

## Daf Ditty Taanis 23: Rain Makers and Miracle Workers



בידיהם : מעשה ששלחו לחוני המעגל וכו' :  
ח"ד פעם אחת יצא רוב אדר ולא ירדו  
גשמים שלחו לחוני המעגל התפלל וירדו  
גשמים התפלל ולא ירדו גשמים עג עוגה  
ועמד בתוכה כדרך שעשה חבקוק הגביא  
ישנאמר ° על משמרתו אעמדה ואחיזבה על  
מצור וגו' אמר לפניו רבונו של עולם בנך  
שמו פניהם עלי שאני כבן בית לפניך נשבע  
אני בשמך הגדול שאיני זו מכאן עד  
שתרהם על בנך התחילו גשמים מנמפין  
אמרו לו תלמידיו רבי ראינוך ולא נמות  
כמדומין אנו שאין גשמים יורדין אלא להתיר  
שבועתך אמר (6) לא כך שאלתי אלא

מַעֲשֵׂה שְׁשֻׁלְחוֹ לְחוֹנֵי הַמַּעֲגָל וְכוּ'. תָּנוּ רַבָּנָן: פַּעַם אַחַת יָצָא רוֹב  
אָדָר וְלֹא יָרְדוּ גְשָׁמִים, שְׁשֻׁלְחוֹ לְחוֹנֵי הַמַּעֲגָל: הַתְּפִלָּל וַיֵּרְדוּ גְשָׁמִים!  
הַתְּפִלָּל, וְלֹא יָרְדוּ גְשָׁמִים. עַג עוֹגָה וְעָמַד בְּתוֹכָהּ, כְּדָרָךְ שְׁעֵשָׂה  
חֲבִיקוּק הַנְּבִיא, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "עַל מִשְׁמַרְתִּי אֶעֱמְדָה וְאֶתִּיצְבָּה עַל מְצוֹר  
וְגו'".

§ The mishna taught: **An incident** occurred in which the people sent a message to **Honi HaMe'aggel**. This event is related in greater detail in the following *baraita*. **The Sages taught: Once, most of the month of Adar had passed but rain had still not fallen. They sent this message to Honi HaMe'aggel: Pray, and rain will fall. He prayed, but no rain fell. He drew a circle in the dust and stood inside it, in the manner that the prophet Habakkuk did, as it is stated:**

א על-משמרתִי אֶעֱמְדָה, וְאֶתִּיצְבָּה עַל-מְצוֹר; וְאֶצְפָּה,  
לְרֹאוֹת מֵה-יַדְבָּר-בִּי, וּמֵה אֲשִׁיב, עַל-תּוֹכְחָתִי. 1 I will stand upon my watch, and set me  
upon the tower, and will look out to see  
what He will speak by me, and what I shall  
answer when I am reproved.

Hab 2:1

*“And I will stand upon my watch and set myself upon the tower, and I will look out to see what He will say to me, and what I shall answer when I am reproved”*

This verse is taken to mean that Habakkuk fashioned a kind of prison for himself where he sat.

אָמַר לְפָנָיו: רַבּוֹנוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם! בְּנִיחָ שָׁמוּ פְּנֵיהֶם עָלַי, שְׂאֲנִי כְּבֵן בֵּית  
לְפָנֶיךָ. נִשְׁבַּע אָנִי בְּשֵׁמֶךָ הַגָּדוֹל שְׂאֲנִי זֶז מִכָּאן עַד שֶׁתִּרְחַם עַל בְּנִיחָ.  
הַתְּחִילוּ גְשָׁמִים מִנְטָפִין. אָמְרוּ לוֹ תַלְמִידָיו: רַבִּי! רְאִינוּךָ וְלֹא נָמוֹת,  
כְּמִדּוּמִין אָנוּ שְׂאִין גְּשָׁמִים יוֹרְדִין אֲלָא לְהַתִּיר שְׁבוּעָתְךָ.

Honi said before God: **Master of the Universe, Your children have turned their faces toward me, as I am like a member of Your household. Therefore, I take an oath by Your great name that I will not move from here until you have mercy upon Your children** and answer their prayers for rain. **Rain began to trickle down, but only in small droplets. His students said to him: Rabbi, we have seen that you can perform great wonders, but this quantity of rain is not enough to ensure that we will not die. It appears to us that a small amount of rain is falling only to enable you to dissolve your oath, but it is not nearly enough to save us.**

אָמַר: לֹא כִּדְ שָׁאַלְתִּי, אֱלֹהִים גְּשָׁמֵי בִּזְעָף וּמַעֲרוֹת. יִרְדּוּ בְּזַעֲף,  
עַד שֶׁכָּל טֶפֶח וְטֶפֶח כְּמֵלֵא פִי חֲבִית. וְשִׁיעְרוּ חֲכָמִים שָׂאִין טֶפֶח  
פְּחוּתָהּ מְלוּג. אָמְרוּ לוֹ תַלְמִידָיו: רַבִּי, רְאִינוּךָ וְלֹא נָמוּת, כְּמַדּוּמִין אָנוּ  
שָׂאִין גְּשָׁמִים יוֹרְדִין אֱלֹהִים לְאַבֵּד הָעוֹלָם.

Honi said to God: **I did not ask for this, but for rain to fill the cisterns, ditches, and caves.** Rain began to fall furiously, until each and every drop was as big as the mouth of a barrel, and the Sages estimated that no drop was less than a *log* in size. His students said to him: **Rabbi, we have seen that you can call on God to perform miracles and we will not die, but now it appears to us that rain is falling only to destroy the world.**

אָמַר לְפָנָיו: לֹא כִּדְ שָׁאַלְתִּי, אֱלֹהִים גְּשָׁמֵי רָצוֹן בְּרָכָה וּנְדָבָה. יִרְדּוּ  
כְּתִיקָנוּ, עַד שֶׁעָלוּ כָּל הָעָם לְהַר הַבַּיִת, מִפְּנֵי הַגְּשָׁמִים. אָמְרוּ לוֹ:  
רַבִּי, כְּשֶׁם שֶׁהִתְפַּלַּלְתָּ שִׁירְדוּ, כִּדְ הִתְפַּלַּל וַיִּלְכוּ לָהֶם. אָמַר לָהֶם: כִּדְ  
מְקוּבְלָנִי שָׂאִין מִתְפַּלְּלִין עַל רוֹב הַטּוֹבָה.

Honi again said before God: **I did not ask for this harmful rain either, but for rain of benevolence, blessing, and generosity.** Subsequently, the rains fell in their standard manner, until all of the people sought higher ground and ascended to the Temple Mount due to the rain. They said to him: **Rabbi, just as you prayed that the rains should fall, so too, pray that they should stop.** He said to them: **This is the tradition that I received, that one does not pray over an excess of good.**

אף על פי כן, הביאו לי פר הודאה. הביאו לו פר הודאה, סמך שתי ידי עליו, ואמר לפניו: רבוננו של עולם! עמך ישראל שהוצאת ממצרים אינן יכולין לא ברוב טובה ולא ברוב פורענות. כעסת עליהם — אינן יכולין לעמוד, השפעת עליהם טובה — אינן יכולין לעמוד, יהי רצון מלפניך שיפסקו הגשמים, ויהא ריוח בעולם. מיד נשבה הרוח, ונתפזרו העבים, וזרחה החמה, ויצאו העם לשדה והביאו להם כמהין ופטריות.

Honi continued: **Nevertheless, bring me a bull.** I will sacrifice it as a **thanks-offering** and pray at the same time. **They brought him a bull for a thanks-offering. He placed his two hands on its head and said before God: Master of the Universe, Your nation Israel, whom You brought out of Egypt, cannot bear either an excess of good or an excess of punishment. You grew angry with them and withheld rain, and they are unable to bear it. You bestowed upon them too much good, and they were also unable to bear it. May it be Your will that the rain stops and that there be relief for the world. Immediately, the wind blew, the clouds dispersed, the sun shone, and everyone went out to the fields and gathered for themselves truffles and mushrooms** that had sprouted in the strong rain.

שֶׁלַח לוֹ שְׂמֵעוֹן בֶּן שֵׁטַח: אֲלֵמָּלָא חוֹנֵי אֲתָהּ, גּוֹזְרֵי עֲלֶיךָ גִידוּי.  
שְׂאִילוֹ שָׁנִים כְּשָׁנֵי אֵלֶיהוּ שְׂמִפְתָּחוֹת גְּשָׁמִים בְּיָדוֹ שֶׁל אֵלֶיהוּ, לֹא  
נִמְצָא שֵׁם שָׁמַיִם מִתְחַלֵּל עַל יָדְךָ,

Shimon ben Shetaḥ relayed to Honi HaMe'aggel: **If you were not Honi, I would have decreed ostracism upon you.** For were these years like the years of Elijah, when the keys of rain were entrusted in Elijah's hands, and he swore it would not rain, **wouldn't the name of Heaven have been desecrated by your** oath not to leave the circle until it rained? Once you have pronounced this oath, either yours or Elijah's must be falsified.

אָבֵל מָה אַעֲשֶׂה לָּךְ, שְׂאֲתָה מִתְחַטֵּא לְפָנַי הַמָּקוֹם וְעוֹשֶׂה לָּךְ רְצוֹנָךְ,  
כְּבִן שְׂמִתְחַטֵּא עַל אָבִיו וְעוֹשֶׂה לוֹ רְצוֹנוֹ, וְאוֹמֵר לוֹ: אָבֵא, הוֹלִיכֵנִי  
לְרַחֲצֵנִי בַחֲמִין. שְׂטַפְנֵי בְּצוֹנוֹ. תַּן לִי אֲגוּזִים, שְׂקָדִים, אֲפִרְסִקִים  
וְרַמְזִים — וְגוֹתֵן לוֹ. וְעֲלֶיךָ הַכְּתוּב אוֹמֵר: "שִׁמְח אָבִיךָ וְאִמְךָ וְתִגַּל  
יִוְלְדָתְךָ".

However, what can I do to you, as you nag God and He does your bidding, like a son who nags his father, and his father does his bidding. And the son says to his father: Father, take me to be bathed in hot water; wash me with cold water; give me nuts, almonds, peaches, and pomegranates. And his father gives him. About you, the verse states:

יולדך תהיה. ותגל, יולדך תהיה. 25 Let thy father and thy mother be glad and let her that bore thee rejoice.

Prov 23:25

*“Your father and mother will be glad, and she who bore you will rejoice”*

## Summary

### 2) Choni the Circle-maker

A Baraisa elaborates on the story of Choni the Circle-maker.

