

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [90]

Rabbi Yoĥanan Heard, But Ilfa Did Not Hear. Rabbi Yoĥanan Returned, And Ilfa Did Not Return. Insights into Babylonian Talmud Ta'anit 21a



Background to Our Story

Rabbi Yoĥanan

This is 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 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 Ĥiyya bar Abba, Rabbi Abbahu, Rabbi Yosei bar Ĥanina, Rabbi Ami, and Rabbi Asi.

Ilfa



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Ta'anit. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 121.

Ilfa was from the first generation of amora'im in Eretz Yisrael. In the Jerusalem Talmud, he is known as Ĥilfai. Apparently, he was a disciple of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, and he also studied under some of his rabbi's students. As related here, he was a friend of Rabbi Yoĥanan's. Ilfa was the older of the pair, and indeed Rabbi Yoĥanan and his disciples transmit statements in his name. Still, Ilfa also asked Rabbi Yoĥanan questions. Ilfa had a very sharp mind and was one of the greatest Torah scholars of his generation. Furthermore, he also taught aggada, as several statements of aggada are attributed to him. Likewise, stories are related of his piety and great righteousness.

Deuteronomy 15:4

However, there should be no needy among you, for in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you.

Deuteronomy 15:11

For the needy shall never cease out of the land. Therefore, I command you to be open-handed toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.

Mishna



The Mishnah or Mishna (Hebrew: משנה, "repetition", from the verb shanah שנה, or "to study and review") is the first major written redaction of the Jewish oral traditions called the "Oral Torah" and the first major work of Rabbinic Judaism. It was redacted c. 220 CE by Judah haNasi when, according to the Talmud, the persecution of the Jews and the passage of time raised the possibility that the details of the oral traditions dating from Pharisaic times (536 BCE – 70 CE) would be forgotten. It is thus named for being both the one written authority (codex) secondary (only) to the Tanakh as a basis for the passing of judgment, a source and a tool for creating laws, and the first of many books to complement the Bible in a certain aspect. The Mishnah is also called Shas (an acronym for Shisha Sedarim - the "six orders"), in reference to its six main divisions. Rabbinic commentaries on the Mishnah over the next three centuries were redacted as the Gemara, which, coupled with the Mishnah, comprise the Talmud.

The Mishnah reflects debates between 70-200 CE by the group of rabbinic sages known as the Tannaim. The Mishnah teaches the oral traditions by example, presenting actual cases being brought to judgment, usually along with the debate on the matter and the judgment that was given by a wise and notable rabbi based on the halakha, Mitzvot, and spirit of the teaching ("Torah") that guided his sentencing. In this way, it brings to everyday reality the practice of the mitzvot as presented in the Bible, and aimed to cover all aspects of human living, serve as an example for future judgments, and, most importantly, demonstrate

pragmatic exercise of the Biblical laws, which was much needed at the time when the Second Temple was destroyed (70 CE). The Mishnah does not claim to be the development of new laws, but rather the collection of existing traditions.

The Mishnah consists of six orders (sedarim, singular seder סדר), each containing 7-12 tractates (masechtot, singular masechet מסכת; lit. "web"), 63 in total, and further subdivided into chapters and paragraphs or verses. The orders and their subjects are: Zeraim ("Seeds"), dealing with prayer and blessings, tithes and agricultural laws (11 tractates), Moed ("Festival"), pertaining to the laws of the Sabbath and the Festivals (12 tractates), Nashim ("Women"), concerning marriage and divorce, some forms of oaths and the laws of the nazirite (7 tractates), Nezikin ("Damages"), dealing with civil and criminal law, the functioning of the courts and oaths (10 tractates), Kodashim ("Holy things"), regarding sacrificial rites, the Temple, and the dietary laws (11 tractates) and Tohorot ("Purities"), pertaining to the laws of purity and impurity, including the impurity of the dead, the laws of food purity and bodily purity (12 tractates).

The word Mishnah can also indicate a single paragraph or verse of the work itself, i.e. the smallest unit of structure in the Mishnah.

Baraita



Baraita (Aramaic ברייתא: "external", "outside"; pl. Baraitot (actually, Barayata). Also Baraitha, Beraita, Ashkenazi Beraisa) designates a tradition in the Jewish oral law not incorporated in the Mishnah. "Baraita" thus refers to teachings "outside" of the six orders of the Mishnah. Originally, "Baraita" probably referred to teachings from schools outside of the main Mishnaic-era academies - although in later collections, individual Baraitot are often authored by sages of the Mishna (Tannaim). According to Rambam (Introduction to Mishna Torah), the baraitot were compiled by Rabbi Hoshaya and bar Qappara, although no compilation was passed down to us like the Tosefta was.

