

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist
[89]

"When will the Messiah Come?"
(Insights into Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 98a)



Background to Our Story

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Berakhot. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 22.

One of the greatest amora'im of the first generation in Eretz Yisrael, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi was, according to some opinions, the son of Levi ben Sisi, one of the outstanding students of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi. Apparently, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi himself was one of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi's younger students.

Many halakhic disputes are recorded between him and Rabbi Yoĥanan, who was apparently his younger disciple-colleague. In general, the halakha is ruled in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, even against Rabbi Yoĥanan, who was the leading authority at that time.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi was also a renowned teacher of aggada. Because of the great esteem in which he was held, aggadic statements in his name are cited at the end of the six orders of the Mishna.

A great deal is told of his piety and sanctity; he is regarded as one of the most righteous men who ever lived. Among other things, it is told that he would sit with the most dangerously infected lepers and study Torah. He was famous as a worker of miracles, to whom Elijah the Prophet appeared, and his prayers were always answered. According to tradition, the Angel of Death had no dominion over him, and he entered the Garden of Eden alive.

He taught many students. All of the Sages of the succeeding generation were his students to some degree and cite Torah pronouncements in his name. His son, Rabbi Yosef, was also a Torah scholar, and married into the family of the Nasi.

Elijah, the Prophet in the Aggadah and Talmud



<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elijah>

Jewish legends about Elijah abound in the aggadah, which is found throughout various collections of rabbinic literature, including the Babylonian Talmud. This varied literature does not merely discuss his life, but has created a new history of him, which, beginning with his death - or "translation" - ends only with the close of the history of the human race. The volume of references to Elijah in Jewish Tradition stands in marked contrast to that in the Canon. As in the case of most figures of Jewish legend, so in the case of Elijah, the Biblical account became the basis of later legend. Elijah the precursor of the Messiah, Elijah zealous in the cause of God, Elijah the helper in distress: these are the three leading notes struck by the Aggadah, endeavoring to complete the Biblical picture with the Elijah legends. His career is extensive, colorful, and varied. He has appeared the world over in the guise of a beggar and scholar.

From the time of Malachi, who says of Elijah that God will send him before "the great and dreadful day" (Mal. 3:23), down to the later stories of the Chasidic rabbis, reverence and love, expectation and hope, were always connected in the Jewish consciousness with Elijah.

Messiah



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Messiah_in_Judaism

Belief in the eventual coming of a future messiah is a fundamental part of Judaism, and is one of Maimonides' 13 Principles of Faith. The term Messiah is derived from the Hebrew "Mashiach", which means "the anointed one," and refers to the ancient practice of anointing kings with oil when they took the throne. The Messiah is the one who will be anointed as king in the End of Days.

There are many references to the Mashiach and to the End of Days throughout the Tanakh, especially in the section of the Nevi'im (prophets).

The Talmud is replete with references and anecdotes about the Messiah and the Messianic era, and also provides exegesis of scriptural verses which illustrate the events that will occur at that time.

The Messianic Age is described as follows by Maimonides:

"And at that time there will be no hunger or war, no jealousy or rivalry. For the good will be plentiful, and all delicacies available as dust. The entire occupation of the world will be only to know G-d... the people Israel will be of great wisdom; they will perceive the esoteric truths and comprehend their Creator's wisdom as is the capacity of man. As it is written (Isaiah 11:9): "For the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of G-d, as the waters cover the sea." "

Maimonides describes the identity of the Messiah in the following terms:

"And if a king shall arise from among the House of David, studying Torah and occupied with commandments like his father David, according to the written and oral Torah, and he will impel all of Israel to follow it and to strengthen breaches in its observance, and will fight Hashem's [God's] wars, this one is to be treated as if he were the anointed one.

If he succeeded and built the Holy Temple in its proper place and gathered the dispersed ones of Israel together, this is indeed the anointed one for certain, and he will mend the entire world to worship the Lord together, as it is stated: "For then I shall turn for the nations a clear tongue, so that they will all proclaim the Name of the Lord, and to worship Him with a united resolve (Zephaniah 3:9)."