A second Baraisa records the message Sanhedrin sent to Choni the Circle-maker following the above cited story.

R' Yochanan retells the story of Choni the Circle-maker sleeping for seventy years and how depressed he became when he realized that he had no one with which to study Torah until he davened that he should die.

### 3) Choni the Circle-maker's grandchildren

The story of Abba Chilkiyah, a grandson of Choni the Circle-maker, davening for rain is retold.

After the rain began to fall the rabbis asked Abba Chilkiyah to explain a number of unusual behaviors he practiced while they followed him.

The Story of Chanan the Hidden is presented and the Gemara explains the origin of his name.

### 4) The contrast between the righteous people of Bavel and the righteous people of Eretz Yisroel

R' Zerika noted the different styles of obtaining rain between those in Eretz Yisroel and those in Bavel.

The Gemara proceeds to relate two incidents involving R' Mani the son of R' Yonah.

A story involving R' Yitzchok ben Elyashiv, mentioned in one of the incidents involving R' Mani, is recorded.

## CHONI HA'ME'AGEL'S SEVENTY-YEAR SLUMBER

**Rav Mordechai Kornfeld** writes:<sup>1</sup>

The Gemara relates that throughout his life, Choni ha'Me'agel was bothered by the meaning of the verse, "... When Hash-m returned the captives of Zion, we were like dreamers" (Tehilim 126:1). When Hash-m returned the Jews from the seventy-year exile in Bavel, it was like they awakened from a slumber of seventy years. Choni was perplexed how a person could sleep for seventy years.

Hash-m provided an answer to Choni's question. Choni met a man planting a carob tree, and he asked him why he was planting a tree which would bear fruit only after seventy years. The man told him that just as his father had planted a carob tree for him, he wanted to plant a carob tree for his children. Afterwards, Choni sat down to eat his bread and was overcome with sleep. He was hidden behind a rock formation, where he slept for seventy years. When he awoke, he saw the grandson of the man who planted the carob tree picking carobs from the tree. He also saw that his donkey had given birth to herds of donkeys.

When he discussed subjects with the Chachamim in the Beis Midrash, they commented that his answers made the subjects "as clear as they were in the days of Choni ha'Me'agel." The Gemara relates that they did not believe him when he said that he was Choni, and they did not give him proper respect. He prayed to Hash-m to spare him the frustration, and he was taken from the world.

The question which bothered Choni throughout his life seems nonsensical. The verse says only that "we were *like* dreamers (k'Cholmim)." It is clearly a metaphor: the years of the Babylonian exile passed like a dream. The verse does not say that the exiles actually slept for seventy years. Why was Choni bothered with how a person could sleep for seventy years?

The **CHIDUSHEI HA'GE'ONIM** (in the **EIN YAKOV**) and the **VILNA GA'ON** (as recorded by his son in **SA'ARAS ELIYAHU**, p. 12) explain that the seventy years of slumber which Choni wondered about represents the average lifespan of a person. Choni saw that the people in his generation did not concentrate their efforts on Torah study and Mitzvah fulfillment, but they wasted their time on material pursuits. He wondered how a person could neglect his primary purpose in the world and spend his life focused on transient, meaningless pursuits (and thus "sleep for seventy years").

Choni wanted to find out what motivates people to waste their time in this world and to spend their seventy-year lifespan doing nothing more than sleeping, with their eyes closed to the true purpose of life. This was the question which bothered Choni for so long.

Hash-m revealed to him part of the answer. Hash-m showed him a person planting a carob tree. He asked the person why he was planting a carob tree if he would not be around to enjoy its fruits, since a carob tree bears fruit only after seventy years. Choni recognized that most people waste

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<sup>1</sup> <https://dafyomi.co.il/taanis/insites/tn-dt-023.htm>

their time in pursuit of meaningless pleasures in this world because the pleasure of Olam ha'Ba is not immediate while the pleasure of Olam ha'Zeh is immediate. People prefer to receive immediate gratification rather than to invest their energies in obtaining pleasure that will come only after many years.

In his conversation with the man who planted the carob tree, Choni discovered the answer to his question about why people waste their lives in pursuit of meaningless pleasures. The man -- by planting a carob tree -- was acting in a way incongruous with the way other people act. The man was willing to forgo immediate gratification and instead toil for a benefit which would be reaped only seventy years later, just as one who engages in Torah and Mitzvos defers his pleasure to Olam ha'Ba. Most other people prefer the immediate but fleeting pleasures of this world.

When the Gemara says that Choni "sat down to eat," it means that he realized that it was the desires of this world (represented by eating) which shut a person's mind and lure him to meaningless pursuits. The realization of the taste of worldly pleasures caused him to "be concealed by a rock," which refers to the Yetzer ha'Ra which entices a person to abandon his pursuit of Olam ha'Ba in exchange for worldly pleasures (the Gemara in Sukah (52a) relates that "Yechezkel called the Yetzer ha'Ra 'rock'") and to "fall asleep" and neglect the pursuit of a meaningful life for seventy years.

When Choni awoke, he saw that his donkey ("Chamor") had given birth to many herds. When man immerses himself in the material pursuits of this world, he becomes irreversibly entrenched and cannot extract himself from the drive for worldly pleasure, which is represented by the Chamor. (The Chamor, donkey, symbolizes a total attachment to the material pleasures of this world. The word "Chamor" is related to "Chomer" and "Chumriyus," materialism.)

## RAIN AND REPENTANCE

When Aba Chilkiyah (the grandson of Choni ha'Me'agel) and his wife prayed for rain, his wife's prayers were answered first. The Gemara explains in its first answer that her prayers were answered first because of the merit of her acts of Tzedakah: she gave food to the poor, while her husband gave only money. She was available in her home at all times to help the poor, and whenever a poor person came to ask for help she would give him something. In return for her superior fulfillment of the Mitzvah of Tzedakah, her prayers for rain were answered first.

The Gemara's second reason for why her prayers were answered first is because she used to pray that the sinners in her neighborhood do Teshuvah and repent, while her husband used to pray that they die. In return, she was rewarded that her prayers for rain were answered first.

According to the Gemara's first reason (her acts of Tzedakah were superior), the element of reward measure-for-measure, "Midah k'Neged Midah," is evident. Since she provided sustenance to the poor, she merited that Hash-m provided sustenance to the world through her prayers for rain.

However, what is the relationship between her prayers that the sinners repent, and being rewarded that her prayers for rain were answered first? Why should rain come in the merit of her prayers that the sinners repent? (**YEFEH EINAYIM**, cited by **BEN YEHOYADA**)

(a) The repentance of sinners is a form of renewal and rejuvenation. When they do Teshuvah, they are considered as though they are returning to life from a state of death. Similarly, rain provides new life to the world. (See **BEN YEHOYADA**.)

(b) The Gemara later (25b) relates that both Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva prayed for rain, but only Rabbi Akiva's prayers were answered. A Bas Kol proclaimed that the reason why Rabbi Akiva's prayers were answered was not because he was greater than Rabbi Eliezer, but because he was "Ma'avir Al Midosav" -- he was forgiving of insult.

What does the Gemara mean when it says that Rabbi Akiva was not greater than Rabbi Eliezer? If Rabbi Akiva was "Ma'avir Al Midosav" while Rabbi Eliezer was not, then Rabbi Akiva indeed was greater!

**RAV YISRAEL SALANTER** (in **OR YISRAEL** #28) explains that there are two different approaches to the service of Hash-m. Rabbi Eliezer's attribute was strict adherence to the honor of the Torah, to uphold and protect it. This attribute was similar to the attribute of Shamaï, Rabbi Eliezer's mentor (Tosfos, Shabbos 130b), as the Gemara in Shabbos (31a) describes. Rabbi Akiva, a student of the academy of Hillel, approached Avodas Hash-m with a different attribute -- that of humility and forgiving of insult, the attribute of Hillel (ibid.). Both are equally valid approaches in serving Hash-m; one cannot be called "greater" than the other. This difference in approach was the subject of dispute like any other Machlokes Tana'im. Although in this case the Halachah was later decided in favor of Hillel (Shabbos 30b), this does not detract from the value of the Avodas Hash-m of Shamaï and his followers.

If both approaches are equally valid, why was Rabbi Akiva's prayer answered, and Rabbi Eliezer's was not? The answer is that when one beseeches Hash-m for Rachamim (to bring rain), if he embodies the attribute of Rachamim himself his prayers will be answered, measure for measure.

According to Rav Yisrael Salanter's explanation, Aba Chilkiyah's wife was answered first because her attribute was that of Rachamim, as she demonstrated by her prayers that the sinners do not die but repent. In response to her prayers measure for measure, Hash-m exercised His trait of Rachamim and sent rain to the people.

## Praying for Rain—Modestly

**Steinzaltz (OBM)** writes:<sup>2</sup>

The Mishna (19a) related the story of Honi HaMe'aggel and the close relationship that he had with God that allowed him to plead before Him on behalf of the Jewish people. Our *daf* relates that his descendants shared some of his abilities and tells stories about their intervention on behalf of *am yisra'el* (the people of Israel), even as they tried to avoid receiving credit for their success.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://steinsaltz.org/daf/taanit23/>

One example is the story of Abba Hilkiyya, who was Honi HaMe'aggel's grandson. He was working in the fields when he saw the delegation of rabbis coming to ask him to intercede on their behalf and pray for rain.

The Gemara relates that he refused to return their greeting and performed a series of strange activities while he walked home, culminating in his entering his home with his wife, feeding his children, and encouraging his wife to join him in prayer on the roof. Only when the clouds had already gathered, and the rain began did he turn to the delegation and ask what they wanted. When they responded that they were sent to ask him to pray, he told them that they did not need his prayers, as it had already begun to rain.

When asked, he explained his odd behaviors – all of which related to his sensitivity to the needs of others (e.g. he could not respond to their original greeting because he was paid by the hour and speaking to them would have been stealing from his employer). He also explained that his wife's prayers were answered before his own because her place in the house allowed her to be more directly involved in responding to the needs of the poor. As Rashi explains, this was true because she was more readily available and because her charity responded to an immediate need (i.e. she fed them, rather than giving them money).

Another one of Honi HaMe'aggel's grandchildren was Hanan HaNehba (i.e. "the one who hides") who, according to the Gemara, received that nickname because he hid himself to avoid receiving honor for his actions. According to some manuscripts of the Gemara, he would hide himself in the lavatory – which may refer to his modesty, that even in the bathroom he was careful to remain clothed, or, according to a tradition of the Ge'onim, when people came looking for him to pray for rain, he hid himself in the bathroom so that he would not be found.



