

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [92]

May the Omnipresent Grant You Two Sons Like Bava ben Buta.

Insights into Babylonian Talmud Nedarim 66b

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Background to Our Story

Bava ben Buta



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Nedarim. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 285.

An outstanding student of Shammai and an important Sage of his generation, Bava ben Buta was renowned in his lifetime both for his great righteousness and for his wisdom. Many stories are told of his exceptional humility and his lack of concern for his own honor whenever he could assist in matters involving domestic peace, or to increase the honor of God. He likely served as a judge in Jerusalem and was also highly regarded for his knowledge of worldly matters. It is related in the Talmud that when Herod killed many of the Sages of Israel, he blinded Bava ben Buta but kept him alive so he could continue to seek his advice. The Gemara relates that it was Bava ben Buta who advised Herod to undertake his magnificent rebuilding of the Temple.

Jewish Babylonian Aramaic



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_Babylonian_Aramaic

Jewish Babylonian Aramaic was the form of Middle Aramaic employed by Jewish writers in Babylonia between the 4th century and the 11th century CE. It is most commonly identified with the language of the Babylonian Talmud (which was completed in the seventh century) and of post-Talmudic (Geonic) literature, which are the most important cultural products of Babylonian Jewry.

Jewish Palestinian Aramaic



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_Palestinian_Aramaic

The Jewish Palestinian Aramaic, also called Galilean Aramaic, is a Western Aramaic language spoken by the Jews in Palestine in the early first millennium. Its closest relatives are the Samaritan Aramaic and Christian Palestinian Aramaic. After the defeat of the Bar-Kochba revolt in 135 CE, the center of Jewish learning in the land of Israel moved to Galilee. With the Arab conquest of the country in the 7th Century, Arabic gradually replaced this language. The main text in it is the Jerusalem Talmud, which is still studied in Jewish religious schools and academically, although not as widely as the Babylonian Talmud.

Lamps (Candles) in Ancient Times



Seah and Geriva

◆ AI Overview

Talmudic measures for Seah and Geriva (or Griba/Gerib) refer to volume capacities for dry goods, primarily flour and grains, although historical variations make exact modern equivalents subject to debate.

Modern Equivalent: Estimates range from 7.3 liters to as high as 14.3 liters in some stringent Orthodox rulings.

Married Women's Duties

Extracted from: **JewishEncyclopedia.com**

The husband's right to his wife's earnings is in consideration of his duty to support her; hence if she wishes to support herself, she need not deliver her earnings to him. Yet he cannot compel her to live on her earnings. The wife has to do all the housework, such as baking, cooking, and washing, as well as nursing her children. If she has twins, the husband has to provide a nurse for one, while she nurses the other (Ketubot 59b). If she brought him a large dowry, she need not do any work in the house, except as tends to the case and comfort of her husband and as is of an affectionate nature, viz., prepare his bed, serve at the table, and so forth. At all times, however, she must do something; for "idleness leads to immorality."

Besides these positive legal enactments, Talmudic literature abounds with maxims and precepts regarding the attitude of the husband toward his wife. He shall love her as himself and honor her more than himself (Sanhedrin 76b; Yebamot 62b). "If thy wife is small, bend down and whisper into her ear," was a common saying among the Rabbis; meaning that one should take counsel with his wife in all worldly matters (B. M. 59b; comp. Midr. Leqah

Tob to Num. xvi.). He shall not afflict her; for God counts her tears. One who honors his wife will be rewarded with wealth (B. M. 59b). The husband shall not be imperious in his household (Giṭ. 6b). God's presence dwells in a pure and loving home (Soṭah 17a). The altar sheds tears for him who divorces his first wife; and he is hated before God (Giṭ. 90b). He who sees his wife die before him has, as it were, seen the destruction of the Temple: his world is darkened; his step is slow; his mind is heavy. The wife dies in the husband's death; he in hers (Sanh. 22a).

The rights of the wife are implied in the husband's duties, while her duties are mainly comprised in his rights. She should not go out too much (Gen. R. lxx. 2) and should be modest even if alone with her husband (Shab. 140b). The greatest praise that can be said of a woman is that she fulfils the wishes of her husband (Nedarim 66b).

