

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist
[86]

Give me Your Hand
Insights into Babylonian Talmud Berachot 5b



Background to Our Story

Rabbi Yoĥanan



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Berachot. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 28.

Rabbi Yoĥanan bar Nappaĥa, one of the greatest amora'im, whose teachings are fundamental components of both the Babylonian and the Jerusalem Talmud. He resided in Tiberias and lived to an advanced age. Almost nothing is known of his family origins. He was orphaned at a young age and, although his family apparently owned considerable property, he spent virtually all of his resources in his devotion to the study of Torah, and he eventually became impoverished. In his youth, he had the privilege of studying under Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, the redactor of the Mishna, but most of his Torah learning was accomplished under Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi's students: Ĥizkiya ben Ĥiyya, Rabbi Oshaya, Rabbi Ĥanina, and Rabbi Yannai, who lavished praise upon him. In time, he became the head of the yeshiva in Tiberias, at which point his fame and influence increased greatly. For a long time, Rabbi Yoĥanan was the leading rabbinic scholar in the entire Jewish world; not only in Eretz Yisrael, but in Babylonia, as well, where he was respected by the Babylonian Sages. Many of them ascended to Eretz Yisrael and became his outstanding students.

He was a master of both halakha and aggada, his teachings in both disciplines are found throughout both of the Talmuds. In recognition of his intellectual and spiritual stature, the halakha is ruled in accordance with his opinion in almost every case, even when Rav or Shmuel, the preeminent amora'im of Babylonia, whom he treated deferentially, disagree with him. Only in disputes with his teachers in Eretz Yisrael, such as Rabbi Yannai and Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, is the halakha not ruled in accordance with his opinion.

Rabbi Yoĥanan was renowned for being handsome, and much was said in praise of his good looks. We know that his life was full of suffering. Ten of his sons died in his lifetime. There is a geonic tradition that one of his sons, Rabbi Mattana, a Babylonian amora, did not predecease him. The death of Rabbi Yoĥanan's disciple-colleague and brother-in-law, Reish Lakish, for which he considered himself responsible, hastened his own death.

Rabbi Yoĥanan had many students. In fact, all of the amora'im of Eretz Yisrael in succeeding generations were his students and benefited from his teachings, to the extent that he is

considered the author of the Jerusalem Talmud. His greatest students were his brother-in-law Reish Lakish, Rabbi Elazar, Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Abba, Rabbi Abbahu, Rabbi Yosei bar Ḥanina, Rabbi Ami, and Rabbi Asi.

Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Abba

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Palestinian tanna; born about the middle of the second century, at Kafri, near Sura in Babylonia; pupil of Judah the Prince (Rebbi), and uncle and teacher of Rab. He was a descendant of a family which claimed to trace its origin from Shimei, brother of King David (Ket. 62b). He passed the earlier part of his life in Babylonia, where he married a certain Judith. By her he had twin sons, Judah and Hezekiah (both of whom became renowned rabbis), and twin daughters, Pazi and Tavi (Yeb. 65b).

In the latter part of his life Ḥiyya emigrated to Tiberias, Palestine, where he established a business in silks, which he exported to Tyre (Ruth R. i. 17; Lam. R. iii. 16; Gen. R. lxix.). The high reputation acquired by him in his native country had preceded him to Palestine, and ere long he became the very center of the collegiate circle of the patriarch Judah (Judah, the Prince). Regarding him more as a colleague than as a pupil, Judah treated Ḥiyya as his guest whenever the latter chanced to be at Sepphoris, consulted him, and took him with him when he went to Cæsarea to visit Antoninus (Tan., Wayesheb). His admiration for Ḥiyya was so great that he used to say: "Ḥiyya and his sons are as meritorious as the Patriarchs" (B. M. 25b).