**A man asleep on a table by (after) Arie De Vois**

## **Choni the circle maker**

**Mark Kerzner** writes:<sup>3</sup>

Once the rains were very late in coming, and people asked Choni to pray for rain. He told them to hide away their clay ovens intended for the coming Passover sacrifice, then prayed for rain, but it did not come. Choni then drew a circle and swore that he will not leave it until his prayer is answered. A small rain started to trickle. "This is not what I asked for," - said Choni - "but a

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<sup>3</sup> <https://talmudilluminated.com/taanit/taanit23.html>

powerful rain!" Immediately it started raining with force, and each drop was like a bucket. "That is not what I asked," - said Choni - "but a normal beneficial rain." A medium rain started to fall - but it would not stop! People collected on the Temple Mount because of the water, and asked Choni to pray to stop the rain. He replied, "It is not proper to ask God to stop a blessing, even if it is too much of it." Nevertheless, he then said, "Bring me a bull for a sacrifice." He took the bull, put his two hands on its head, and said, "Master of the world, your children cannot stand too much bad or too much good." The wind blew, the sun showed, and the rain stopped.

All his life Choni was bothered by the phrase, "When we came back from Babylon to rebuild the Temple, we were like dreamers." This exile lasted for seventy years, but can anyone sleep for that long? Once Choni saw a man planting a carob trees. The man told him that he was planting for his grandchildren, just as his grandfathers planted for him, for it takes seventy years for a carob to grow. Choni then sat down to eat and fell asleep. When he awoke, he saw a man by the carob tree who told Choni that he was a grandson of the man he had seen earlier. Choni deduced that he had slept for seventy years. He went to the study hall, where he heard the students say, "Today all is clear to us, just like in the days of Choni the circle maker." He said, "I am Choni." But they did not believe him and did not pay him proper respect. He prayed for mercy and died.

### *Prayers supported with the merit of good deeds*

משום דאיתתא שכיחא בביתא ויהבא ריפתא לעניי ומקרבא הנייתה

Abba Chilkiya was a descendant of Choni the circlemaker. The Jews needed rain, and a delegation was sent to ask Abba Chilkiya to pray.<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, Abba Chilkiya and his wife climbed to the roof of their house to daven. Each stood at an opposite corner of the roof, and as they davened, clouds began to form at the side of the sky closer to his wife. Abba Chilkiya was asked why his wife's prayers were more readily answered, as indicated by the cloud formation building nearer to her. He explained that although both he and his wife gave tzedaka to the poor, she always gave food which was ready to eat. He, however, only had money to give. Her prayers were therefore most productive because her kindness to the needy was more available and beneficial.

HaRav Shlomo Morgenstern points out that the curses in Parashas Ki Savo in Devarim feature a verse warning that one's sons and daughters will be in distress, and the parent will only be able to watch helplessly, unable to do anything about it. Why will one's hand be powerless? In his translation and commentary (Devarim 28:32), **יונתן בן עוזיאל** explains that the parent will be lacking in good deeds **עבדין טבין לית בידיכון** and that, as a result, his prayers will be ineffective. This is what the verse means when it says, "your hand will be unable to reach God." Generally, a person can spare himself from suffering by davening to Hashem. The Jews in Egypt cried out in pain. Hashem obviously knew they were in pain, but He didn't rescue them until He heard their cries and prayers. Clearly, a parent who sees his children in distress will daven to Hashem for their rescue.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.dafdigest.org/masechtos/Taanis%20023.pdf>

If so, why is it that this man described in Parashas Ki Savo will not be answered at a time of his children's distress? Despite davening to Hashem, a person might not be answered due to a lack of merit. This verse is speaking about a person who has inadequately performed acts of kindness. Prayer itself cannot achieve its goal if the person is deficient in his actions. The Targum is teaching us a new insight into the secret of prayer. Prayer alone, without merits, is ineffective. Merit alone, without prayer, is also inadequate. Mitzvos and good deeds are the foundation upon which effective prayer can be built, which enables us to approach ה' הקב .

Prayers are effective when pronounced by a person who performs good deeds. And, in fact, the quality of the good deeds itself also determines the degree to which a prayer can penetrate the Heavens, as evidenced in the case of Abba Chilkiya. Repentance, prayer, and good deeds can push away an evil decree. When our prayers are surrounded by repentance and good deeds, we will see the results.

### *The circle of Choni HaMe'ageil*

עג עוגה ועמד בתוכה

Once the Mabit, zt"l, was asked a difficult question: "Rebbi, I don't understand the Gemara in Taanis 23. The Gemara tells us there that we desperately needed rain and Choni HaMe'ageil came and drew a circle around himself and swore that he wouldn't step foot out of it until rain fell.

Why did Choni HaMe'ageil make a circle in particular? And why is this fact considered significant enough to be recorded for posterity in the Gemara? Couldn't it have simply stated that he refused to leave his place until rain fell?

The Mabit explained: "There is a very deep message hidden within the circle of Choni HaMe'ageil. The sages taught that the world is round. For this reason, a circle alludes to the natural world or the natural order of things. Choni made a circle around himself to show that if Hashem would not help His children by sending rain, this would imply that we are subject to the natural order of things, to the cycle of nature.

This is a tremendous desecration of Hashem's Name, because we are His chosen people who have been uplifted to higher things. This is why Choni said that he would only leave the circle when the rain came. It was his way of showing that we are actually above the circular cycle of nature when there are tzaddikim among us. When such lofty people are in our midst, all natural cosmological and astronomical influences are suspended for the Jewish people.

This is the meaning of Hashem taking Avraham Avinu out of the stratosphere of the world to gaze at the stars. This was meant to show him that Hashem had raised him far above the influence of the stars and the order of nature. And it was this that would allow him to have children, because by nature, Avraham was physically unable to bear children.

The Mabit concluded: "The verse says that Hashem took Avram outside, above the natural order of things, and said, 'That is how your descendants will be.' (Bereshis 15:5) When will your

descendants merit to transcend the circular cycle of natural influence? When they are truly ‘your descendants’— when they are righteous like you!”

**Rachel Scheinerman** writes:<sup>5</sup>

*Our daf* contains the famous story of Honi the Circle Drawer, one of the mysterious wonder workers that populate rabbinic lore. Though he has a close relationship to God — so close that he can rely on God to answer him — Honi is not a rabbi. In fact, his behavior is anathema to the rabbis.

In *the mishnah* that we read a few pages back, we learned that the community calls a fast on account of any communal tragedy *except* for an overabundance of rain. This comment occasions a story.

Jerusalem is experiencing a severe drought. Instead of *blowing a shofar* and *declaring a fast*, as the rabbis prescribe, the residents call in Honi the Circle Drawer, a man known for speaking directly to God and working miracles. Honi agrees to help, but when he finds that ordinary prayer does not succeed, he sets about performing his signature brand of supplication — he draws a circle on the ground and declares that he will not move until God brings the rain.

The ploy works. But as if to tease Honi, God sends the lightest rain possible. Standing firm in the circle, Honi unabashedly addresses God again and demands rain that is strong enough to fill the cisterns, ditches and caves. Abruptly, the rain comes down in a torrent — the kind that causes flash floods and devastation. Again, Honi is unperturbed, and once again addresses God, asking for a moderate rain of “benevolence, blessing and generosity.” Immediately, God grants it. The drought is over and, for a brief moment, it looks like Honi has succeeded.

Except the moderate rain does not stop. It continues to fall until Jerusalem is underwater and the residents must take shelter on the *Temple Mount*, the high point of the city. The people beg Honi to pray for the rain to cease, but he heartlessly refuses, saying he will not pray for the end of rain until the Claimants’ Stone — an ancient rock used as a lost and found on the Temple Mount — has been washed away. (Recall: We began with a rule that the community does not pray for rain to cease, but Honi does not cite that as his reason for refusing to help. And Honi has already proven that he is not interested in rabbinic methods of supplication — otherwise he would have followed the proper procedure for a drought and initiated a fast.)

At this point, Honi’s true colors are impossible to ignore. He loves the power, the prestige, the showmanship, the drama. But he does not love the people or truly care for their wellbeing. It is at this moment that Shimon ben Shetach, one of the rabbinic leaders of the community, offers a bitter imprecation:

*Were you not Honi, I would have decreed that you be ostracized, but what can I do to you? You nag God and he does your bidding, like a son who nags his father and his father does his bidding.*

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<sup>5</sup> Myjewishlearning.com

Honi has bucked the rabbinic method of dealing with drought, and though his methods initially work, bringing the rain that is so desperately needed, the ultimate results are disastrous. The rabbis are appalled, but because they recognize Honi's extraordinary relationship with God, they stop short of **excommunicating him**.

This is where the mishnah's story, related back on **Taanit 19**, ends. In **the Gemara** we read today, the rabbis seem eager to redeem Honi's character. They understand his circle drawing not as some foreign **magical act**, but as an imitation of **the biblical prophet Habakkuk**. Instead of painting him as a lone actor, they surround him with a bevy of disciples who urge him on at every turn. And when the rain begins to overwhelm the city, Honi does not express haughty disinterest in the plight of the people, but regret that the tradition does not allow him to pray for the rain to end. And then, seeing the devastation around him, he thinks the better of blindly following that law and says something to his students that is wholly different from anything we have in the mishnah:

*Nevertheless, bring me a bull. I will sacrifice it as a thanks-offering and pray at the same time.*

*They brought him a bull for a thanks-offering. He placed his two hands on its head and said before God: Master of the Universe, your nation Israel, whom you brought out of Egypt, cannot bear either an excess of good or an excess of punishment. You grew angry with them and withheld rain, and they are unable to bear it. You bestowed upon them too much good, and they were also unable to bear it. May it be your will that the rain stop and that there be relief for the world.*

*Immediately, the wind blew, the clouds dispersed, the sun shone, and everyone went out to the fields and gathered for themselves truffles and mushrooms that had sprouted in the strong rain.*

In this version, Honi is a hero. He saves the city from drought, and then from flood. No longer portrayed as a lone wolf wonder worker who shows no regard for rabbinic law, he is domesticated as a student of the rabbis and the prophets. He is surrounded by disciples and knows how to follow the law, and even when to break it. And his story is no longer a tragedy but a comedy, ending with the people gathering truffles after the rain. In rewriting Honi this way, the rabbis transform him from someone with a dangerous power into one of their own. And in so doing, they claim his power for themselves.