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Nedarim 66b

ההוא בר בבבלי דארעא דישׂראל, נסיב איתתא. אמר לה: בשילי לי תרי טלפני. בשילה ליה תרי טלפני. רתח עליה.
למחר אמר לה: בשילי לי גרינא. בשילה ליה גרינא. אמר לה: זילי איתי לי תרי בוציני. אזלת ואיתי ליה תרי שרגי.
אמר לה: זילי תברי נתהון על רישא דבבא. הוה יתיב בבא בן בוטא אבבא, וקא דאין דינא. אזלת ומברת נתהון על רישיה.
אמר לה: מה הדין דעבדת?! אמרה ליה: כך ציוני בעלי. אמר: את עשית רצון בעליך – המקום יוציא ממך שני בנים כבבא בן בוטא.

There was a certain Babylonian who went up to Eretz Yisrael and married a woman there. He said to her: Cook two lentils, i.e., some lentils, for me. She cooked exactly two lentils for him. He grew angry with her. On the following day, so that she would not repeat what she had done, he said to her: Cook a se'a [geriva] for me, intending: A large amount. She cooked an actual se'a for him, far more than what one person could eat. He said to her: Go and bring me two butzinei, intending small gourds, as butzinei are small gourds in the Aramaic dialect spoken in Babylonia. She went and brought him two lamps [sheraggei], called butzinei in the Aramaic dialect spoken in Eretz Yisrael.

He said to her: Go and break them on the head of the bava, intending the top of the gate, as bava means a gate in the Aramaic dialect spoken in Babylonia. She did not recognize this word.

At that time, the Sage Bava ben Buta was sitting as a judge at the gate. She went and broke them on his head, as his name was Bava.

He said to her: What is this you have done?

She said to him: This is what my husband commanded me to do.

He said: You fulfilled your husband's desire, may the Omnipresent grant you two sons like Bava ben Buta.



Explaining the Text

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

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

Bonus ? What do we learn from our story about the relationship between husbands and wives in Talmudic times?

? Why is it important for the understanding of the story to know that the husband was from Babylon and the wife from Eretz Yisrael?

? What did the husband mean when he said to his wife "Cook two lentils"?

Bonus ? How do we know that the husband meant more than two lentils?

? Why did the husband become angry with his wife?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Bonus ? Why do you think the wife cooked him exactly two lentils?

Bonus ? Why did the husband ask his wife the next day to cook him a geriva worth of lentils?

Bonus ? Why do you think the wife cooked him exactly a geriva?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Why did the wife bring her husband two lamps when he asked her to bring two small gourds?

? Why did the husband say to his wife: Go and break them (the lamps) on the head of the gate?

Bonus ? Why did the wife smash the lamps on top of the Sage Bava ben Buta?

? How did Bava ben Buta react to the smashing of the lamps on his head?

? What was the wife's explanation of her strange behavior?

Extra Bonus ? Why didn't Bava ben Buta get upset with the wife?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Extra Bonus ? Why didn't Bava ben Buta admonish the husband?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Extra Bonus ? Why is it important to know that Bava ben Buta was sitting as a judge at the gate?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Extra Bonus ? Assuming the husband found out what his wife did and how Bava ben Buta reacted, how do you see the relationship between husband and wife unfolding? Do you think they continued to be married?

Bonus ? Knowing what you know from our story about Bava ben Buta, with what qualities will the woman's children be blessed with, if being like Bava ben Buta?

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

! No matter how much we seek to "dictate" and "regulate," there will always be the Amelia Bedelias among us who ensure that life is full of delightful surprises.

! Breaking the cycle of incommunication: the gift of a "gifted" third party.



Our story reminds us "that no matter how much we seek to dictate and regulate, there will always be the Amelia Bedelias among us who ensure that life is always full of delightful surprises – so long as your name is not Bava ben Buta!" (Chavatzelet Herzliya).

