

From the Rabbi's Desk
Rabbi Manes Kogan
Hillcrest Jewish Center
183-02 Union Turnpike, Flushing, NY 11366
rabbikogan@hillcrestjc.org

Stories with a Twist [99a]

God of Meir Answer Me!

Insights into Babylonian Talmud Avodah Zarah 18a



Background to Our Story

Rabbi Meir



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Eiruvim Part 1. Koren publishers Jerusalem.

60.

One of the greatest *tanna'im* of the generation that preceded the redaction of the Mishna. There is no clear information available concerning Rabbi Meir's parents, though it is told that he descended from a family of converts from the house of the Roman emperors.

His exceptional brilliance in Torah study was evident from a very early age, and he was a student of the two greatest scholars of the generation, Rabbi Yishmael and Rabbi Akiva. He was also the lone Sage who continued to study with Elisha ben Avuya, despite the latter's estrangement from Judaism. His primary teacher was Rabbi Akiva, who ordained him at a very young age, which is the reason that he was ordained a second time by Rabbi Yehuda ben Bava.

In recognition of his outstanding scholarship, Rabbi Meir was officially appointed *hakham*, literally, wise man, the third level below *nasi*, head of the Sanhedrin. The halakhic discussions between him and his colleagues Rabbi Yehuda, Rabbi Yosei, Rabbi Shimon, and Rabbi Elazar form one of the most important foundations of the Mishna.

Rabbi Meir's greatest undertaking appears to have been a structured, oral redaction of the Oral Law, including establishing specific formats for the *halakhot*. Apparently, Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi followed in Rabbi Meir's footsteps and incorporated his work in the Mishna. Consequently, it is a well-known principle that the author of an unattributed statement in

the Mishna is Rabbi Meir, as the assumption is that this was one of the *mishnayot* he formulated.

Due to his involvement in the attempt to depose Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, the head of the Sanhedrin, he was punished by the latter, and for a long period his teachings were not cited in his name but were introduced with the words: Others say.

His private life was full of suffering. His two sons died during his lifetime, and his extraordinary wife Beruria also died in painful circumstances. Nevertheless, it is known that a daughter of his survived. He was eventually forced into exile to Asia Minor, where he died, with the order that his coffin be transferred to Eretz Yisrael and that he be temporarily interred on the shore of the sea whose waves reach the Holy Land.

Rabbi Meir was famous in his lifetime, not only for his sharp intellect, which exceeded that of all his peers, but also for his personal attributes, his efforts as a peacemaker, and his willingness to relinquish personal honor for the good of others. He was known as a magnificent public speaker. It is said that following his death, those who composed parables ceased. Several of his animal parables were repeated for many generations. He was also renowned as a miracle worker, and for many years a charity fund named after him, Rabbi Meir the Miracle Worker [*Ba'al HaNes*] served as the main source of funding for the Jews in Eretz Yisrael.

Rabbi Hanina ben Teradyon



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Avoda Zara. Koren publishers. Jerusalem. Page 89

Rabbi Hanina ben Teradyon was a *tanna* of the fourth and fifth generations of *tanna'im*. Few of his statements are preserved in the mishna or other tannaitic sources. Rabbi Hanina lived in Sikhnei in the Upper Galilee, where he apparently presided over a large yeshiva. It is clear from several sources that he was a charity collector and that he also distributed his own funds to the poor.

Following the bar Kokheva rebellion, he defied the decrees against teaching Torah in public despite the mortal danger of such activity. Rabbi Hanina was eventually caught by the authorities and sentenced to death. As the Gemara describes, he was wrapped in a Torah and burned along with it. He is listed in the midrash and liturgical poetry as one of the Ten Martyrs, the ten rabbis who were martyred by the Romans in the period after the destruction of the Second Temple.

It is known that Rabbi Hanina ben Teradyon had two sons and two daughters. One of his sons was killed by the Romans, his wife was sentenced to die by execution, and his daughter was condemned to serve in a brothel.

His other daughter, Berurya, was renowned for her extensive knowledge of Torah that placed her on par with the *tanna'im*. As explained later on in the Gemara (18a), she was the wife of the *tanna* Rabbi Meir

Berurya



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Berakhot. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 61

Berurya was the wife of the *tanna* Rabbi Meir. She was the daughter of the *tanna* Rabbi Hanina ben Teradyon, who was one of the ten martyrs. She was renowned not only for her character and personality, but also for her extensive Torah knowledge. Her aptitude for Torah study exemplified her exceptional genius. She disagreed with several Sages of her

generation, and we find that the *halakha* in that dispute was ruled in accordance with her opinion.