The concept of the coming of The Messiah was held in the highest regard by pre-Christian Judaism. The Talmud records: "All the prophets prophesied [all the good things] only in respect of the Messianic era." In another folio, the Talmud says, "The Jews are destined to eat [their fill] in the days of the Messiah," and "The world was created only...for the sake of the Messiah."

The literal translation of the word, messiah (moshiach), is "anointed," which refers to a ritual of consecrating someone or something by putting holy oil upon it.^[1 Sam. 10:1-2] It is used throughout the Jewish Bible in reference to a wide variety of individuals and objects; for example, a Jewish king,^[1 Kings 1:39] Jewish priests,^[Lev. 4:3] and prophets,^[Isa. 61:1] the Jewish Temple and its utensils,^[Ex. 40:9-11] unleavened bread,^[Num. 6:15] and a non-Jewish king (Cyrus king of Persia).^[Isa. 45:1]

A common modern rabbinic interpretation is that there is a potential messiah in every generation. Modern, rabbinical Judaism asserts that a unique future physical messiah will usher in the messianic age of peace to the world.

In Judaism today, as always, the fervent—in the words of Rambam—"believe in the coming of the Messiah and await it daily although it may be delayed." As religious Jews were herded into the gas chambers by the Nazis, a song arose as if to proclaim that no force can wreck their trust in the Messianic future, to the words of the Rambam.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's Cave

◆ AI Overview

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (Rashbi) was a 2nd-century Tannaite sage and key Jewish mystic who hid in a cave for 13 years to escape Roman persecution. According to Talmudic tradition, he and his son Elazar survived on a miraculous carob tree and spring, spending their time studying the Zohar's foundational teachings.

Key Details About the Cave Tale:

- Duration: The rabbis lived in the cave for 12 years, then an additional year after emerging and realizing they were too detached from worldly life.
- Conditions: To protect their clothes from wearing out, they covered themselves with sand, sitting naked while studying.
- The Miracle: A carob tree and a water spring were created to sustain them.
- Ending the Exile: Elijah the Prophet informed them that the emperor died, allowing them to leave.

Legacy and Impact:

- Lag BaOmer: The anniversary of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's death is celebrated annually on Lag BaOmer, particularly at his burial place on Mount Meron, which is one of Israel's most visited holy sites.
- Kabbalah: He is revered as the author of the Zohar, the central work of Kabbalah.
- Teachings: His life is viewed as a testament to spiritual devotion and Torah study,

The World to Come (Olam Ha-Ba)

The spiritual afterlife is referred to in Hebrew as Olam Ha-Ba (oh-LAHM hah-BAH), the World to Come, although this term is also used to refer to the messianic age. The Olam Ha-Ba is another, higher state of being.

In the Mishnah, one rabbi says, "This world is like a lobby before the Olam Ha-Ba. Prepare yourself in the lobby so that you may enter the banquet hall." Similarly, the Talmud says, "This world is like the eve of Shabbat, and the Olam Ha-Ba is like Shabbat. He who prepares on the eve of Shabbat will have food to eat on Shabbat." We prepare ourselves for the Olam Ha-Ba through Torah study and good deeds.

Psalms 95:7

כִּי־הוּא אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאִנְחָנוּ עִם מְרֵעִיתוֹ וְצֹאן יְדֹו הַיּוֹם אִם־בְּקִלּוֹ תִשְׁמָעוּ:

For he is our God; and we are the people in his care, and the sheep of his flock. Today, if you would only give ear to his voice!

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 98a

רבי יהושע בן לוי אשכח לאלהו, דהוי קיימי אפיתקא דמערתא דרבי שמעון בן יוחאי. אמר ליה: "אתינא לעלמא דאתי"? אמר ליה: "אם ירצה אדון תזה". אמר רבי יהושע בן לוי: "שנים ראיתי וקול שלשה שמעת?".