And speaking of Bava ben Buta, he is the hero of our story. After the initial unpleasant surprise, Bava ben Buta immediately understands the situation in front of him. Knowing that the solution to the situation is not an easy one (we must read the story in the context in which it was written), he lifts the spirits of the woman, and her self-esteem, by giving her a most desired blessing, while sending an implicit message to the husband: I have your wife's back; learn from me and work on your patience.

Appendix a: Amelia Bedelia Marries a Babylonian By *Chavatzelet Herzliya*

As a child, I was a big fan of the Amelia Bedelia books. This popular series featured a dark stocking and apron-clad housekeeper who was famous for her silly but well-intentioned errors. In *Amelia Bedelia Plays Baseball*, the eponymous heroine is instructed to run home and so she runs all the way to her house. In *Amelia Bedelia Goes to School*, she is told to take her seat and walks out of the room with her chair. In story after story, Amelia Bedelia delighted me and countless other children with her literal-mindedness.

Although it is years since I read these books, I was reminded of Amelia Bedelia today when I learned *daf yomi*, a program in which Jews all over the world participate in a seven-year cycle to learn the entire Talmud at a page-a-day rate. We learned today about a man from Babylonia who married a woman in Eretz Yisrael who was strikingly similar to my favorite housekeeper. Here is the story as rendered on Nedarim 66b:

A man from Babylon came to Israel and married a woman there. He said to her: "Cook me two lentils." She cooked him exactly two lentils. He got angry (literally "he boiled") at her. The next day he said to her, "Cook me a seah's worth of lentils (a very large quantity). She cooked him exactly a seah. He said to her, "Go bring me two pumpkins." She went and brought him two candles (because in Eretz Yisrael, the Babylonian word for pumpkin means candle). He grew furious and said to her, "Go smash these candles against the bava (the Aramaic word for gate). Beside the gate sat the sage Bava ben Buta rendering judgments. She came to him and smashed the candles over his skull. He said to her, "Why did you do that?" She said, "I did as my husband told me." He said: "If you did your husband's will, God will grant you two sons like Bava ben Buta."

Like Amelia Bedelia, this hapless housewife from Eretz Yisrael can't seem to stay out of trouble. She takes everything literally, and is consequently always in a fix. As with the Amelia Bedelia books, which were written by children's educator Peggy Parish as a way of teaching children about language, the Talmudic story serves as a lesson about the nuances of language (particularly as it varied between Bavel and Eretz Yisrael) and the danger of too much precision.

The Talmud is comprised of *halacha*, legal discourse which deals with the right way to live life in all its minutiae, and *aggadah*, stories that fly in the face of legalistic details and show life in all its complicated messiness. This passage is of course a part of the *aggadah*, and it serves remind us that no matter how much we seek to dictate and regulate, there will always be the Amelia Bedelias among us who ensure that life is always full of delightful surprises – so long as your name is not Bava ben Buta! –Chavatzelet Herzliya

Appendix: b (Very) Different Reading of Our Story

How Leaders Can Use Guilt to Control a People

Baba ben Buta's Story on Babylonian Talmud, N'darim 66b
DR. RUHAMA WEISS, PH.D.

Parashat Korach tells the story of Korach's rebellion against Moses and Aaron. We read:

"They combined against Moses and Aaron and said to them, "You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and the Eternal is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above the Eternal's congregation?" (Num. 16:3)

We have to admit that Korach's reasoning is sound. Maybe Korach and his people were right. But as usual, leadership would not give up its power.

Moses raises two arguments against the just ideas of Korach. First, Moses says that you [Korach] are ungrateful, because we [Moses and Aaron], the "royal" family, are leading you for your own sake, and we gain nothing from it. We read:

"Moses was much aggrieved and he said to the Eternal, "Pay no regard to their oblation. I have not taken the ass of any one of them, nor have I wronged any one of them" (Num.16:15).

Second, Moses argues that we [Moses and Aaron] never sought royalty: it is God's will and we are just obeying His rules. We read:

"By this you shall know that it was the Eternal who sent me to do all these things; that they are not of my own devising:" (Num. 16:28).