**Rabbi Johnny Solomon** writes:<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately, when people cite Talmudic stories, they often omit the foundation of the story which, in many cases, is a biblical verse. This then leads them to explore the meaning of the story independent of the verse, and gives them greater license to overlay the story with their own meaning - as opposed to considering how the story is a form of commentary on that given verse.

A great case in point is the story of Choni found in **our daf** (Ta'anit 23a) which is often told as follows: 'Choni Hame'agel once [dreamt that he] met an old man planting a carob tree. "**How long**

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<sup>6</sup> [www.rabbijohnnysolomon.com](http://www.rabbijohnnysolomon.com)

*will it take to grow?” he asked. “Seventy years,” the man answered. “Do you think that you will live another 70 years?” Choni inquired. “Just as my ancestors planted for me,” replied the man, “so too I plant for my children.”* The Gemara then goes on to say that [the continuation of Choni’s dream is that] he became drowsy, slept for 70 years, and woke up to find a similar looking man picking fruit from the tree. Upon asking who he was, he explained that he was the grandson of the man who had planted the tree.

The problem is that this is not how the story begins. It begins, as Rav Yochanan explains, by noting that Choni was constantly trying to make sense of a particular biblical verse throughout his life - namely: *שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת בְּשׁוּב ה' אֶת שִׁיבַת צִיּוֹן הָיִינוּ כְּחֹלְמִים* – *‘A song of ascents: When the Lord brought back the exiles of Zion we were like dreamers’* (Tehillim 126:1).

To remind ourselves, Choni died around 63 BCE, i.e. prior to the destruction of the second Temple, but during a time of great strife and growing persecution in the country during which times the people also suffered from a severe lack of rain. For Choni who, as I previously explained in my post on Ta’anit 19a was compassionate, caring and loving and who was regarded as someone who could beseech God to overcome the challenges that his generation faced, these were unsettling and depressing times. True, he was living in Israel. But as a dreamer himself, he hoped for better times and focused his attention on the meaning of this verse and on a time when the Jewish people would live with greater security in Zion as dreamers.

And so he dreamt a dream of a man who laboured to dig, sow and grow a carob tree whose fruit he was not going to enjoy but was going to be there for future generations. And, as Rabbi Yaakov Lorberbaum (1760-1832) in his ‘Emet L’Yaakov’ explains, this provided Choni with a measure of comfort in knowing that while the Jewish people were suffering in his days, and while he foresaw that they would continue to suffer from persecution and exile in the future, there would be a time when, ‘the Lord will bring back the exiles of Zion when we will be like dreamers.’

Around a century after Choni’s death, the second Temple was destroyed. Soon after, the Jews were exiled, and in the ensuing 2,000 years the Jewish people experienced repeated persecutions. Yet while we are far from living in a perfect world, and while the Jewish people continue to experience challenges in many parts of the world, I am currently sitting in my house in Israel writing this thought on Daf Yomi and, cognizant of the journey of my ancestors which took them to many countries, realising the fulfilment of the words, ‘A song of ascents: When the Lord brought back the exiles of Zion we were like dreamers’.

There are many important lessons we can overlay onto this story about Choni. But when we understand that it is a commentary on a verse, we come to realise that its main message is primarily about the restoring a people to its land and about the period in Jewish history when – notwithstanding the difficulties we have experienced – we return to Zion and feel like dreamers.



## Differences between a Jewish and non-Jewish tale

**Israel Drazin** writes:<sup>7</sup>

*There are many instances where both Jews and non-Jews tell stories with some variations on the same plot. In many of these instances, the Jewish version attempts to use its version to teach Jews proper behavior. The following is an example.*

### **Rip Van Winkle**

Washington Irving (1783-1859) published “Rip Van Winkle” in 1820 and the tale became the first internationally famous American short story. It made Irving internationally famous. Rip had an

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<sup>7</sup> <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/differences-between-a-jewish-and-non-jewish-tale/>

aversion to all kinds of profitable work. He found it impossible to keep his farm in order. He was a rather simple, lazy, good-natured, kind, lovable man to everyone but his wife who was exasperated by Rip's failure to do his chores. She hen-pecked poor Rip daily. But his wife's behavior gained him universal popularity, for the constant complaints and threats of a termagant wife is worth all the sermons in the world for teaching the virtues of patience and long-suffering. Rip's only escape from the labors of the farm and the clamor of his wife was to stroll away into the woods and sit at the foot of a tree.

One day as he was sitting under his tree, a strange man (later identified as a ghost of a long-dead inhabitant of the area) approached him and enticed him to drink a delicious intoxicating liquor. Rip drank liberally and soon fell asleep.

When he awoke, he saw that everything had changed. A new stream was in the area. His beard had grown a foot longer. When he arrived at his town, he discovered that he had been asleep for twenty years. Many of his friends had died. His wife was also dead. (Rip was unsure whether he should be happy or sad about being released from petticoat government.) His son was now grown but was as lazy and unproductive as he had been. But his daughter was also grown, had married, and brought Rip to live at her house, and Rip found a place to sit daily on the bench at the door of the local inn.

There are many versions of such tales in various cultures. The following is a Jewish version.

### **Honi Hamaagel**

Honi Hamaagel (Honi the circle maker) was an especially pious Jewish man who lived during the first century BCE. The Talmud states that he was so pious that he had a special relationship with God and was able to be a miracle worker.[1] He would be able to pray for rain when the populace

needed the precipitation. He would draw a circle, step inside it, and inform God that he would not step out of the circle until it rained. Due to his piety, he was always successful; God did not want to see this pious man stranded in a circle.

According to Talmud,[2] while traveling Honi saw a man planting a carob tree. He asked him, “How long would it take (for this tree) to bear fruit?” The man answered, “Seventy years.” He then asked, “Are you sure that you will live another seventy years?” The man answered, “No. But I’m not planting this (tree) for myself, but for the next generations and the ones that follow.” Honi shrugged his shoulders and left. Later, when he sat down to rest, he slept for seventy years. When he awoke and retraced his prior walk, he saw a man plucking carobs from a tree. He asked, “Did you plant this tree?” The man answered, “No. My grandfather planted it. My father told me that his father planted this tree for me.”

### **Similarities**

1. Both stories focus on men well-liked by their communities.
2. Both sleep for an unusual length of time and awaken to see changes in their surroundings.

### **Differences**

1. Rip was lazy, did little to help his wife and nothing to aid his community. Honi devoted himself to helping the general population.
2. Honi was pious and loved by God because of his piety. Rip only thought of leisure.
3. God is not mentioned in Rip’s story.
4. Rip slept for twenty years, one generation, while Honi slept for seventy years, using the number seven that appears frequently in Jewish tales and which makes it possible for readers to see the impact of the action taken in the story two generations after the first act.

5. Rip's wife is disparaged in his tale. No women appear in Honi adventure.
6. Rip does not change. He was lazy before he slept and lazy when he awoke. He made no contribution to his fellow citizens before and after the sleep. Honi changed. He did not seem to understand why the man planted a tree for a future generation before he slept; he left the man shrugging his shoulders. Later, the story tells the impact upon the man's family and presumably both the reader and Honi learnt a lesson from what they saw/read.
7. Rip's story is fun to read but has no lesson for the reader. Honi's tale teaches a profound lesson.

[1] Babylonian Talmud Taanit 19a and 23a.

[2] Taanit 23a.



## **Rip Van Winkle, Tu B'Shvat and the Secret of Jewish Perseverance**

**Jonathan Feldman** writes:<sup>8</sup>

*On Tu B'Shvat we appreciate the experience of planting trees or eating the fruit of trees that will bear fruit leading to a better future.*

Four months ago, a friend gave my wife a small sapling kumquat tree as a birthday present. We replanted it into a bigger pot, and every few days after watering it I would check to see if it grew. I didn't see progress, so I figured I'd wait another few days. (My wife does not just wait; she talks to the plants and gets more results than I do!) Four months later, we are still waiting.

The first lesson to be drawn from this experience is that trees do not grow a lot in the winter. However, the bigger lesson is that trees teach us about patience and investing in the future. For a people that has lasted 3300 years, patience and long-term vision are essential aspects of Jewish consciousness. The holiday of Tu B'Shvat, the New Year for trees, is upon us, and one of the central themes to be learned from this holiday is the principle of patience. In order to fully understand this concept, I need you to be patient and allow me to share a fascinating story from the Talmud about resolution and investing in the future.

## **The Key to Jewish Continuity**

One of the most unique figures in the Talmud is Choni Hamagel, Choni the Circle Maker (Babylonian Talmud Taanit 23a). His name might sound like that of a native American Chief, but really, he was one of the sages of the Talmud. So how did he get his name? In times of drought, he would draw a circle on the ground and declare to the Almighty that he would not leave the circle until the rain came. And sure enough, the rain would come.

One day Choni was walking along and saw a man planting a carob tree. Choni asked the man why he was planting if there was a good chance that he would not see the tree bear fruit, which only comes after 70 years. The man's answer is the key to the secret of Jewish continuity: Just as he found a world full of carob trees in his life because his ancestors planted for him, so too he decided to plant for his descendants.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://unitedwithisrael.org/rip-van-winkle-tu-bshvat-and-the-secret-of-jewish-perseverance/>



It seems that hearing this message was not enough, Choni needed to experience it. Choni ate a meal and fell asleep and slept for 70 years! When he awoke, he saw a man gathering carobs from the tree and asked if he had planted the tree. The man answered no, I am the son of the man who planted. It was then that Choni realized he had slept for 70 years.

He returned home only to find out that his son had passed away and only his grandson was still alive. In the study hall, he heard scholars lamenting that they no longer had Choni to answer their questions. When he told them that he was indeed Choni, they did not believe him. Choni was so upset he prayed for mercy and died. The Talmud then concludes this tale with the quote “either friendship or death,” meaning that without his peers, Choni felt his life was not worth living.

What is this puzzling and tragic Rip Van Winkle-like story meant to teach us? The lessons from this story share themes with holiday of Tu B’Shvat. Choni’s story teaches that we plant trees for the long term, and that with a tree, like in life, the fruits often only come after many years. The fruit of our story, the carob, is an example of a fruit which takes a lifetime to bear fruit, and we have the custom to eat it on Tu B’Shvat.



