

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [95]



Hisda, Hisda, I do Not Need You. You Need Me for Forty Years.

Insights into Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 33a

Background to Our Story

Rav Huna



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Berakhot. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 30

One of the great second generation Babylonian *amora'im*, Rav Huna was most closely associated with his teacher, Rav. Rav Huna was of aristocratic descent and descended from the House of the Exilarchs. Despite that lineage, he lived in abject poverty for many years. Later in life, he became wealthy and lived comfortably and distributed his resources for the public good.

Rav Huna was the greatest of Rav's students, to the extent that Shmuel, Rav's colleague, used to treat him deferentially and direct questions to him. After Rav's death, Rav Huna became the head of the yeshiva of Sura and filled that position for about forty years. His prominence in Torah and his loftiness of character helped make the yeshiva of Sura the preeminent center of Torah for many centuries. Because of Rav Huna's extensive Torah knowledge, the *halakha* is almost invariably ruled in accordance with his opinion in disputes with all of his colleagues and contemporaries. The only exception was in civil law, where the rulings were in accordance with the opinion of Rav Nahman.

Rav Huna had many students, some of whom studied exclusively with him; moreover, Rav's younger students remained to study with Rav Huna, his disciple, after his death. Rav Huna's son, Rabba bar Rav Huna, was one of the greatest Sages of the following generation.

Rav Hisda



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Berakhot. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 193

One of the greatest second generation Babylonian *amora'im*, Rav H̥isda, a priest, was one of Rav's younger students. After Rav's death, he remained a disciple-colleague of Rav's student, Rav Huna. Throughout his life, Rav H̥isda showed great affection for the teachings of Rav and constantly tried to learn additional matters of Torah in his name. Although he was poor as a youth, he became wealthy and lived most of his life comfortably. He was very generous toward his fellow man. He was devoted to his students, his sons, and his daughters, guiding them along the straight and narrow in both spiritual and worldly matters.

The Obligation to Honor and Revere One's Torah Teacher

◆ AI Overview

In Jewish law (Halakha), the obligation to honor and revere one's Torah teacher (Rebbe) is of the highest magnitude, strictly surpassing even the obligation to honor one's parents.

The Two Categories of Teachers

The level of honor required under Jewish law depends on how much a person has learned from that specific teacher:

- Rav Muvhak (Primary Teacher): This is a teacher from whom a person has acquired the vast majority of their wisdom, knowledge, or analytical framework. The strictest laws of reverence apply here permanently.
- General Teacher: This applies to someone who has taught you even a single chapter, law, verse, or letter. According to Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers), you must still treat this individual with significant honor. King David treated Ahithophel as a master and guide despite learning only two insights from him.

Concrete Laws of Reverence (Mora)

To maintain a distinct boundary of spiritual awe, a student must adhere to several strict daily restrictions around their Rav Muvhak:

- Addressing by Name: A student is strictly forbidden from calling or referring to their teacher by their first name alone. An appropriate title (e.g., "My master, Rabbi...") must always be added. The Talmud notes that breaking this rule publicly categorizes someone as a religious rogue.
- Physical Spaces: A student may not sit in a teacher's designated seat or stand in their permanent prayer spot.
- Contradiction: It is forbidden to openly argue, dispute, or contradict a teacher's statements or legal rulings.
- Halakhic Rulings: A student may not issue public halakhic rulings within the local jurisdiction or physical presence of their teacher without explicit permission.

Torah scholars who are in Babylonia



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Bava Metzia I. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 182

In the talmudic era, there was a clear difference between the style of Torah study in Babylonia and the style in Eretz Yisrael. In Eretz Yisrael, where the study halls were in close proximity to the Sanhedrin, the hierarchy was clear. Most of the study took place in the form of lectures by the head of the yeshiva. In Babylonia, at first, the head of the yeshiva did not have great authority, and most of the students assembled only twice a year for the *yarḥei kalla*, during the months of Elul and Adar. Otherwise, Torah was studied in small groups. Therefore, the knowledge they amassed from their colleagues equaled, if not surpassed, the knowledge they gained from the head of a yeshiva in the role of a preeminent teacher.

The Text: Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 33a

The Context of Our Story

The mishna teaches: If **his father and his teacher were** each **carrying a burden**, he first places his teacher's burden down and thereafter places his father's burden down. **The Sages taught** in a Baraita (Tosefta 2:30): **His teacher**, with regard to **whom** the tanna'im **stated** in the mishna that his burden takes precedence, is **his teacher who taught him wisdom**, i.e., the profound analysis of the Torah that constitutes the Talmud, **and not his teacher who taught him Bible or Mishna**; this is **the statement of Rabbi Meir**. **Rabbi Yehuda says**: The reference is to **any teacher from whom** one learned **most of his knowledge**, be it Bible, Mishna, or Talmud. **Rabbi Yosei says**: **Even if he enlightened him in the understanding of only one mishna, that is his teacher**.

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Ulla says: **The Torah scholars who are in Babylonia rise** in deference **before one another and rend** their garments in mourning **over one another's** passing.

In contrast to Eretz Yisrael, where the preeminent Torah scholars and teachers served at the heads of the Torah academies, in Babylonia most scholars studied Torah with peers and there was no preeminent teacher. **But with regard to** returning **a lost item in** a case **where** both **one's father** and one's teacher lost an item, **he returns** the lost item **only to his preeminent teacher** before returning that of his father, and not to his peer

קב"ע מיינה רב חסדא מרב הונא: תלמיד וצריך לו רבו מאי? אמר ליה: חסדא חסדא, לא צריכנא לך, את צריכת לי עד ארבעין שנים. איקפדי אהדדי ולא עיילי לגבי הדדי.
יתב רב חסדא ארבעין מעניתא משום דחלש דעתיה דרב הונא, יתב רב הונא ארבעין מעניתא משום דחשדיה לרב חסדא.