Throughout history, leadership has used this kind of argument to maintain power.

How did the people respond?

Initially, and just for a short moment, it seems that the people have the courage to join Korach and stand against leadership. We read:

"Next day the whole Israelite community railed against Moses and Aaron, saying, "You two have brought death upon the Eternal's people!" (Num.17:6). Yet after just few verses and intimidations from Moses and God, they panic and return to obey their leadership, as we read, "But the Israelites said to Moses, "Lo, we perish! We are lost, all of us lost" (Num.17:27).

The community is in a panic. People feel guilty and lost in their own sin. In a chaotic moment, the leadership exercises its power upon the community, as we read:

The Eternal One spoke further to Aaron: I hereby give you charge of My gifts, all the sacred donations of the Israelites; "I grant them to you and to your sons as a perquisite, a due for all time. This shall be yours from the most holy sacrifices, the

offerings by fire: every such offering that they render to Me as most holy sacrifices, namely, every meal offering, sin offering, and reparation [guilt] offering of theirs, shall belong to you and your sons." (Num. 18:8-9)

This is a sophisticated way to handle the community's guilt feelings; to both encourage them on one hand and at the same time to build the leadership's authority through the process of remorse. This, too, is a familiar method that leadership has used to maintain power.

Let's talk about sacrifice and guilt

This is a good time to turn our focus to the guilt offering. Among the various reasons for which a sacrifice is needed, a central space is allocated to the sinner and guilt: A person feels guilty and attempts to atone for his or her sin by offering a sacrifice. The sound of the calls of the slaughtered sacrifice, the sight of the blood on the altar, and the smell of the smoking fire demonstrate in practice what should have happened to the person. This incredibly powerful, sensory experience is intended to awaken in the sinner thoughts of repentance.

It is easy to understand how the experience is intended not only to direct those who intentionally sinned, but also to evoke a desire in everyone to bring a sacrifice. Indeed, there is even a sacrifice for a person who unintentionally sinned:

"If any person from among the populace unwittingly incurs guilt by doing any of the things which by the Eternal's commandments ought not to be done, and realizes guilt... that person shall bring ... as an offering... and the priest shall thus make expiation for that person, who shall be forgiven." (Lev. 4:27-35)

As we see in our Torah portion, guilt feelings have the power to dominate community and enable the continuity of government. So much of the portion is about powerful guilt feelings that I want to share with you a complex, multibranch system of guilt sacrifices that have developed in Jewish law.

That depends – doubtful guilt sacrifice

What would a person do when he suspects he may have committed a sin, but is not completely sure? This person would offer a special sacrifice labeled the "doubtful guilt sacrifice." (asham talui). It is already possible to sense how this system of sacrifices provides broad operational leeway for those who carry in their conscience feelings of insatiable and boundless guilt.

Guilt offerings of the pious – constant feelings of guilt

As if the guilty feelings of those offering a doubtful guilt sacrifice were not enough, the sacrificial system branches out and offers people with an especially guilty conscience the opportunity for unending pre-occupation with their feelings of guilt. This possibility comes in the form of a special sacrifice labeled "the guilt offering of the pious," as we read:

"Rabbi Eliezer says: 'A person may voluntarily offer a doubtful guilt sacrifice any day and any time and it is called a 'guilt offering of the pious.' It is said that Bava ben Buta would offer a doubtful guilt sacrifice every day except for the day immediately after Yom Kippur. One day he said: 'This Temple pledge of mine! If they would permit me, I would bring one [a doubtful guilt sacrifice immediately after Yom Kippur as well]. However, they say to me wait until there is even the possibility that you have doubtful guilt.'" (Mishnah, K'ritot 6:3).

Yom Kippur ruins the routine of guilty-feeling people

Rabbi Eliezer describes a tradition, likely from the school Beit Shammai, according to which a person can bring a doubtful guilt sacrifice every day, called "the guilt offering of the pious." As opposed to the regular doubtful guilt sacrifice offered when there is a reason to suspect we have sinned, the guilt offering of the pious can be brought unconnected to a concrete suspicion. The guilt offering of the pious is a sacrifice for people experiencing perpetual guilt.