Children take decades to raise, careers are built over a lifetime, and Jewish life is built across lifetimes, centuries and even millennia. Jewish continuity is an enterprise for which others have laid the foundation, and our role is to continue to build that foundation for those who will come after us. The idea of acting for the future generations is also very relevant to the preservation of our planet, which has become a dire issue. We must think about how the way in which we use the planet will affect future generations. This is why Tu B'Shvat has become the 'Jewish Earth Day.'

The timing of Tu B'Shvat serves as a message similar to the lesson learned by Choni. Tu B'Shvat marks the beginning of the New Year for trees, so one might think the holiday would fall out just before the new crop of fruit. But instead, it falls out in the tail end of winter in Israel. The cold, rain and darkness of winter are not over in mid-February, not even in Israel. Yet the Talmud tells us, and science corroborates, that the sap begins to rise and nurture the tree six weeks before the beginning of spring. We learn that even though we might not outwardly see how our efforts are impacting the world, the seeds planted will eventually blossom and a brighter future bearing fruit will emerge.



Our family made Aliyah immediately after the 70th anniversary of the State of Israel, and when we look out our window and see the Judean forests, we know they are there because the previous generations of Zionists had the vision to understand the significance of planting for the future. For us, moving to Israel was so important because we wanted to plant roots for our family in our homeland. We hope that we will be able to contribute to the physical and spiritual building of the land, which will lay the foundation for the next stage of our personal, family, and national destiny.

## **Israel education: Are you a Honi Ha'Meagel or a Shimon ben Shetach?**

**Ilan Bloch** writes:<sup>9</sup>

*Perhaps Honi and Shimon ben Shetach are really on a spectrum and our job as Israel educators is to try and find our point on the axis between their two hashkafot (philosophical worldviews) — one which works for us as educators and for the learners themselves, which is suitable in terms of the content knowledge we are trying to convey, and which accords with the policies of the institution in which we are teaching or guiding.*

Our Sages teach (*Taanit* 23a) that halfway through *Adar* rain had not yet fallen. The people send a message to Honi Ha'Meagel (Honi the Roof Thatcher), asking that he pray for rain, which he does, but to no avail. He then draws a circle and stands within it, beseeching God to open the skies,

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<sup>9</sup> <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/israel-education-are-you-a-honi-hameagel-or-a-shimon-ben-shetach/>

even stating that he would not leave his circle until God did so. God responds with only a drizzle. With *chutzpah* (audacity) he exclaims to God that he wanted more, and God responds by opening the floodgates. With even more *chutzpah*, he tells God that this deluge is too much, and a regular amount of rain starts to fall. Overall though, the land is flooded (people even need to ascend the Temple Mount to gain shelter) and Honi lays his hands on a bullock for a thanksgiving offering, asking that the rains now stop. The clouds dissipate, the sun shines and the people go out into the fields to gather mushrooms and truffles. Disaster is averted. Honi manages to serve as an intermediary between the people and God, bringing deliverance to them in a miraculous manner. Shimon ben Shetach tells him that if not for the fact he was Honi Ha'Meagel he would surely be excommunicated. Who acts so petulantly toward God, making demands again and again?! It is as though Honi is a toddler acting as one would expect when trying to convince his parent to grant him something special!



Honi makes things easy for the people, he gives them what they want, and he successfully serves as an intermediary, bringing the people and God closer to one another. Shimon ben Shetach wants the people to have to work harder to strengthen their relationship with God and to try to achieve a greater level of spiritual loftiness. He does not want them to rely on miracles or miracle-makers; he wants the onus to change the situation to be on them.

Honi seems to be the hero of the story, whereas Shimon ben Shetach perhaps comes across as a stodgy man, making unnecessary demands of the people, pushing them unreasonably when easier alternatives exist. Honi may well bring people closer to God, but the relationship might be one that is juvenile and shallow. Shimon ben Shetach may well push for a deeper, more complex connection, but people might give up on the endeavor because of the effort involved or may find such an attachment once achieved to be uninspiring, and even artificial.

How might we understand this passage in regard to Israel education? An articulate and inspiring tour guide or teacher can spoon-feed his charges, serving as entertainer-in-chief, while offering Zionist sound bites or easy-to-digest messages. He may even receive top grades in terms of student feedback. His students may view him as their intermediary to connect with Israel; he might even be considered to be a miracle worker in the field of education and tourism.

A tour guide or teacher might also have higher expectations of her students. She may embrace the Socratic method continuously, even when students are exhausted; every new topic taught might need to be acquired by the students through hard work, rather than be simply transmitted by the guide/teacher. She might not prepare a source sheet or course reader but rather force students to look up original works to find a relevant quote or text. Every lesson or tour experience might call for indefatigable efforts on the part of students and force them to ponder controversial and complicated issues and clarify where they stand in relation to them. Her students may even hate some lessons or tours. By the end of the Israel program or school semester or year, the teacher might well not be seen as the central actor in the educational enterprise; student evaluations of her might not be as high as those of her colleague who embraces the approach of Honi. The students may have learned a lot and achieved a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the content matter, but they may well be missing some element of splendor, wonder and fun.

Perhaps Honi and Shimon ben Shetach are really on a spectrum and our job as Israel educators is to try and find our point on the axis between their two *hashkafot* (philosophical worldviews) — one which works for us as educators and for the learners themselves, which is suitable in terms of

the content knowledge we are trying to convey, and which accords with the policies of the institution in which we are teaching or guiding.

Where do you stand? Are you more of a Honi or a Shimon ben Shetach? Why?<sup>10</sup>



**The Hills of the Galla**

## **Lessons from Choni HaMa'agel**

**Vardah Littmann** writes:<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Inspired by a class with Nechama Goldman Barash.

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.jewishmag.com/149mag/choni\\_hamagel/choni\\_hamagel.htm](http://www.jewishmag.com/149mag/choni_hamagel/choni_hamagel.htm)

High in the Gallilian hilltops, where the breeze sings through the tall grass and sways the trees, there is found the grave-site of the famed sage from the Talmud, Choni HaMa'agel, located above the village of Hatzor HaGlilit.

The Talmud speaks about Choni HaMa'agel who was the most pious person of his generation. But how do we know if a person is really pious? The Talmud gives the criterion that allows others to tell if the person is really a pious person. This condition is, the ability to influence the bringing down of rain. The key to rainfall is in the Hand of G-d . It orders for one's prayer for rain to be effective one must find favor in the eyes of G-d by making his 'will' the 'Will of G-d , so that G-d will make His 'Will' the 'will' of the one praying and answer his prayer for rain. The rabbis of the generation knew that Choni was always able to cause the rain to fall with his supplications. During a year of drought they sent him a message to request rain. Choni took his staff and drew a circle around himself, in the sand. He then swore that he would not leave the circle until rain fell. (The sages say he is called HaMa'agel because he drew this circle - *ha-magel* means the circle maker). In heaven there was a hash decree of drought against the Jewish nation and G-d did not want to give them rain. Yet, because of the honor of the pious one, so that Chonie should not be bound by his oath and should be able leave the circle, G-d made a few tiny drops fall. Choni said "I did not ask for such rains."

So G-d decided that He would exchange the decree of drought to one of a flood. A flood can cause great devastation. In those times the houses were not well built, and a too heavy rainfall could cause them to cave in and collapse. On the Day of Atonement, the High Priest would request that the rains should not be too heavy in the coming year and thereby cause the houses of the people to be their graves.

As Choni finished speaking, great big heavy drops started falling, Choni then said "I did not ask for this type of rain, Your people, Israel, cannot deal with bad decrees and they cannot deal with too much good. We need rain in the correct measure." G-d accorded, and gentle beneficial rain began descending- rain of blessing and all the empty wells filled up and the soil was saturated.

The Talmud says that the sages censured Choni. Rav Gamliel sent him a message. "If you were not Choni, I would put you into excommunication, but what can I do if you act before G-d as a son before a father."

We see from the above story that Choni was the pious one of the generation. He was also one of the greatest torah scholars of his generation, but he had difficulty with one verse. The first verse in of Psalm 126 states -"*A song of ascents, when the captivity of Zion returns we will be like dreamers*".

The meaning of this is that at the time of the return to Zion, it will seem the exile was a long dream. The Babylonian exile lasted seventy years. Choni felt it was farfetched to be able sleep for so long.

Choni knew that an allegory was intended as the verse says, "*like dreamers*". But Choni also knew the premises that when an allegory is given, the simple meaning of the allegory must also be applicable. If a man cannot in actually sleep seventy years, then the verse would not use this allegory saying, 'as if we dreamt seventy years'. Thus Choni had difficult with the plain understanding of the verse. It was therefor decided in Heaven to show him that such a phenomena is indeed possible.

The Talmud continues the narrative. One day Choni was riding along on his donkey. A great exhaustion overtook him. He got off his donkey to rest. In the nearby field he saw an old man planting a carob tree. Choni asked the man when

this newly planted tree would bear fruit. He was told that this type of carob bears fruit only seventy year after it is first planted. Choni wondered "Do you intend to eat from this tree?"

"Just as my ancestors saw to it that when I came into the world I found fruit trees that I could eat from, so to I am making sure my descendents will have fruit trees available when they come into the world." Answered the old man. Each generation makes sure the following generations' needs are met.

Fatigue overwhelmed Choni and he lay down next to the sapling and fell into a deep sleep. From heaven it was made sure no one would notice him. No one would disturb him. Seventy years later he woke up. How did Choni know seventy years had passed? He saw that the tree that had been planted on the day he fell asleep, was now bearing fruit. He understood that Heaven was showing him that it is possible to sleep for seventy years.

Choni then came into to the House of Learning but he did not recognize anyone there. He inquired about Choni's sons, his own sons. He was told they had passed away. Who was around? Gandsons? Great grandsons?

People were learning Torah and Choni joined in. His explained the chapter being learned and enlightened their minds. He put down the correct premisses. He easily paved a way though the most difficult passages. The learners said to each other, "Such explanations only Choni used to give"

"Yes, it's me- Choni."

They ridiculed him.

Chonie went outside and pleaded, "Either friendship or death." In essence he was saying "If I am not appreciated for who I am, I rather die." G-d took his soul.

This is an awesome lesson.

Choni certainly knew the teaching;"One hour of repentance and good deeds in this world is worth the entire next world". So why should it bother him he is being mocked. He should learn. For each hour he will acquire more of the next world. He can learn and pray. He can teach Torah to others. All agree his comprehension of Torah is very profound. He can keep the Shabbat. Why should he care if others are belittling him?

We see from here that even for the greatest most pious person in the entire Jewish nation, it is worthwhile to give up on one's next world, so that people should not laugh at him.