It was a current saying among the Palestinians that since the arrival of Ḥiyya in Palestine storms did not occur and wine did not turn sour (Ḥul. 86a). His prayers are said to have brought rain in a time of drought and to have caused a lion, which had rendered the roads unsafe, to leave Palestine (Gen. R. xxxi.). Other miracles of the same kind are credited to him. He was especially lauded by his Babylonian compatriots. Simeon ben Lakish names him after the two other Babylonians, Ezra and Hillel, who came to Palestine to restore the study of the Torah (Suk. 20a). However exaggerated this assertion may be, Ḥiyya was certainly very active in the promotion of learning in Palestine. He founded schools for children and often acted as instructor.

Ḥiyya's activity in the field of the Halakah was very extensive. To him and his pupil Hoshea is due the redaction of the traditional halakot which had not been included by Judah, the Prince in the Mishnah. These halakot are known under the various names of "Baraitot de-Rabbi Ḥiyya," "Mishnat de-Rabbi Ḥiyya," and "Mishnayot Gedolot." Some of them are introduced in the Talmud with the words "Tane Rabbi Ḥiyya," and are considered the only correct version of the halakot omitted by Judah (Ḥul. 141a). Ḥiyya was the author of original halakot also, which he derived from the Mishnah by the hermeneutic rules. Although very conservative, he opposed the issuing of new prohibitions. "Make not the fence higher than the Law itself, lest it should fall and destroy the plants" (Gen. R. xix.). Ḥiyya seems to have contributed to the Sifra the redaction of the tannaitic midrash to Leviticus, where his sayings are often quoted. From the time of Sherira Gaon, Ḥiyya was generally regarded as the author of the Tosefta; but the supposition has been rejected on very strong grounds by modern scholars (see Tosefta).

Ḥiyya was a physician of high repute. The Talmud quotes many of his medical utterances, among which is a description of the development of the embryo in the womb which betrays considerable medical knowledge (Nid. 25a). Ḥiyya is represented in the Talmud as having been a model of virtue and goodness; his house is said to have been always open to the poor (Shab. 151b). At his death, relates a haggadah, stones of fire fell from the skies (M. K. 25b).

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Rabbi Ḥanina



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Yoma. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 239.

This is Rabbi Ḥanina bar Ḥama, who lived in the transitional generation between the *tanna'im* and *amora'im*. Rabbi Ḥanina was born in Babylonia, but emigrated to Eretz Yisrael at a very young age, where he studied Torah from Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi. His teacher was very fond of him, saying that Rabbi Ḥanina was not a human being, but an angel. Rabbi Ḥanina also studied under Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi's greatest students, in particular Rabbi Ḥiyya. At the time of his death, Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi appointed Rabbi Ḥanina as head of the yeshiva, but in his humility, Rabbi Ḥanina refused to accept the position during the lifetime of his older colleague, Rabbi Afas.

Rabbi Ḥanina lived in the city of Tzipori, where he dealt in the honey trade, from which he grew wealthy. He used his money to build a large study hall. Rabbi Ḥanina is considered one of the cleverest scholars of his generation and was also renowned for his righteousness and kindness. Rabbi Ḥanina's halakhic and aggadic statements abound both in the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds, and as he enjoyed a long and healthy life, he taught many students over several generations. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi was his student and colleague, and he was also privileged to teach Rabbi Yoḥanan for many years. The *amora* Rabbi Ḥama, son of Rabbi Ḥanina, was possibly his son.

Oy Vey! – Afflictions and their Reward

Excerpt from an article by Chanan Morrison

The Talmudic sages discussed the topic of suffering in the world at length. While they tried to understand this problematic phenomenon, they were equally concerned with the question of how one should respond to these challenges.

If a person sees that he is suffering, he should examine his conduct.... If he has examined his actions and found no wrongdoing, he should attribute the suffering to *bitul Torah* (neglect of Torah study), as it says, "Fortunate is the person whom You, God, afflict; You teach him from Your Torah."

And if he finds that he is not guilty of neglecting Torah study, then these afflictions must be 'Afflictions of Love.' As it says, "God rebukes those whom He loves." (Proverbs 3:12) (*B'rachot* 5a)

The sages understood that there are no pat formulas to explain suffering in this world. There may be completely righteous individuals, innocent of all misconduct, including *bitul Torah*, and still they endure pain and suffering. Therefore, the sages introduced a concept called 'Afflictions of Love.' These afflictions are not a form of punishment, nor do they come to

correct some fault on the part of sufferer. Rather, they are an expression of Divine love. But what kind of love is this?