As a result of decrees of persecution, nearly her entire family was martyred. Calamity continued to afflict her throughout her life when her two children died in a single day. The Gemara relates how she conducted herself with exceptional courage. From a story which is only alluded to in the Talmud, we know that her own death also came about in the wake of a series of painful events. (See Babylonian Talmud Avodah Zarah 18 a, and Rashi there)

Aside from a few halakhic statements, we find several places in the Talmud where her modest and considerate characteristics are manifested even through sharp responses to various people.

Elia the Prophet

♦ AI Overview

In Judaism, Elijah (Eliyahu HaNavi) is one of the most beloved and prominent prophets. Described in the Hebrew Bible, he is renowned for his defense of monotheism against the worship of Baal, for performing miracles, and for ascending to heaven in a fiery chariot without experiencing death.

Elijah the Prophet is a celebrated figure who bridges the gap between biblical history and everyday folklore. Transcending his origins as a fierce zealot, he became a compassionate, omnipresent guardian who roams the earth to perform miracles, answer legal questions, and help the righteous

Tarkav

A measure of volume that equals 3 kavs. One tarkav is equivalent to between 4.5 and 8 quarts.

Denarius

♦ AI Overview



The denarius (plural: denarii) was the standard silver coin of ancient Rome, serving as the backbone of the Roman monetary system for nearly 500 years. First minted around 211 BC during the Second Punic War, it was roughly the size of a modern dime and initially represented 10 asses (hence its name, meaning "containing ten") before being re-tariffed to 16 asses in 141 BCE.

- Daily Wages: A single denarius was generally considered the standard daily wage for a Roman legionary soldier or a skilled laborer.
- Purchasing Power: In its prime, one denarius could buy approximately two gallons of wheat, a liter of cheap wine, or a day's worth of basic food essentials.
- Currency Hierarchy: 1 gold aureus was worth 25 silver denarii, and 1 denarius was equal to 4 bronze sesterces.

Aureus (pl. aurei "golden")



Aureus is a Latin word meaning "golden." Depending on the context, it most commonly refers to the main gold coin of ancient Rome, a prominent medical bacterium, or various modern financial, technology, and energy companies.

Historical Coin

- Ancient Roman Coin: The *aureus* (plural: *aurei*) was the primary gold coin used in ancient Rome from the 1st century BCE to the early 4th century CE.
- Value & Size: Originally valued at 25 silver denarii, it was standardized during the Roman Empire and often displayed the bust of the reigning emperor.

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Avodah Zarah 18 a, and Rashi there.

ברוריא דביתיהו דרבי מאיר , בבתיה דרבי חנינא בן תרדיון הנאי, אמרה לו: זילא בי מלתא דיתבא אחתאי בקופה של זונות.
שקל תרקבא דדינרי ואזל, אמר: אי לא איתעביד ביה איסורא מיתעביד ניסא, אי עבדה איסורא לא איתעביד לה ניסא.
אזל נקט נפשיה כחז פראשא, אמר לה: השמיעני לי, אמרה ליה: דשתנא אנא.
אמר לה: מתרחנא מרתח, אמרה לו: נפישין טובא, ואיכא טובא חכא דשפירן מינאי.
אמר: שמע מינה לא עבדה איסורא, כל דאתי אמרה ליה הכי.
אזל לגבי שומר דידה, אמר ליה: הבה ניהלה. אמר ליה: מיסתפינא ממלכותא.
אמר ליה: שקול תרקבא דדינרא, פלגא פלח ופלגא להוי לך, אמר ליה: וכי שלמי, מאי איעביד? אמר ליה: אימא "אלהא דמאיר ענני" ומתעלת. אמר ליה: ומי יימר דהכי איכא? [אמר ליה: השתא חזית.] הוה הנהי פלבי דהו קא אכלי אינשי, שקל קלא שדא בהו, הוה קאתו למיכליה, אמר: "אלהא דמאיר ענני!"
שבקוה, ויהבה ליה.
לסוף אשתמע מילתא בי מלכא, אתיוה אסקוה לזקיפה, אמר: "אלהא דמאיר ענני!" אחתוה.
אמרו ליה: מאי האי? אמר להו: הכי הנה מעשה.
אתו חקקו לדמותיה דרבי מאיר אפיתחא דרומי, אמרי: כל דתזוי לפרצופא הדין ליתיה.
יומא חדא חזיוהי, רהט אבתריה, רהט מקמיהו, על לבי זונות. איכא דאמרי: בשולי גוים חזא, טמש ביה ומתק ביה.
איכא דאמרי: אתא אליהו אדמי להו כזונה, ברכתיה; אמרי: חס ושלום, אי רבי מאיר הנה, לא הנה עביד הכי.
קם ערק אתא לבבל. איכא דאמרי: מהאי מעשה, ואיכא דאמרי: ממעשה דברוריא.