So let's conclude from here how careful we should be with the way we treat others. To try being extra careful with their honor and esteem. We should be careful with what we say to others, and how we phrase, what we say it to them. We should treat everyone, both adults and children, with the maximum of deference and respect.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Based on a lecture by Rabbi Sholom Meir HaCohen Wallach



## Letting go of the old Israel: A talmudic insight about 70 years

*The famous story of Honi the Circle-Maker has a profound hidden message for what it means to be 70 years old*

**Francis Nataf** writes:<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/letting-go-of-the-old-israel-a-talmudic-insight-about-seventy-years/>

The Jewish tradition has much to say about the timespan of 70 years. Its most important association is with the Babylonian exile — it being the number of years that this exile is said to have lasted. The Talmud, however, weaves this seemingly nondescript fact into a much larger tapestry with the story of Honi HaMa'agel (Taanit 23a). The deceptive charm of the story of the man that slept for 70 years belies its profound insights about the place of man in history.

While the Talmud directly connects the 70 years that he slept with the years of the exile, the story is more subtly informed by the notion (Tehillim 90:10) that 70 years is the length of an average lifespan. Putting the two together, Honi was deeply disturbed that an entire generation could be born and die in exile; that it could not see the fruits of its political or spiritual labors to end the exile and rebuild the Jewish nation. However, to help him see that productive people's lives are never in vain, God had Honi witness the planting of a carob tree, fall asleep and not wake up until 70 years later, when the tree was finally producing fruit.

But the story does not end there. When Honi returns to his home, he finds neither his peers, nor those of his children. Rather, he enters the world of his grandchildren. And while the new generation has heard of the great talmudic sage, they do not understand him; nor does he understand them. And so he finds that there is nothing left for him to do but die. He accordingly prays that God take his soul and is immediately answered.

The lesson of the first part of the story is well known — that our actions have value, even if we may not live to see it. But the second part of the story may tell us something even more important. And that is that the ultimate value of our actions is out of our own purview. The meaning they would have for us cannot possibly be the same as what they will have for our grandchildren, who will live in a different reality. And I suggest that we look to the 70th anniversary of the State of Israel with the above teaching in mind.

The founding fathers sought to create a haven for all those Jews fleeing the virulent anti-Semitic persecutions they had so long endured in exile. More than anything else, the state was to give the Jews the ability to protect themselves. But having lived through the Holocaust made the precarious nature of Jewish survival continue to be a central part of the identity of Israel's founders. One could never be sure of the next day and, so, risk was to be avoided at all costs.

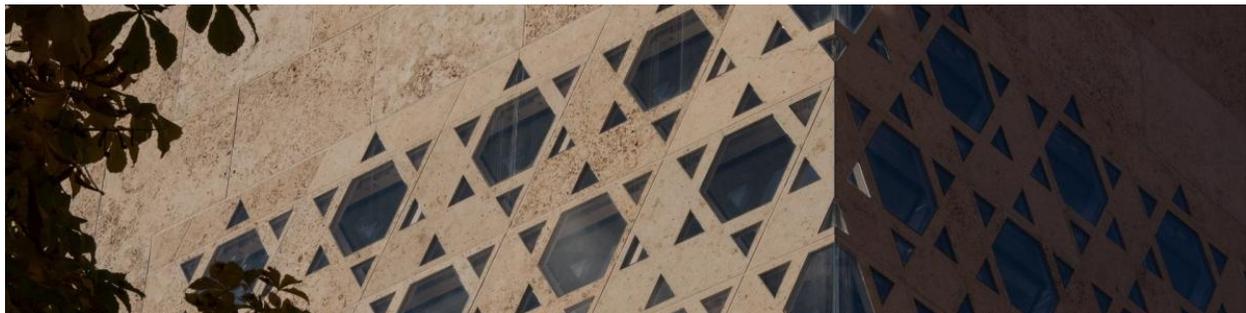
While anti-Semitism has not disappeared, its nature and scope are far different from what it was in the 1930s and '40s. The days when entire Jewish communities could be plundered and destroyed while governments turned a blind eye or worse are largely behind us. I cannot say that such occurrences will never come back, but those that believe that every Marine Le Pen or Jeremy Corbyn are harbingers of a return to those darker days misunderstands the profound change the world has undergone.

Nor is the security of Israel anywhere as precarious as it once was. Its first three decades were ones in which it was not clear that Israel would survive the threat represented by all of its neighbors. Today, the two longest borders are with nations that are not only at peace with us, but often involved in helping to secure those borders for us. And, as recent events show, our remaining enemies have much more reason to be scared of Israel's might than visa-versa.

All of this is to say that what the founding fathers gave to their grandchildren and great-grandchildren is vastly different from what they knew — the tree they planted proved much sturdier than they could ever have imagined. Without becoming oblivious to the dangers that continue to exist or forgetting the Holocaust, young Jews are — correctly — less prone to think that their national existence is threatened. And that mindset will eventually bring about a different — hopefully better — Israel. It will be an Israel that fully understands that with power and wealth comes responsibility; one that does not panic every time it is criticized; and one that can finally plan for the next 70 years instead of worrying about the next 70 days. But most importantly, it will

be a country unafraid to be different and allow itself to dig into its own deep and rich heritage and define its values independently of other cultures.

Seventy years is a time to appreciate those who planted the tree so that we can now enjoy it. But it is also a time to let those who are living with the reality of that tree — as it actually is now — decide how best to make use of it.



## **Hassidim and Academics Unite: The Significance of Aggadic Placement**

**Rabbi Yitzchak Blau** writes:<sup>14</sup>

What guided our sages' decisions when they placed aggadic (non-legalistic) passages in the Talmud? Perhaps they came armed with a treasure trove of quality material, such as the account of R. Shimon bar Yohai in the cave and the final moments of R. Hanina ben Teradyon's life, and they simply looked for associations enabling the insertion of this material into the Talmud. If so, analyzing the placement will not contribute to meaning. Alternatively, the sages built upon thematic connections in arranging the *aggadot*. Talmudic stories can connect to themes of the tractate, the chapter, or a preceding *sugya* (talmudic passage), be it halakhic or aggadic. If so, study of placement enhances understanding.

As far as I know, the major traditional commentaries on aggadic material, Maharsha (R. Shemuel Eidels, 1555–1631) and Maharal (R. Yehudah Loeb of Prague, 1520–1609), did not raise questions of placement. However, in the nineteenth century, R. Zadok Hakohen from Lublin made a programmatic statement that all *aggadot* relate conceptually to their talmudic location. Stories about the Temple's destruction are found on pages 55b–58a of *Gittin*, a tractate about marriage and divorce, since the destruction represents a breach in the marital relationship between God and the Jewish people.[1] *Aggadot* about the manna can be read on pages 74b–76a of *Yoma*, a tractate

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.jewishideas.org/print/article/hassidim-and-academics-unite-significance-aggadic-placement>

about the laws of Yom Kippur, because eating this heavenly food reflects a less corporeal consumption that reminds us of the angelic transcendence of the physical on Yom Kippur.[2]

R. Zadok also notes how placement at the beginning of tractate can set the tone for the entire tractate. *Pesahim* (mainly concerned with the laws of Pesah) begins with a long discussion about what the word “*ohr*” means in the opening Mishnah. It then proceeds to a discussion of different values involved in speaking well, including refined speech, clear discourse, and brevity. For R. Zadok, this fits the topic of the exodus since he connects refined speech with *yihus*, lineage or pedigree, and sees the exodus as emphasizing Jewish uniqueness.[3] I would like to suggest an alternative connection. Dialogue plays a bigger role on Pesah than on any other holiday. The Torah commands us to relate the exodus story over to our children, and the Seder attempts to facilitate this momentous conversation. Therefore, the tractate begins with a study of proper discourse.

R. Zadok assumes purposeful placement regarding every aggada. Such an assumption expresses his belief in omnisignificance, an apt term coined by Dr. James Kugel describing the eschewal of technical explanations in the search for a maximum of religious meaning.[4] R. Zadok goes so far as to suggest a deeper explanation for why the mitzvah to write a Sefer Torah appears specifically in *siman* 270 of the *Shulhan Arukh*. This commandment corrects the sin of Judah’s son Er (see Genesis 38), whose *gematriya* (the numerical value of the Hebrew letters) is 270.[5] Many of us will find this degree of omnisignificance too extreme, but we can still accept a more moderate version of R. Zadok. Perhaps some placement is meaningful while others are more arbitrary.

Let us move from the Batei Midrash of nineteenth-century Poland to the libraries of contemporary academia. Yonah Fraenkel deserves a lot of credit for initiating literary academic study of talmudic stories. He showed that these tales are not merely historical accounts but finely crafted literary creations. Fraenkel also insisted in the principle of “closure,” which reads each story as an independent unit. His approach resembles the literary theory called New Criticism, which champions focusing on the poem itself, with an indifference to the biography of the author or historical context. Along similar lines, Fraenkel contends that we should analyze an individual story about a given sage without bringing in information from other stories. A sage can be poor in one tale and quite wealthy in another.[6]

Fraenkel notes a contrast between biblical and talmudic writing, in that only the former operates within a historical framework. *Megillat Rut* begins with a historical context, the time of the judges, and ends with a clear historical direction, heading toward the Davidic dynasty. Talmudic stories do not function that way. Even when a string of stories on roughly the same theme appears together, such as the aforementioned *aggadot* about the Temple’s destruction, they are not seriously connected to each other in a chronological or thematic fashion.

