

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [97]

What do You Want from a Poor Foreigner?!

Insights into Jerusalem Talmud, Berakhot 9:1

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Background to Our Story

Rabbi Tanhuma bar Abba

◆ AI Overview

Rabbi Tanhuma bar Abba was a famous Palestinian scholar who lived during the late 4th century CE. He belonged to the fifth generation of Amoraic sages. He is remembered as one of the most prolific creators of Aggadah (homiletic rabbinic literature) in Jewish history.

Book of Jonah, Chapter 1

¹ Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ² Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me." ³ But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so, he paid the fare, and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. ⁴ But the Lord sent out a great wind on the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship was about to be broken up. ⁵ Then the mariners were afraid; and every man cried out to his god and threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten the load. But Jonah had gone down into the lowest parts of the ship, had lain down, and was fast asleep. ⁶ So the captain came to him, and said to him, "What do you mean, sleeper? Arise, call on your God; perhaps your God will consider us, so that we may not perish." ⁷ And they said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this trouble *has come* upon us." So, they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸ Then they said to him, "Please tell us! For whose cause *is* this trouble upon us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?" ⁹ So he said to them, "I *am* a Hebrew; and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry *land*." ¹⁰ Then the men were exceedingly afraid, and said to him, "Why have you done this?" For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them. ¹¹ Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you that the sea may be calm for us?"—for the sea was growing more tempestuous. ¹² And he said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will become calm for you. For I know that this great tempest *is* because of me." ¹³

Nevertheless the men rowed hard to return to land, but they could not, for the sea continued to grow more tempestuous against them. ¹⁴ Therefore they cried out to the Lord and said, "We pray, O Lord, please do not let us perish for this man's life, and do not charge us with innocent blood; for You, O Lord, have done as it pleased You." ¹⁵ So they picked up Jonah and threw him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. ¹⁶ Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly and offered a sacrifice to the Lord and took vows.

The Text: Jerusalem Talmud Berakhot 9:1

אמר רבי תנחומא מעשה בספינה אחת של גוים שהיתה פורשת [בנים] הגדול והיה בה תינוק אחד יהודי. עמד עליהם סער גדול בים ועמד כל אחד ואחד מהן והתחיל נוטל וקורא בידו וקורא ולא הועיל כלום. כיון שראו שלא הועילו כלום אמרו לאותו יהודי. בני קום קרא אל אלהיך ששמענו שהוא עונה אתכם בשאתם צועקים אליו והוא גיבור. מיד עמד התינוק בכל לבו וצעק וקיבל ממנו הקדוש ברוך הוא תפילתו ושם הים. כיון שירדו ליבשה ירדו כל אחד ואחד לקנות צרכיו. אמרו לו לאותו תינוק לית את בעי מזבין לך כלום. אמר להון מה אתון בעי מן הון אכסניא עלובה. אמרו לו את אכסניא עלובה. אינון אכסניא עלובה אינון הכא וטעותהון בבבל. ואינון הכא וטעותהון ברומי. ואינון הכא וטעותהון עמהון ולא מהנון להון כלום. אבל את כל אהן דאת אול אלהך עמד. ההוא דיקתיב ביי אלהינו בכל קראינו אליו.

Rebbi Tanhuma said: A happening with a ship of Gentiles that sailed the great sea and on it was a Jewish child.

There came upon them a big storm; each one got up, took his idol in his hand and called upon it, without result.

When they saw that it was of no use, they said to that Jew: Son, get up, call on your God, for we heard that He answers you when you cry and He is strong. The child immediately got up with a full heart and cried; the Holy One -blessed be He- received his prayer and the sea quieted down.

When they came to dry land, each one descended to buy his needs.

They said to that child: Do you not want to buy anything for yourself?

He [the child] said to them: What do you want from a poor foreigner?!

They said to him: You a poor foreigner? They are poor foreigners; they are here and their idols are in Babylonia, they are here and their idols are in Rome, they are here and their idols are with them but are of no use to them. But you, everywhere you go, your God is with you. That is what is written (Deuteronomy 4:7): What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we call on Him?