אמר ליה: "אימת אתי משיח"? אמר ליה: "זיל שניליה לדידיה". "והיכא יתיב"? אפיתקא דרומי. "ומאי סימניה"? "יתיב ביני ענני סובלי תלאים, וכולן שרו ונאסירי בחד זימנא, איהו שרי חד ונאסיר חד. אמר: דילמא מבעינא, דלא איעכב". אזל לגביה. אמר ליה: "שלום עליך רבי ומורי!" אמר ליה: "שלום עליך בר ליואי". אמר ליה: "לאימת אתי מר"? אמר ליה: "היום". אתא לגבי אליהו.

אמר ליה: "מאי אמר לך"? אמר ליה: "שלום עליך בר ליואי". אמר ליה: "אבטחך לך ולאבוד לעלמא דאתי". אמר ליה: "שקורי קא שקר בי, דאמר לי: 'היום אתינא', ולא אתא!" אמר ליה: "הכי אמר לך: 'היום אם בקלוי תשמעו'".

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi found Elijah the prophet, who was standing at the entrance of the cave of Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said to him: Will I be privileged to come to the World-to-Come? Elijah said to him: If this Master will wish it so. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi says: Two I saw, Elijah and me, and the voice of three I heard, as the Divine Presence was also there, and it was in reference to Him that Elijah said: If this Master will wish it so.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said to Elijah: When will the Messiah come?

Elijah said to him: Go, ask him.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi asked: And where is he sitting?

Elijah said to him: At the entrance of the city of Rome.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi asked him: And what is his identifying sign by means of which I can recognize him?

Elijah answered: He sits among the poor who suffer from illnesses. And all of them untie their bandages and tie them all at once, but the Messiah unties one bandage and ties one at a time. He says: Perhaps I will be needed. Therefore, I will never tie more than one bandage, so that I will not be delayed.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi went to the Messiah. He said to the Messiah: Greetings [Shalom] to you, my rabbi and my teacher.

The Messiah said to him: Greetings [Shalom] to you, son of Levi.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said to him [the Messiah]: When will the Master come?

The Messiah said to him: Today.

Sometime later, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi came to Elijah. Elijah said to him: What did the Messiah say to you?

He said to Elijah that the Messiah said: Greetings [shalom] to you, son of Levi.

Elijah said to him: He thereby guaranteed that you and your father are destined to enter the World-to-Come, as he greeted you with shalom.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said to Elijah: The Messiah lied to me, as he said to me: I am coming today, and he did not come.

Elijah said to him that this is what he said to you: He said that he will come "today, if you will listen to his voice" (Psalms 95:7).



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

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? What was Elijah the Prophet doing at the entrance of the cave of Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Bonus ? Based on what you read in the background, what do Elijah, the prophet, Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai, and Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi have in common?

Bonus ? Why did Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi want to know if he would come to the World to Come?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

? Why did he ask Elijah the Prophet?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

Bonus ? What did Elijah mean by the answer: "If this Master will wish"?

Bonus ? Who are the two people Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi saw? Who are the three he heard?

Bonus ? Why does Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi want to know when the Messiah will come?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

? Why did he ask Elijah the Prophet?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

? Where is the Messiah to be found?

? Where is the Messiah not to be found?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

Answer 5 _____

Answer 6 _____

? What is unique about the way the Messiah ties and unties his bandages?

Bonus ? How was Elijah able to infer from the Messiah's greeting that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi and his father were destined to the World to Come?

? Why does Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi believe the Messiah lied to him?

? How did Elijah the Prophet interpret the reply of the Messiah to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi?

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

! "When will the Messiah Come?" - Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi's "today" versus Elijah's "today."

! Where is the Messiah to be found?



Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi is a curious person. He wishes to know, like most of us, if he would be worthy of the World to Come. He also wishes to know when the Messiah will arrive.

In his interactions with Elijah, the prophet, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi learns that the Messiah is not waiting in a heavenly abode to be called to his redeeming mission, but instead he spends the time at the gate of Rome among the poor who suffer from illnesses.

In his interactions with Elijah, the prophet, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi also learns that his personal redemption is secure, and that he and his father are worthy of the World to Come. However, the collective redemption -the coming of the Messiah- is contingent to the Jewish people listening to God's voice, and doing what is expected from them.

Lastly, perhaps the Messiah was hinting to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi that one way to help bring about the redemption is to spend time with the poor and the ill, sharing in their suffering.