More recent scholars disagree with Fraenkel arguing that context does matter. Ofra Meir utilizes different versions of stories in rabbinic literature to show how they are shaped by context. The story of R. Shimon bar Yohai hiding in the cave appears in the Jerusalem Talmud without the Babylonian Talmud’s theme of the tension between Torah study and mundane work. In the Babylonian Talmud’s immediately preceding Gemara (*Shabbat* 33b), R. Shimon bar Yohai states that the illness called *askara* is a punishment for *bittul Torah* (wasting time on activities unrelated to Torah). Thus, R. Shimon’s call for intense dedication to Torah study was already lurking in the background of this passage and helped focus the ensuing presentation. Furthermore, R. Elazar son

of R. Yossi attributes *askara* to the sin of *lashon hara* (gossip), which also appears in the story when Yehuda ben Gerim relates the rabbinic conversation to the Roman authorities.[7]

Meir notes the identical phenomena regarding two versions of R. Hananya ben Hakhinai spending over a decade away from home studying Torah and then shocking his wife upon returning home. In the Babylonian Talmud (*Ketubot* 62b), the story appears in a larger context discussing when husbands have the legal right to eschew domestic responsibilities in order to study Torah. In a midrash (*Vaiykra Rabba* 21:8), the story supports a theme of not suddenly entering one's abode, fitting the biblical context of Aaron's sons illegally entering the Holy of Holies. Meir shows how differences between the two accounts reflect the themes of each version.[8]

Jeffrey Rubenstein adds more arguments in favor of looking beyond the story itself.<sup>[9]</sup> He notes literary connections running through extended passages such as key words and thematic continuity. For example, the verb *tikun* comes up repeatedly in *Shabbat* 33b, first as something the Romans do, then as something R. Shimon bar Yohai does, and finally as something our patriarch Jacob does.[10] To use an example from Fraenkel himself, a series of stories about husbands spending significant time away from home to study Torah play off each other (*Ketubot* 62b). In one story, R. Hama bar Bisa tries to avoid the mistake of R. Hananya ben Hakhinai from the preceding tale. Furthermore, the entire picture balances stories critical of the rabbis for avoiding domestic responsibility with the successful model of R. Akiva spending many years away.[11]

Yonatan Feintuch's recent book, *Panim el Panim*, makes a major contribution to aggada study and brings more evidence showing the importance of context. He points to a series of stories about confronting the evil inclination (*Kiddushin* 82a). In the first few, rabbis struggle with sexual urges and the tales encourage great precaution to prevent sin. However, in the final story, we see R. Hiyya renouncing sexuality with his wife leads to marital tension, R. Hiyya consorting with someone he thinks is a prostitute, and R. Hiyya punishing himself by sitting in a burning oven. This balances the preceding message; we cannot address the challenges of temptation with complete abstinence. These examples indicate that reading each story in isolation will miss some of the force of the overarching message.[12]

Beyond literary context, Rubenstein also stresses the importance of cultural context. We can turn to other talmudic sources for help "when confronted by a symbol, such as a column of fire, or a motif, such as a sage forgetting his studies."<sup>[13]</sup> To use an example of my own, carob trees appear in the stories of Honi *haMe'agel* sleeping for 70 years (*Ta'anit* 23a), in the oven of Ahkhinai when R. Elazar utilizes miracles to support his halakhic position (*Baba Mezia* 59b), and when R. Shimon and his son live in the cave (*Shabbat* 33b). Consistent usage of the same tree does not seem to be coincidence. In the Honi story, carob trees produce fruit only after an extremely long duration. Maharsha suggests that the choice of carob trees adds to the miraculous quality of R. Shimon's survival in the cave since the tree that grows to feed him normally takes decades to bear fruit.[14] To be fair, Fraenkel himself did not always adhere to his closure principle. He understands the significance of Moshe sitting in the Bet Midrash's eighteenth row (*Menahot* 29b) based on a different talmudic story (*Hulin* 137b).[15] In a chapter on future directions for aggadic scholarship, he mentions the idea of a topos, a commonplace theme in a given body of literature.[16] Thus, even the champion of "closure" occasionally saw the value of looking beyond the individual story.

Feintuch's work includes several models of how aggadic stories impact on adjacent halakhic *sugyot*. They can present another opinion. The halakhic discussion of the five afflictions of Yom Kippur ultimately decides that only not eating and drinking are included in the biblical command of afflicting oneself on Yom Kippur whereas the other prohibitions come from a different source. Feintuch shows how the subsequent *aggadot* (*Yoma* 74b–78a) relate to abstinence as a kind of *innuy* (affliction), differing from the preceding halakhic texts.[17] From this aggadic perspective, *innuy* is not only concrete discomfort or pain but even the absence of pleasure.

Secondly, the aggada can reveal some of the difficulties in applying the abstract halakha in the real world. One Gemara (*Bava Batra* 22a) grants special selling privileges to scholars who function as traveling salesmen. In a following story, R. Dimi comes to a town intending to sell dates. One of the locals, R. Ada bar Ahava, asks R. Dimi an obscure halakhic question and stumps the latter. R. Dimi doesn't receive the privileges of a scholar and his dates therefore turn rotten. Feintuch suggests that applying this law proves difficult in practice since determining who qualifies as a *talmid hakham* (sage) can bring out scholarly competition and become a major source of social tension. The aggadic tale adds an important dimension to the legal ruling.[18]

Finally, a talmudic story can convey a level of extralegal piety. *Berakhot* 33a teaches that someone engaged in prayer interrupts his prayer if a life-threatening situation emerges. For example, a snake may not endanger the person praying but a scorpion will. Nevertheless, a preceding story tells of a pious fellow who does not interrupt his prayer to return the greeting of an important Roman official. In theory, ignoring the Roman is a very dangerous gambit. Feintuch explains that this story presents a level of super piety, which would allow for taking on risks in the pursuit of intense devotion to God.[19]

Yakov Blidstein offers a similar read of aggadic stories about not destroying trees. In one tale, the son of R. Hanina apparently perishes for cutting down a tree. In another, Rava bar R. Hana resists eliminating his own tree despite its negative impact on his neighbor, R. Yosef (*Baba Batra* 26a). Rava was willing to have R. Yosef remove the tree but refused to do the act himself.[20] Blidstein explains that while halakha actually allows for cutting down such trees, the aggadic material reflects a religious attitude extremely committed to the ideal of *bal tashhit* (not being destructive). R. Zadok and university professors obviously do not approach Talmud from the same vantage point, yet the parallels between them are intriguing. Both think that placement and context matter, and both find religious meaning in their analysis of these literary issues. I would like to close with one further parallel. We noted earlier how R. Zadok thinks that placement of a *sugya* at the beginning of a tractate can be telling. Several academics have made the identical suggestion about an aggada at the beginning of *Avoda Zara* relating how the nations of the world complained that they were not given a chance to accept the Torah. This conversation appropriately sets the stage for a tractate about the relationship between Jews and gentiles.[21]

Perhaps this happens on a meta level at the beginning of the entire Talmud. The first line in the Talmud questions how the Mishnah could simply jump into the details of *keriat shema* without initially establishing the existence of a mitzvah to recite the Shema. The Gemara answers that the Mishnah works off biblical verses establishing the Shema requirement. R. Zadok and a contemporary Israeli scholar think that this opening question and answer begin the Talmud to

establish an idea that the reader will carry through the entirety of the Talmud. R. Zadok explains that the rabbinical discussions found in all of the Talmud are rooted in the biblical world. This ancient legal dialogue is not just a conversation of intelligent humans but a discussion of the divine word.[22] Ruth Calderon says this opening conveys how each rabbinic text builds upon earlier texts. Unlike R. Zadok who speaks of God, Calderon writes about the nature of being part of an ongoing literary canon. Both think the placement here at the start of our talmudic journey was purposeful.[23]

Parallels between Hassidic *rebbe*s and university professors should encourage us to realize that these two worlds need not always remain completely apart. The yeshiva world has much to gain from the keen insights of Fraenkel, Rubenstein, and others. Conversely, academics would benefit from utilizing the interpretations of traditional rabbinic commentary. We need not collapse methodological distinctions and theological assumptions to learn from each other.

[1] *Peri Zaddik, Beresihit Kedushat haShabbat ma'amar* 3. On this methodology in R. Zadok, see Sarah Friedland, “*Shekhenut veKorat Gag: al Shnei Ekronot Darshanut Zuraniyim biKitvei R. Zadok Hakohen miLublin*,” *Akdamot* 8 (Kislev 5760) pp. 25–43.

[2] *Peri Zaddik Devarim le'Erev Yom Hakipurim* 5.

[3] *Ohr Zarua laZaddik* 7:2.

[4] Kugel utilizes the term in *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (New Haven, 1981) when writing about rabbinic interpretation of *Tanakh*. For the extension of this principle to rabbinic texts, see Yaakov Elman, “Progressive *Derash* and Retrospective *Peshat*: Nonhalakhic Considerations in Talmud Torah”, *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah*, ed. Shalom Carmy (Northvale, 1996), pp. 227–287.

[5] *Mahshavot Haruz* 15.

[6] Yonah Fraenkel, *Sippur haAggada-Ahdut shel Tokhen veTzura* (Tel Aviv, 2001) pp. 32–50.

[7] Ofra Meir, *Sugyot bePoetica shel Sifrut Hazal* (Tel Aviv, 1993).

[8] Ofra Meir, “*Hashpaat Ma'aseh haArikha*,” *Tura* 3 (1994), pp. 67–84.

[9] Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture* (Baltimore, 1999) pp. 10–14. For Rubenstein, this is part of a larger thesis claiming that the *stammaim* (authors of anonymous passages in the Talmud) were quite creative and active in their redaction of the *aggadot*. For my purposes, the central point is that the placement was done purposely, irrespective of who did the placement and editing.

[10] Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, pp. 105–38.

[11] Yonah Fraenkel, *Iyumin beOlam haRuhani shel Sippur haAggada* (Tel Aviv, 1981), pp. 99–115.

[12] Yonatan Feintuch, *Panim el Panim: Shezirat haHalkha vahaAggada beTalmud haBavli* (Jerusalem, 2018) pp. 129–149.

[13] Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, p. 12.

[14] R. Shmuel Eidels, *Hiddushei Aggadot Shabbat* 33b s.v. *Itrahesh Nisa*.

[15] Fraenkel, *Sippur haAggada*, p. 44.

[16] *Ibid.*, pp. 369–372.

[17] *Panim el Panim*, pp. 219–236.

[18] *Ibid.*, pp. 161–183.

[19] *Ibid.*, pp. 83–106.

[20] Yakov Blidstein, “*Ana lo Kayzna...Mar e Niha Lei Leikuz: leErkhei Halakha veAggada beSugya Talmudit Ahat Dialektika o Konflikt*,” *Safot veSifruyot beHinukh Yehudi: Mehkarim Likhvodo shel Michael Rosenak* ed. Yonatan Cohen (Jerusalem, 5767), pp. 139–145.

[21] Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, pp. 235–238.

[22] *Zidkat haZaddik* 10.

[23] Ruth Calderon, *Alpha Beita Talmudi: Osef Prati* (Israel, 2004), pp. 239–241.



