Bonus ?** According to our story (and Abaye), how was the demon defeated?

**Bonus ?** According to Rav Aña bar Ya'akov how was the demon defeated?

**?** How did Rav Aña bar Ya'akov feel the day after the episode? How do you think he felt a month later?

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

**!** Abaye's "I knew you could do it!" versus Rav Aña bar Ya'akov's "it wasn't funny!"

**!** The needs of the community (Abaye) versus the needs of the individual (Rav Aña bar Ya'akov)!



Rav Aña bar Ya'akov goes to study Torah with Abaye, who "uses" his piety to defeat a demon who was intimidating the students in the study hall. While the end of the story is a happy one for Abaye and the rest of the students, it leaves a bitter taste on Rav Aña bar Ya'akov, who feels "used" and endangered by his future teacher and colleagues.

While we don't know how the following days unfolded in the study hall, we could imagine that Rav Aña bar Ya'akov was able to forgive Abaye and to move on, either because he was able to decode Abaye's plot as a compliment and sign of trust, or because he understood that the needs of the community in the eyes of Abaye took precedent over his own needs for lodging and security.