Berurya, the wife of Rabbi Meir, was a daughter of Rabbi Hanina ben Teradyon. She said to Rabbi Meir: It is a disrespectful matter for me that my sister is sitting in a brothel; you must do something to save her.

Rabbi Meir took a vessel [tarkeva] full of dinars and went. He said to himself: If no transgression was committed with her, a miracle will be performed for her; if she committed a transgression, no miracle will be performed for her.

Rabbi Meir went and dressed as a Roman knight, and said to her: Accede to my wishes, i.e., engage in intercourse with me. She said to him: I am menstruating and cannot. He said to her: I will wait. She said to him: There are many women in the brothel, and there are many women here who are more beautiful than I. He [Rabbi Meir] said to himself: I can conclude from her responses that she did not commit a transgression, as she presumably said this to all who come.

Rabbi Meir went over to her guard and said to him: Give her to me. The guard said to him: I fear that if I do so, I will be punished by the government. Rabbi Meir said to him: Take this vessel full of dinars; give half to the government as a bribe, and half will be for you. The guard said to him: But when the money is finished, what shall I do? Rabbi Meir said to him: Say: God of Meir answer me! And you will be saved. The guard said to him: And who can say that this is the case, that I will be saved by this utterance? Rabbi Meir said to him: You will now see. There were these carnivorous dogs that would devour people; Rabbi Meir took a clod of earth, threw it at them, and when they came to devour him, he said: God of Meir answer me! The dogs then left him alone, and after seeing this the guard gave the daughter of Rabbi H̄anina ben Teradyon to Rabbi Meir.

Ultimately the matter was heard in the king's court, and the guard, who was brought and taken to be hanged, said: God of Meir answer me! They then lowered him down, as they were unable to hang him. They said to him: What is this? He said to them: This was the incident that occurred, and he proceeded to relate the entire story to them.

They then went and engraved the image of Rabbi Meir at the entrance of Rome where it would be seen by everyone, and they said: Anyone who sees a man with this face should bring him here. One day, Romans saw Rabbi Meir and ran after him, and he ran away from them and entered a brothel to hide. Some say

he then escaped capture because he saw food cooked by gentiles and dipped this finger in the food and tasted it with that other finger and thereby fooled them into thinking that he was eating their food, which they knew Rabbi Meir would not do. And some say that he escaped detection because Elijah came, appeared to them as a prostitute and embraced Rabbi Meir. The Romans who were chasing him said: Heaven forbid, if this were Rabbi Meir, he would not act in that manner.

Rabbi Meir arose, fled, and arrived in Babylonia. There are those who say that he fled because of this incident, and there are those who say that he fled due to embarrassment from the incident involving his wife Berurya.



Explaining the Story

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

Comprehension Questions

Bonus  How did Berurya's sister end up in a brothel?

 Why is it important to know at the beginning of our story that Berurya was the wife of Rabbi Meir and the daughter of Rabbi Hanina ben Teradyon?

 Where did Rabbi Meir go to rescue his sister-in-law?

Bonus  Why didn't Rabbi Meir's sister-in-law recognize him?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

 Why did Rabbi Meir take with him a tarkav of (golden) dinars?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Extra Bonus  Why is Rabbi Meir testing his sister-in-law?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

 How is Rabbi Meir testing his sister-in-law?

 How is Rabbi Meir convinced that his sister-in-law didn't transgress?

Extra Bonus ? Why would the guard want to handle Berurya's sister to Rabbi Meir upon his request?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

? Why doesn't he?

? Why is the guard afraid of the government?

? What did Rabbi Meir do to assuage the fears of the guard?

? Why did the Romans take the guard to be executed?

Bonus ? What happened after the guard exclaimed: "God of Meir answer me!"?

Bonus ? Why does the guard tell the Romans the whole incident with Rabbi Meir?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

? Why did the Romans engrave the image of Rabbi Meir at the entrance of Rome?

Bonus ? What did Rabbi Meir do to trick his pursuers?

? Why did Rabbi Meir's pursuers finally leave him alone?

Bonus ? According to our story, why did Rabbi Meir flee to Babylon?

Analysis Questions

? How is Rabbi Meir being portrayed in our story? What are his main personality traits?

Bonus ? If Rabbi Meir merits God's miraculous help, why doesn't he invoke that help to free his sister right away?

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

! Rabbi Meir: A man of action, with a plan, who thinks on his feet, who takes care of business...and who, like all of us, can use occasionally, a little help from God.

