

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

Stories with a Twist [85]



Since He Was Not Compassionate, Let Afflictions Come Upon Him.

Insights into Babylonian Talmud Bava Metzia 85a

Background to Our Story

Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi (also known as "Rabbi")



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

Rabbi closed the tannaitic period with his arrangement of the Mishna. The son of Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel II, and a seventh-generation descendant of Hillel the Elder, Rabbi Yehuda lived in 135–220 CE during the fifth, and last, generation of tanna'im. According to tradition, Rabbi Yehuda was born on the day of Rabbi Akiva's death, leading people to later proclaim: "the sun sets, and the sun rises" (Ecclesiastes 1:5). Indeed, Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi was a successor to Rabbi Akiva, who had begun to assemble the statements of the Oral Law into a format that later became the Mishna. During his youth, Rabbi Yehuda studied under the five great students of Rabbi Akiva: Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yehuda bar Elai, Rabbi Yosei, Rabbi Shimon, and Rabbi Elazar. In addition, he learned Torah from his father Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel. In an effort to collect all the statements of the previous generations, Rabbi Yehuda moved from yeshiva to yeshiva, obtaining most of his knowledge from Rabbi Ya'akov bar Krashai. The wide breadth of his learning and his position as Nasi, to which he was appointed at age thirty upon his father's death, gave him the standing to undertake the greatest Torah enterprise of the era, the compilation of the Mishna. Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi surrounded himself with the most prominent Sages of his time, who assisted him in establishing the accuracy of the corpus he wanted to produce. Fortunately for him, the relative political calm of the time, and his favorable relationship with the Roman government, permitted the development of such an ambitious project. Due to his position as head of the community, the Mishna of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi was universally accepted, and earlier and other collections of halakha were set aside. This phenomenon unified the nation, as all of the Jewish people began to study the identical corpus of Oral Law. Due to poor health in his later years, Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi moved to Tzippori. His students were the Sages of the first generation of amora'im, including Rabbi Yo'hanan, Rabbi Hiyya, bar Kappara and Rav. The Gemara reports (Gittin 59a) that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi was the first

individual since Moses to have such a broad mastery of Torah, and his great scholarship led him to be referred to in the Talmud as simply: Rabbi, or: Our holy Rabbi.

The Maidservant of the Household of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Ketubot Part 2. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 241.

The maidservant of the household of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi is mentioned here and in several other contexts in the Gemara. She famously spoke in the purest, most ancient form of the Hebrew language, including words with which the Sages themselves were no longer familiar. It seems that she was a unique servant who was perhaps raised in the family of the *Nesi'im*. The Gemara recounts her wise conduct and her witty and wise manner of speech.

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Bava Metzia 85a

יסורי דרבי אלעזר ברבי שמעון עדיפי מדרבי.

דאילו רבי אלעזר ברבי שמעון – מאתקבה באו ומאתקבה הלכו, דרבי – על ידי מעשה באו ועל ידי מעשה הלכו.

“על ידי מעשה באו”. מאי היא? דהוא עגלא דהו קא ממטו ליה לשחיטה, אול תליא לרישיה בכנפיה דרבי, וקא בכי. אמר ליה: זיל, לכך נוצרת. אמרי: הואיל ולא קא מרתם – ליתו עליה יסורין.

“ועל ידי מעשה הלכו”. יומא חד הוה קא פנשא אמתיה דרבי ביתא. הוה שדיא בני פרכושתא וקא פנשא להו. אמר לה: שבקינהו. כתיב: “ורחמיו על כל מעשיו”. אמרו: הואיל ומרתם – נרתם עליה.

...the afflictions of Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, were greater than those of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi. The reason is that whereas the afflictions of Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, came upon him out of love, and left him out of love, i.e., they were solely the result of his own request, those of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi came upon him due to an incident and left him due to another incident.

Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi's suffering came upon him due to an incident. What was that incident that led to his suffering?

That there was a certain calf that was being led to slaughter. The calf went and hung its head on the corner of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi's garment and was weeping.

Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi said to it: Go, as you were created for this purpose.

It was said in Heaven: Since he was not compassionate toward the calf, let afflictions come upon him.

And Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi's suffering left him due to another incident. One day, the maidservant of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi was sweeping his house. There were young weasels [*karkushta*] lying about, and she was in the process of sweeping

them out. Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi said to her: Let them be, as it is written: "The Lord is good to all; and His mercies are over all His works" (Psalms 145:9).

They said [in heaven], "Since he has shown compassion, let us be compassionate to him."



Explaining the Story

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

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? What do you think is the meaning of the expression "the afflictions of Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, were greater than those of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi"?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

? Why did the calf hang its head among the folds of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi's garment?

? What did Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi mean by telling the calf: "Go, as you were created for this purpose"?

Bonus ? Do you believe Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi knew that afflictions were about to come upon him if he told the calf: "Go, as you were created for this purpose"?

Extra Bonus ? Why did suffering come upon Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

? Why did Rabbi *Yehuda HaNasi's* maidservant start sweeping some young weasels out of the house?

? What were the young weasels doing in the house?

Bonus ? Do you believe Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi knew that afflictions were about to leave him if he told his maidservant to leave the weasels alone?

? Why did Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi instruct the maidservant to leave the young weasels alone?

? How did Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi become more compassionate?

? Why did suffering leave Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Bonus ? How do we know that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi's transformation was sincere and that he learned his lesson?

? What else, besides his instruction to his maidservant, is indicative of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi's transformation?

Extra Bonus ? Do you think you could make a case showing that the afflictions of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi were greater than the ones of Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon?

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

! Compassion: the character trait Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi learned the "hard way," and we can learn the "easy way".



How does one learn to be compassionate? Our story seems to indicate that suffering can certainly be a powerful, albeit, harsh teacher.

Empathy (the ability to understand and share the feelings of others) is a character trait emotionally healthy individuals possess. Like all important lessons in life, we can learn them the "easy way" or the "hard way."

Our story invites the reader to incorporate compassion into his or her own life, and to learn the "easy way" from Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi's harsh experience ("hard way").