

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist
[88]



When He Heard He Did Not Come Again
Insights into Babylonian Talmud Ketubot 103a

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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 Tzipori. 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



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.

Babylonian Talmud Ketubot 103a

”גַּר יֵהָא דְלוּק בְּמְקוֹמוֹ, שׁוּלְחָן יֵהָא עָרוּךְ בְּמְקוֹמוֹ, מִטָּה תֵהָא מוּצַעַת בְּמְקוֹמָהּ.” מַאי טַעְמָא? כֹּל בֵּי שְׂמַיִם הָיָה אֲתֵי לְבֵיתָהּ.
הָיָה בֵּי שְׂמַיִם אֲתֵי שַׁבָּתָא, קָא קָרִיָּה אַבְבָּא . אֲמַרָּה אֲמַתֵּיהּ : שְׁתִּיקוּ, דְּרַבִּי יְהוּדָה בֵּינָן דְּשָׁמַע – שׁוּב לָא אָתָּא, שְׁלָא לְהוֹצִיא לְעוֹזְלֵי צְדִיקִים הָרְאוּשׁוֹנִים.

Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi commanded his sons: My lamp should be lit in its usual place, my table should be set in its usual place, and the bed should be arranged in its usual place.

What is the reason he made these requests?

Every Shabbat eve, even after his passing, Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi would come to his house as he had done during his lifetime.

It happened on a certain Shabbat eve that a neighbor came by and called and knocked at the door. His maidservant said to her: Be quiet, for Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi is sitting.

When he heard his maidservant reveal his presence to the neighbor, he did not come again, so as not to cast aspersions on earlier righteous individuals who did not appear to their families following their death.



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

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

Why did Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi command his sons: My lamp should be lit in its place, my table should be set in its place, and the bed should be arranged in its place?

Why did Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi want to return to his home every Friday afternoon after his death?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

Bonus Why was Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi able to return to his home every Friday afternoon after his death?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Bonus Do you think Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi returned to his home every Friday afternoon in his bodily form or in his spiritual form? What is challenging about assuming that Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi returned in his bodily form? What is challenging about assuming that Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi returned in his spiritual form?

Why can we assume that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi's household looked forward to his weekly visits?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Why did a neighbor knock on the door one Friday afternoon?

Extra Bonus How many times do you think Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi visited his house after his death, before the incident with the neighbor took place?

Extra Bonus Why did Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi's maidservant tell the neighbor: "Be quiet, for Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi is sitting"?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Extra Bonus Why did Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi decided to discontinue his visits? Who suffered from his decision?

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

! The price of doing the right thing!

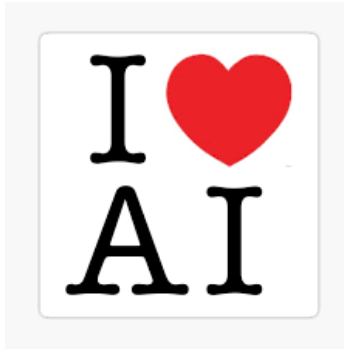
! Bragging has a cost!

(A message from the past....)

As Carol reads these reflections, I am in Los Angeles studying with my colleagues from the Hartman Institute at our annual winter retreat. First, thank you very much, Carol, for leading the discussion. We now know you can do this in the future as well!

My first "twist" is: "The price of doing the right thing." Though Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi and his household looked forward to the visits, he decided to stop coming. Doing the right thing—in this case, preventing derogatory talk about the great men of previous generations (i.e., "Our rabbi is greater than your rabbi")—comes at a cost. The price is that Rabbi Yehuda and his family will no longer enjoy these visits. In life, doing the right thing often has a price, and our story teaches us that we should be willing to pay it when necessary.

A second (and secondary) twist is: "Bragging has a cost." Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi's maidservant felt proud that her master was unique and that she was part of such a special experience. While she didn't boast about the visits publicly (as the household would not have approved), she found a subtle way to let the "outside world" know that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi was visiting after his death. She was hinting that both the Rabbi and she were special. Her bragging, however, had a cost: the visits stopped, and no one—including herself—could enjoy them again. Our story reminds us that in life, bragging may offer a short-lived reward, but in the long run, it often comes with a high price tag.



Here are the answers based on the Talmudic story in Ketubos 103a:

◆ AI Overview

Why did Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi command his sons: My lamp should be lit in its place, my table should be set in its place, and the bed should be arranged in its place?

Answer 1: He requested this because he planned to return to his home every Friday evening (Shabbat eve) to recite Kiddush for his family, just as he had done during his lifetime.

Answer 2: He wanted to maintain the sanctity and routine of his household to ensure his family could continue to fulfill their obligations and feel his presence.

Bonus: Why was Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi able to return to his home every Friday afternoon after his death?

Because of his extreme righteousness and piety, he was permitted to return to his home on Shabbat eve to continue his spiritual service, similar to the story of Rabbi Meir.

Bonus: Do you think Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi returned to his home every Friday afternoon in his bodily form or in his spiritual form? What is challenging about assuming that Rabbi Yehudah returned in his bodily form? What is challenging about assuming that Rabbi Yehudah returned in his spiritual form?

- **Bodily/Spiritual:** Opinions differ, with some commentaries suggesting a spiritual form that appeared physical, while others suggest his physical body remained uncorrupted.

- **Challenge of Bodily Form:** It contradicts the physical reality of death and decomposition, raising questions about how a buried body can move and return home.
- **Challenge of Spiritual Form:** If it was purely a spirit, it is halakhically challenging to understand how he could recite Kiddush to fulfill the obligations of living people, as only those obligated in a mitzvah can fulfill it for others.

Why can we assume that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi's household looked forward to his weekly visits?

Answer 1: It provided spiritual comfort and reassurance to his family, allowing them to maintain a connection with him.

Answer 2: He would recite Kiddush for them, enabling them to fulfill their obligation to hear the Shabbat blessing.

Why did a neighbor knock on the door one Friday afternoon?

The neighbor was likely visiting, perhaps to request something or to greet the family, and was unaware that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi was conducting a private service.

Extra Bonus: How many times do you think Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi's visited his house after his death, before the incident with the neighbor took place?

The text does not specify the exact number of times, only that he returned "every Shabbat eve" from the time of his death until the incident occurred, implying it was a regular occurrence over some time.

Extra Bonus: Why did Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi's maidservant tell the neighbor: "Be quiet, for Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi is sitting"?

Answer 1: She told the neighbor to be quiet because she heard or saw the Rabbi sitting in his place, preparing to or reciting Kiddush.

Answer 2: She likely meant that the Rabbi was present and engaged in sacred activity, demanding respect and silence for that moment.

Extra Bonus: Why did Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi decided to discontinue his visits? Who suffered from his decision?

- **Why:** He stopped because the maidservant revealed his presence, and he did not want his return to become public knowledge and "cast aspersions" (dishonor) on earlier righteous individuals who did not return after their death.
- **Who suffered:** His household and family suffered, as they lost the spiritual guidance, connection, and assistance in fulfilling the Shabbat mitzvot from their father/master.