Because the Mishnah encapsulates the entire Oral Law in a purposely compact form (designed to both facilitate and necessitate oral transmission), many variant versions, additional explanations, clarifications and rulings were not included in the Mishnah. These were later compiled in works called the "Baraitot" - often in the form of a list of teachings by one sage. "Baraita" can thus also designate collections of such traditions. The main collections of Baraita are the Tosefta, and the Halakhic Midrashim (Mekhilta, Sifra and Sifre).

The authority of the Baraita is somewhat less than that of the Mishnah. Nevertheless, these works are the basic "proof-text" cross-referenced by the Talmudic sages in their analysis and interpretation of the Mishna; See Gemara. Here, a teaching from the Baraita is usually introduced by the Aramaic word "Tanya" ("It was orally taught") or by "Tanu Rabanan" ("Our Rabbis have orally taught"), whereas "Tnan" ("We have orally taught") introduces quotations from the Mishnah. Anonymous Baraitot are often attributed to particular Tannaim by the Talmud. In the Jerusalem Talmud, references to Baraitot are less common.

Reconciling a Mishnah and a Baraita

◆ AI Overview

Reconciling a Mishnah (the core, redacted Oral Law) and a Baraita (an external, Tannaite teaching omitted from the Mishnah) is a primary function of the Gemara (Talmud).

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Ta'anit 21a

אילפא ורבי יוחנן הוו גרסי באורייתא, דחיקא להו מילתא טובא. אמרי: ניקום ונזיל וניעבד עיסקא, ונקיבם בנפשין: "אפס כי לא יהיה בך אביון". אזלו, אותבי תותי גודא רעיטא. הו קא פרכי ריפתא.

אתו תרי מלאכי השרת. שמעיה רבי יוחנן דאמר חד לחבריה: גישדי עליהו האי גודא ונקטלינהו, שמניחין חיי עולם הבא ועוסקין בחיי שעה. אמר ליה אידי: שבקינהו, דאיכא בהו חד דקנימא ליה שעתא. רבי יוחנן שמע, אילפא לא שמע. אמר ליה רבי יוחנן לאילפא: שמע מר מידי? אמר ליה: לא. אמר: מדשמעי אנא ואילפא לא שמע, שמע מינה לדידי קנימא לי שעתא. אמר ליה רבי יוחנן: איקוד ואוקי בנפשאי: "כי לא יחדל אביון מקרב הארץ".

רבי יוחנן קוד, אילפא לא קוד. עד דאתא אילפא, מליך רבי יוחנן.

אמרו לו: אי אתיב מר וגריס, לא הנה מליך מר? אזל תלא נפשיה באסקריא דספינתא, אמר: אי איכא דשאל לי במתניתא דרבי חייא ורבי אושעיא ולא פשטינא ליה ממתניתין נפילנא מאסקריא דספינתא וטבענא".

אתא ההוא סבא, תנא ליה: האומר: תנו שקל לבניי בשבת, והן ראויין לתת להם סלע, נותנין להם סלע. ואם אמר: אל תתנו להם אלא שקל, אין נותנין להם אלא שקל. אם אמר: אם מתו, ירשו אחרים תחתיהם, בין שאמר תנו, בין שאמר אל תתנו, אין נותנין להם אלא שקל. אמר ליה: הא מגי? רבי מאיר היא, דאמר: מצוה לקיים דברייהמת.

Ilfa and Rabbi Yoĥanan studied Torah together, and they became very hard-pressed for money.

They said, "Let us get up and go and engage in commerce, and we will fulfill, with regard to ourselves, the verse: 'Although there should be no needy among you,' (Deuteronomy 15:4), as we will no longer be complete paupers." They went and sat under a dilapidated wall and were eating bread, when two ministering angels arrived.

Rabbi Yoĥanan heard that one angel said to the other, "Let us knock this wall down upon them and kill them, as they abandon eternal life of Torah study and engage in temporal life for their own sustenance." The other angel said to him, "Leave them, as there is one of them whose time of achievement stands before him, i.e., his time has yet to come." Rabbi Yoĥanan heard all this, but Ilfa did not hear the angels' conversation.

Rabbi Yoĥanan said to Ilfa, "Did the Master hear anything?" Ilfa said to him, "No." Rabbi Yoĥanan said to himself, "Since I heard the angels and Ilfa did not hear, I can learn from this that it is I whose time of achievement stands before me."

Rabbi Yoĥanan said to Ilfa, "I will return home and fulfill with regard to myself the contrary verse: 'For the poor shall never cease out of the land.' (Deuteronomy 15:11)." Rabbi Yoĥanan returned to the study hall, and Ilfa did not return, but went to engage in business instead.