Rav Ḥisda raised a dilemma before Rav Huna: If there is a student, and his teacher needs him because he serves as his peer and study partner, what is the halakha with regard to precedence in a case where he finds a lost item belonging to his father and one belonging to his teacher?

[Rav Huna] said to him: Ḥisda, Ḥisda, I do not need you. You need me for forty years! (until you complete 40 years of study before me).

They grew angry with each other over the perceived insult and the harsh reaction, and each did not enter to visit the other.

Rav Ḥisda observed forty fasts due to the fact that Rav Huna was offended.

Rav Huna observed forty fasts due to the fact that he suspected Rav Ḥisda.



Explaining the Text

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

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Please explain the dilemma (question) Rav Ḥisda put forward to Rav Huna.

? Please explain Rav Huna's reply to Rav Hisda: "Hisda, Hisda, I do not need you. On the contrary, you need me until you complete forty years of study before me"

? Why does Rav Huna refer to his colleague as Hisda, as opposed to Rav Hisda"?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Why was Rav Huna angry with Rav Hisda? What would you write in Rav Huna's "bubble thought"?



Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

? Why was Rav Hisda angry with Rav Huna? What would you write in Rav Hisda's "bubble thought"?



Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

? What was the consequence of their mutual anger?

? Why did Rav Hisda take upon himself 40 days of fasting?

? Why did Rav Huna take upon himself 40 days of fasting?

? How is the number 40 significant in our story? How is the number 40 significant in the Torah?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

More Analysis Questions

Bonus ? What is the greatness of Rav Hisda in our story?

Bonus  What is the greatness of Rav Huna in our story?

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

 When “your problem” becomes “my problem” – Directing the attention to “your feelings”: Rav Hisda’s way to improve interpersonal relationships.

 When “my problem” becomes “your problem” - Directing the attention to “my actions”: Rav Huna’s way to improve interpersonal relationships.

Exploring a Digression: The Novel Reading of the Maharsha

The Maharsha

AI Overview

The Maharsha (מהרש"א) is the Hebrew acronym for Rabbi Shmuel Eliezer HaLevi Eidels (1555–1631), a towering Jewish scholar and one of the most prominent Talmudic commentators of the post-Renaissance era. His landmark commentary is standard in almost every printed edition of the Babylonian Talmud worldwide.

The Maharsha divided his ultimate commentary into two parallel sections, which modern printers usually combine at the back of Talmudic volumes:

- Chiddushei Halachot (Novellae on Law): An incisive analysis focusing strictly on the legal text of the Gemara, Rashi, and Tosafot. It is highly valued for its extreme brevity, logic, and mastery over contradictions.
- Chiddushei Aggadot (Novellae on Lore): A philosophical commentary on the ethical, narrative, and homiletic parts of the Talmud. He often relied on rational interpretation, deep philosophy, and Kabbalah to decode complex allegori

Life and Leadership

- **Early Life**: Born in Kraków, Poland, he was a descendant of the legendary Maharal of Prague.
- **Rabbinic Career**: Following the passing of his mother-in-law, he served as Chief Rabbi in several historically vital European Jewish communities, including Chelm, Lublin, Tiktin, and finally Ostroh (located in modern-day Ukraine).
- **Communal Impact**: He was a primary leader of the Council of the Four Lands, the central autonomous governing body for Polish Jewry.
- **Legacy of Kindness**: Beyond his intellectual brilliance, he was famous for his deep Humility. He famously kept an engraving on his front door reading: "No sojourner spent the night outside; my door was always open to the guest."

The Maharsha passed away on the 5th of Kislev in 1631. His final resting place, along with the historical Great Maharsha Synagogue, remains an important landmark in Ostroh, Ukraine.

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Our Reading:

[Rav Huna] said to him: *Ħisda, Ħisda*, I do not need you. You need me for forty years!

They were angry with each other, and each did not enter to visit the other.

The Maharsha's Reading

[Rav Huna] said to him: *Ħisda, Ħisda*, I do not need you. You need me!

For forty years they were angry with each other, and each did not enter to visit the other.

More Analysis Questions

Bonus  What do you think about the Maharsha's original reading of our story? 

What do you think prompted him to choose this reading?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____



Like many stories of interpersonal conflict, it is tough to pinpoint exactly what lit the fuse. Was Rav Huna just having a bad day? Was he feeling insecure about his leadership at the academy? Was Rav *Ħisda* being overly sensitive? Or did things just get lost in translation?

Fortunately, neither man wastes time assigning blame; instead, they focus entirely on healing the rift. Rav *Ħisda* displays grace and humility by stepping into Rav Huna's shoes, tapping into deep empathy for a man who was simultaneously his friend, teacher, and colleague. Meanwhile, Rav Huna looks inward, confronting his own missteps and realizing he had unjustly suspected his friend.

In the Maharsha's striking interpretation, however, reconciliation doesn't come so easily. It takes 40 years of bitter estrangement for Rav Huna and Rav *Ħisda* to finally bridge the gap—a powerful, sobering reminder that in human relationships, it is always infinitely easier to break than to mend.