There are some aspects of character refinement that cannot be attained by any other means. Not by individual effort, not by good deeds, not even by Torah study. The only means to ennoble the spirit and attain a higher ethical perfection is through Afflictions of Love - a gift granted by God that allows one to achieve a spiritual level above and beyond his own natural capabilities.

Understanding the concept of 'Afflictions of Love' helps elucidate King David's assertion, "Fortunate is the person whom You, God, afflict."

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Berachot 5b

רבי חייה בר אבא חלש, על לגביה רבי יוחנן.
אמר ליה: תביבין עליה יסורין? אמר ליה: לא הוּן ולא שְׁכָרוּן. אמר ליה: הוּב לי יְדָד! יְהוּב ליה יְדִיה
וְאוֹקְמִיה.
רבי יוחנן חלש, על לגביה רבי חנינא. אמר ליה: תביבין עליה יסורין? אמר ליה: לא הוּן ולא שְׁכָרוּן.
אמר ליה: הוּב לי יְדָד! יְהוּב ליה יְדִיה וְאוֹקְמִיה.
אמאי? לוקים רבי יוחנן לנפשיה! אמרי: אין תבוש מתיר עצמו מבית האסורים.

Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Abba, fell ill. Rabbi Yoḥanan entered to visit him, and said to him: Is your suffering dear to you?

Rabbi Ḥiyya said to him: I welcome neither this suffering nor its reward.

Rabbi Yoḥanan said to him: Give me your hand. Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Abba gave him his hand, and Rabbi Yoḥanan stood him up and restored him to health.

Similarly, Rabbi Yoḥanan fell ill. Rabbi Ḥanina entered to visit him, and said to him: Is your suffering dear to you?

Rabbi Yoḥanan said to him: I welcome neither this suffering nor its reward.

Rabbi Ḥanina said to him: Give me your hand. He gave him his hand, and Rabbi Ḥanina stood him up and restored him to health.

Why did Rabbi Yoḥanan wait for Rabbi Ḥanina to restore him to health? If he was able to heal his student, let Rabbi Yoḥanan stand himself up.

They [people] say: A prisoner cannot free himself from prison.



Explaining the Story - What is going on in our story? (Explain the sequence of events)

Comprehension Questions

? Why did Rabbi Yoĥanan go to visit Rabbi Ĥiyya bar Abba?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Bonus ? What did Rabbi Yoĥanan mean by his question to Rabbi Ĥiyya bar Abba "Is your suffering dear to you?"

? What did Rabbi Ĥiyya mean by his reply: "I welcome neither this suffering nor its reward"?

Bonus ? How did Rabbi Yoĥanan restore Rabbi Ĥiyya to health?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

Answer 5 _____

? Why can't Rabbi Yoĥanan restore himself to health?

Analysis Questions

Extra Bonus ? Why do you think the Talmud tells us the same exact story twice, the second time with Rabbi Yochanan being sick and Rabbi Ĥanina visiting him?

Extra Bonus ? Why do you think the Talmud brings a story in which two great rabbis as Rabbi Ĥiyya and Rabbi Yoĥanan welcome neither their suffering nor its reward"?

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

! A prisoner cannot free himself from prison!

! Give me your hand: building a "sacred community" in which everybody lends a hand, everybody needs (sooner or later) a hand, and everybody is agreeable to accept help.



Our story brings together three of the greatest teachers in the Talmud. Their lesson, however, is not about a difficult text, but about life itself. Although suffering is an intrinsic part of life, and may serve a purpose, you don't have to "rejoice" over it. Furthermore, you should be ready to help alleviate the suffering of others, and accept help when others wish to help alleviate your own suffering.

Last but not least, our story reminds us that everyone can use "a hand" regardless of how great or strong he or she is.