By the time that Ilfa came back from his business travels, Rabbi Yoĥanan had been appointed head of the academy.

His colleagues said to Ilfa, "If the Master had sat and studied, instead of going off to his business ventures, wouldn't the Master have been appointed head of the academy?"

Ilfa went and suspended himself from the mast of a ship, saying, "If there is anyone who can ask me a question concerning a baraita of Rabbi Ĥiyya and Rabbi Oshaya, and I do not resolve his problem from a mishna, I will fall from the mast of this ship and be drowned."

A certain old man came and taught a baraita before him:

"If there is a man who, upon his deathbed, says in his will, 'Give a shekel to my sons every week, but this is a situation where, based on their needs,' they are fit for the court to give them a sela, i.e., double the amount, they give them a sela. When the dying man mentioned a shekel, he presumably meant that they should be given a sum in accordance with their actual requirements, not that specific amount.

"But if he said, 'Give them only a shekel,' the court gives them only a shekel and no more.

"If one said, 'If my sons die, others should inherit their portion in their stead,' regardless of whether he said, 'Give them a shekel,' or whether he said, 'Give them only a shekel' then the court gives his sons only a shekel per week, as their father clearly stated that he wishes to give his sons only a specific stipend and that he intends to leave the bulk of his property to others."

Ilfa said to the old man, "In accordance with whose opinion is this ruling? It is in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi Meir, who said: It is a mitzva to fulfill the statement of the dead."



Explaining the Text

What's going on here? (The sequence of events)

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Why were Ilfa and Rabbi Yoĥanan very hard-pressed for money?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? What was Ilfa's and Rabbi Yoĥanan's justification to abandon their studies and to embark in business? What were they giving up?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

? Why did one of the ministering angels wish to kill Ilfa and Rabbi Yoĥanan?

? Why did the other ministering angel suggest leaving Ilfa and Rabbi Yoĥanan alone?

Bonus ? Why didn't the ministering angels kill the "one" who wasn't destined to greatness?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Bonus ? Why did Rabbi Yoĥanan hear the angels' conversation, but Ilfa didn't?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

Bonus ? Why did Rabbi Yoĥanan return to his studies?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

? What was Rabbi Yoĥanan's justification to return to his studies? What was he giving up?

Bonus ? Why didn't Ilfa return with Rabbi Yoĥanan?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

? How much time do you think elapsed since Rabbi Yoĥanan and Ilfa separated until Ilfa returned and Rabbi Yoĥanan became the head of the Academy?

? What did Ilfa's former colleagues mean by "If the Master had sat and studied, wouldn't the Master have been appointed head of the academy?"

? What did Ilfa intend to demonstrate by challenging his audience saying, "If there is anyone who can ask me a question concerning a baraita of Rabbi Ĥiyya and Rabbi Oshaya, and I do not resolve his problem from a mishna, I will fall from the mast of this ship and be drowned"?

The Baraita of Rabbi Hiyya and Rabbi Oshaya (What the old man taught)

? *If there is a man who, upon his deathbed, says in his will: Give a shekel to my sons every week, but this is a situation where, based on their needs, they are fit for the court to give them a sela, i.e., double the amount, they give them a sela. Why?*

? *But if he said: Give them only a shekel, the court gives them only a shekel and no more. Why?*

? *If one said: If my sons die, others should inherit their portion in their stead, regardless of whether he said: Give them a shekel, or whether he said: Give them only a shekel, then the court gives his sons only a shekel per week. Why?*

Bonus ? How do we know that Ilfa truly really had the potential of becoming the head of the Academy?

Bonus ? What would you write in Ilfa's "bubble thought"?



Bonus ? What would you write in Rabbi Yohanan's "bubble thought"?



Bonus ? What would you write in the student's "bubble thought"?



“The Twist” – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from the Text

! Life: a unique combination of gifts and choices! (The lesson *Rabbi Yoĥanan* learned and Ilfa didn't).

! Not everybody is gifted but everybody is responsible for his/her own choices (Another lesson Ilfa didn't learn).



Our Story begins as Ilfa and Rabbi Yoĥanan, hard pressed for money, abandon their studies to engage in commerce.

Rabbi Yoĥanan is privy to an exchange between ministering angels, and concludes from that exchange, that he is destined to greatness in the realm of Torah. Rabbi Yoĥanan decides to return to his studies, while Ilfa continues his journey to make a living.

Our story ends with Rabbi Yoĥanan at the head of the academy, and a resentful and jealous Ilfa, perhaps wishing in his heart he had returned with Rabbi Yoĥanan.

Our story is a reminder that while not everyone possesses the gift of hearing the conversations of ministering angels, everyone is free to make their own choices, and at the end of the day, our lives are a result not only of our unique gifts, but especially of our decisions.