Explaining the Story

What's going on in our story? (The sequence of events)

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

What were the Gentiles doing on the ship?

Bonus What was a Jewish child doing on the ship of Gentiles?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Why do the Gentiles have idols with them?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Bonus Why doesn't the Jewish boy pray together with everybody else?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

How is the Jewish boy a foreigner?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

How isn't the Jewish boy a foreigner?

What is the source of the Gentiles' feeling of reliance?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

What is the source of the boy's feeling of reliance?

Why isn't the boy coming down to shore to buy things?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Extra Bonus What do you think is the connection between feeling like a foreigner and having God near to you?

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

! "I lift up my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come from?" (Psalms 121:1) - What is the source of your reliance?

! Sometimes, when you travel light, when you don't find your place, you find God.

Our story contrasts the wealthy, adult Gentiles with the poor, foreign, Jewish child. The Jewish child (we don't know why he is by himself in a ship owned by Gentiles) perceives himself as a foreigner in this world, and as a foreigner, he travels "light." And yet, it is this poor, foreign, Jewish child, the one who saves everyone's lives with his prayers.

The end of our story leaves the reader with mixed emotions: on one hand, the Gentiles, like in the Book of Jonah, are forced to recognize the superiority of the God of Israel. On the other hand, their lives after the life-threatening experience seem to continue unchanged (*each one descends to buy their needs*).

The life of our boy, as well, remains unchanged: he possesses very little (the exile experience), but because God is always near him, he doesn't need much.

For the modern reader, our story seems to imply that if you travel light, with less stuff, and embrace a status of foreigner in this world, you might be able to bring God closer to you.

◆ AI Overview



Summary of the Narrative

This story functions as a theological parable. During a life-threatening storm at sea, the idols of the Gentile passengers prove powerless. The sincere prayer of a lone Jewish child prompts divine intervention, calming the sea. Upon reaching land, the other passengers recognize that while their localized gods are useless or distant, the omnipresent God of Israel is instantly accessible to His people anywhere in the world.

Literary and Theological Analysis

1. The Power of Vulnerability (The Child Protagonist)

- Contrast of Scale: The text pairs a massive, chaotic storm with a vulnerable child. This emphasizes that divine salvation does not rely on human strength, status, or age.
- Purity of Faith: The child prays with a "full heart" (*b'lev shalem*). This genuine, uncomplicated intent (*kavanah*) is contrasted against the desperate, transactional rituals of the adults on the ship.

2. The Failure of Idolatry

- Physical Proximity vs. Spiritual Distance: The Gentiles literally hold their idols in their hands, yet their gods remain fundamentally distant and unresponsive.
- Geographic Limitations: On land, the passengers note that their gods are bound to specific places like Rome or Babylonia. If the idolater travels away from the deity's geographic seat of power, the deity loses its efficacy.

3. Radical Omnipresence and Inwardness

- God Without Borders: The core lesson of the story is the absolute portability of the Jewish God. Because God is not tied to a specific physical idol, temple, or territory, He is present "everywhere you go."
- True Wealth: The child perceives himself as a "poor foreigner" because he lacks material wealth to buy goods at the port. The Gentiles correct his perspective, redefining wealth not as physical merchandise, but as immediate access to divine protection.

4. Scriptural Justification

- The Prooftext: The story concludes by quoting Deuteronomy 4:7. The narrative functions to unpack this specific verse, transforming a theological abstract ("God is near us") into a concrete, dramatic reality that even outsiders can see and validate.

Cultural and Historical Context

Midrash Tanchuma/ the Jerusalem Talmud was compiled during an era when Jews lived under dominant foreign empires (like Rome and Persia/Babylonia) and frequently experienced displacement, exile, and travel across dangerous trade routes. This story provided deep psychological comfort to Jewish communities in

the Diaspora. It assured them that despite losing their physical homeland and Temple, they had not lost their connection to God.