Baba ben Buta, a Sage who lived during the late Second Temple period, was one of Shammai's disciples, and he always felt guilty. It seems that for Baba ben Buta, sin was the basis of life. This is not any concrete, specific sin, but rather the very essence of human existence that disrupts pure spirituality. The substance of life itself is sin. However, the day after Yom Kippur, even the pious are prevented from bringing a guilt offering of the pious as Yom Kippur atones for all sins; as much as one may want to bring such a sacrifice, the potential for sin does not yet exist.

But Baba ben Buta is not just any person nor is he even a typical pious person. Baba ben Buta regrets that even one day of the year he is prohibited from enacting his world's foundational experience -- the experience of guilt.

Couples therapy, guilt, and violence

Upon first examination, it seems that people with a tendency for guilt and self-punishment are not dangerous to those around them. They may be a danger to themselves, but it appears that there is no suspicion that they would hurt someone else. However, an additional aggadah about Baba ben Buta debunks that calming assumption.

This aggadah begins with a Babylonian Jew who comes west to the Land of Israel and marries a local woman. At that time, both Babylonian Jews and Jews in the Land of Israel spoke Aramaic, but they used different dialects. These linguistic differences caused difficulty in communication between the couple: He asked her to prepare a certain dish, and she, in her innocence, prepared a different dish. Thus, in a series of linguistic miscommunications, the couple's relationship became more and more tense.

At the height of this crisis, the husband asks his wife to bring him a "tray butzini." In his dialect of Aramaic that means two zucchini. In her dialect of Aramaic it means two lamps (made of clay). Furious with anger, the husband commands his wife, "Go and break these clay lamps 'al rosh ha'baba." In his Babylonian Aramaic, "rosh ha'baba" means "above the gate." However, in his wife's Aramaic dialect

"rosh" means "head" and "baba," as we have already seen, can be a person's name. In her distress and lacking her husband's understanding of this word, the woman goes to the Sage Baba ben Buta and breaks the clay lamps on his head.

This is how Baba ben Buta, the man who has never been opposed to bearing the burden of guilt, responded to that woman (Babylonian Talmud, N'darim 66b), "He said to her, 'What are you doing?' She said to him, 'Thusly my husband commanded me to do.' He said, 'You have done your husband's bidding, God will bring forth from you two sons like Baba ben Buta.'"

He sends her back to the aggressor's arms

At first glance, this seems like generous couples' therapy. The Rabbi sees the woman's distress, so he puts aside his own honor and lets her fulfill the violent and uncompromising demands of her husband (as at this point, he does not know about the couple's language confusion).

However, the Torah has already taught us: "Love thy neighbor as thyself." The phrasing of this commandment reflects the psychological truth that only someone who loves him- or herself can properly love his neighbor.

If Baba ben Buta was not full of so many feelings of guilt he could find room in his heart to get angry and feel injured by the woman who hurt him. If Baba ben Buta would permit himself to get angry at the woman, he could subsequently become angry at her abusive husband. If Baba ben Buta could believe that he isn't supposed to be beaten by a strange woman, he could understand that she too isn't supposed to receive degrading commands from her husband. And, if Baba ben Buta could love himself, he could supply this woman with genuine protection.

It is easy to see that the breaking of clay lamps on Baba's head was not just the result of a linguistic mistake; it was a call for desperately needed help. Baba ben Buta should have gone to the aggressive husband and spoken to him harshly and sensitively to save his neighbor from her distress. But Baba ben Buta is in love with guilt, and people experiencing perpetual guilt offer to those around them the same world they experience -- a world without love or mercy. From these combined traditions of Baba ben Buta, we can learn that whoever lacks compassion for himself or herself cannot be compassionate toward others.

Back to Korach

We have to remember that guilt feelings are sometimes used as governmental tools, that guilt feelings are very much overrated, and that often they don't serve the public good but rather serve power positions. We have to be careful with feeling guilty.

(This article was translated with the help of Uzi Bar Pinchas.)

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