## Religion and Climate Change: Rain Rituals in Israel, China, and Haiti

Haiyan Xing and Gerald Murray writes:<sup>15</sup>

*Human populations confront three distinct climate challenges: (1) seasonal climate fluctuations, (2) sporadic climate crises, and (3) long term climate change. Religious systems often attribute climate crises to the behavior of invisible spirits. They devise rituals to influence the spirits and do so under the guidance of religious specialists. They devise two types of problem-solving rituals: anticipatory climate maintenance rituals, to request adequate rainfall in the forthcoming planting season, and climate crisis rituals for drought or inundations. The paper compares rainfall rituals in three different settings: Israel (Judaism), Northwest China (ethnic village religion), and Haiti (Vodou). Each author has done anthropological fieldwork in one or more of these settings. In terms of the guiding conceptual paradigm, the analysis applies three sequentially organized analytic operations common in anthropology: (1) detailed description of individual ethnographic systems; (2) comparison and contrast of specific elements in different systems; and (3) attempts at explanation of causal forces shaping similarities and differences. Judaism has paradoxically maintained obligatory daily prayers for rain in Israel during centuries when most Jews lived as urban minorities in the diaspora before the founding of Israel in 1948. The Tu of Northwest China*

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/11/11/554/htm>

*maintain separate ethnic temples for rainfall rituals not available in the Buddhist temples that all attends. The slave ancestors of Haiti, who incorporated West African rituals into Vodou, nonetheless excluded African rainfall rituals. We attribute this exclusion to slavery itself; slaves have little interest in performing rituals for the fertility of the fields of their masters. At the end of the paper, we identify the causal factors that propelled each systems into a climate-management trajectory different from that of the others. We conclude by identifying a common causal factor that exerts a power over religion in general and that has specifically influenced the climate responses of all three religious' systems.*

## 1. Introduction

Human populations through the ages have been confronted by three distinct meteorological challenges: (a) seasonal climate fluctuations, (b) sporadic climate crises (such as droughts, inundations, hurricanes), and (c) long term climate change. Challenges (c) and (b) are interrelated; climate change increases the frequency and severity of sporadic climate crises.

Though the theme of climate change has surged in current international discourse, ethnographers have been recording statements from elders around the world, principally in agrarian villages, about the “good old days” when the skies behaved as they are supposed to. Some decades ago, one of the authors (**Murray 1968**), while doing research in the Spanish Caribbean, recorded verbatim laments from farmers about how the rains had diminished over the years sabotaging the viability of their livestock-raising slash-and-burn agropastoral economy. When asked why the rains had stopped, an elderly Dominican farmer answered in the Spanish dialect spoken in the mountains of the Cordillera Central:

Well, some people say it's because the mountains have been stripped of trees. But that's not so. No, señor! Like the elders used to say, this is the fulfillment of a prophecy. It had to happen. The rains were going to become scarce. These hills were going to be covered with roads. We used to say, “No, that can't possibly happen... You have to be stupid to believe that!” Is that so? Well just look. The hills are crisscrossed by roads *everywhere!* ... Our animals are disappearing. They say that there will be a time where children will ask their fathers, “Papá, what kind of a bone is that?” And the father will answer, “Mi hijo, that belonged to an animal that we used to call a cow...”. (**Murray 1968, pp. 92–93**)

The farmers interviewed knew well the effects of diminished rains on their livelihood. However, they had folk-explanatory theories about the remote unseen causes of this process. Additionally, as has been true of populations around the world, both normal climate fluctuations and aberrant weather crises are viewed as under the control of an invisible but powerful spirit world. It should also be noted: even popular awareness of anthropogenic factors does not preclude the attribution of climate change to supernatural beings. The Dominican farmer cited above knew well that it was a sawmill company, not the Dios of his Catholicism, that transformed the mountain ecology with lumber-extraction roads; farmers also know that the long-term decline in rainfall is somehow related to the removal of tree cover. That does not, however, prevent the inclusion of invisible spirits as remote causal agents of the crisis. Humans cut trees and build roads, but the invisible spirit world has power to guide (or permit) the human behaviors that are the immediate efficient causes of climate crises.

It is here that religion has entered throughout human history. In these pages, “religion” is defined as a cultural subsystem with cognitive, behavioral, and organizational components: belief in invisible spirits, rituals to interact with the spirits, and specialist leaders who guide others as to the nature of the spirits and the rituals needed to influence them. Across the globe and throughout history, climate fluctuations and crises have been attributed to the action of invisible spirit beings. However, religions go beyond folk-theological speculation. Under the guidance of specialist/practitioners believed to have more knowledge of and/or power over the spirits, ritual interventions are designed to manage the weather. There are two generic types of rituals. The most frequent are the climate maintenance rituals that occur before the expected rainy season to petition the invisible powers to send the right amount of rain at the right time. There are also climate crisis rituals that spring into action when the skies (and/or the spirits) are misbehaving, either by withholding rain or by sending catastrophic deluges or hurricanes.

In these pages we will be exploring the involvement of three distinct religious systems in climate issues. Our approach will be ethnographic, focusing on systems in which each of the authors has carried out field research. We will compare three distinct, unrelated religious systems in terms of their ritual involvement with rainfall issues. In our comparison, we have been surprised at some of the patterns that have emerged. It is not only the skies that behave in unpredictable fashion. So also do religious systems.

All three of the systems to be studied here behave in counterintuitive ways with respect to weather. One of them has, for 2000 years, maintained obligatory daily rain-and-crop related rituals long after its practitioners ceased being farmers and had long ago left the only territory of relevance to the rituals. One would have predicted the disappearance of the rain rituals long ago. Another system places rainfall under the control of particular animal spirits that in the western world are considered to be demon-driven enemies of the human species. Additionally, the third system, whose adherents desperately need increasingly scarce rain for their fields and crops, have a ritually rich folk-religious system that nervously avoids rituals that would address climate issues.

The first religious system to be dealt with is the majority religion in Israel: Rabbinic Judaism, quite different in many core details from its historical predecessors Patriarchal Judaism and Temple Judaism. Murray spent several months on the Gaza strip in a religious agrarian Israeli *moshav* shortly before it was demolished by the Israeli government. He has also participated in hundreds of synagogue rituals in the U.S. and other countries and has taught courses in the Anthropology of Judaism. Another is the religion of the Tu ethnic group studied by Xing in Northwest China. They are an agropastoral group that is heavily involved in the Tibetan Buddhism that is the dominant religious tradition in the region of the Tibetan Plateau in which they live. However, they have maintained as well their own separate ethnic temples; the major function of Tu temple ritual at the moment is precisely that of managing critical but increasingly unpredictable rainfall, an option that is not available in the Buddhist rituals in which they also participate. The third is the religion that arose among African slaves in the French colony of Saint-Domingue and that has persisted as Haitian Vodou. It is a theologically and ritually complex folk-religion that emerged during slavery and that survived after the slave revolt and national independence in 1804. Murray spent nearly two years in a village where Vodou was practiced by some 60% of the village population. He has made multiple return visits to the village, the most recent one being in 2017.

Both authors are anthropologists. Our methods were accordingly based on observations and interviews carried out in the local languages (Hebrew in Israel, Qinghaihua and Mandarin in Northwestern China, and Creole in Haiti.) In Haiti, Murray in addition carried out 100% surveys of the entire village including questions that dealt with involvement in Vodou. Our goal in these pages goes beyond ethnographic description. We assume that the structure of religious belief and ritual is not a product of cultural whimsy; the evolution of religious systems is driven by causal factors, at least some of which can be tentatively identified. We will venture into explanatory efforts at the end of the article. After first presenting some basic ethnographic information on each of the systems, in the end we will identify some factors that may help explain the counterintuitive trajectories into which the different religious systems have veered in their shifting cultural-evolutionary involvement with rainfall and crops. We will see that the response of religious systems to climate crises is governed not only by climate fluctuations and ecological factors. The nature of ritual responses to rainfall is also governed by sociopolitical factors that operate independently of objective environmental factors. We will see that the exercise of State power has affected all three systems.

## **2. Israel: Judaism and Climate Concerns**

Israel is located on the southeastern coastline of the Mediterranean Sea. Currently it has an estimated 2020 population of 9.2 million living on 21,000 km<sup>2</sup>, yielding a per km population density of 417 per km<sup>2</sup>, the highest of the three countries considered here. It also has the highest annual per capita GDP of over \$40,000. In terms of religion, 74% of Israelis are Jews; they practice Judaism with varying levels of observance (or non-observance). 18% of Israelis are Arab Muslims, and 2% are Christians, most of the latter being Arabs.

We will examine here the surprisingly high level of explicit concern for climate and field crops in the daily, weekly, and annual liturgy of Rabbinic Judaism, the religion of the Jewish majority in Israel. The word “surprising” is not an over-dramatization. As we will see, the obligatory climate-related passages in the daily Jewish liturgy deal only with rainfall and crop fertility explicitly in Israel/Palestine. The Babylonian Talmud, which was compiled during centuries when Jews were still farmers, did modify the timing of the prayer for dew and rain to accommodate the timing of the rainy season in nearby Iraq. Jews around the world in subsequent ages adopted this modified timing but made no accommodations to the rainy season in their specific countries. The text of the prayers accommodates the rainy season only in Israel and Babylon.

However, for some two millennia, before massive Jewish immigration to British-controlled Palestine and (as of 1948) to the State of Israel, almost the entire Jewish world lived as urban minorities in diaspora countries around the world engaged in non-agrarian pursuits. Their prayers for rain in Palestine, which they recited word-for-word from the synagogues of urban Europe, North and South America, North Africa, and elsewhere, would have benefitted the Muslim farmers who replaced the Jews several centuries ago.<sup>2</sup> Did diaspora Jewry entertain sustained conscious humanitarian concern during centuries for the Muslim farmers of Palestine? It is unlikely. The counterintuitive survival of these prayers demands, first, documentation, and then explanation.

## 2.1. Rabbinic Judaism and Its Predecessors

To place Judaic weather prayers in historical context, it is useful to distinguish three historical phases of Judaism. Patriarchal Judaism was the religious system that emerged under three founding ancestral figures described in the book of *Bereshit* (Genesis) of the Hebrew Bible: Abraham, his son Isaac, and his grandson Jacob. Biblical texts describe them all as livestock raisers. None were farmers. The principal ritual offered to the Hebrew God was decentralized animal sacrifice carried out by the founding patriarchs on stone altars constructed on hilltops. In this phase of Judaism, there is no textual evidence for ritual concern with the rains. The promised reward for fidelity to the covenant was not abundant rainfall and crops, but abundant offspring and a land of their own. The patriarchs experienced drought and famine. Their response to drought was emigration to irrigated Egypt, not rituals to bring the rains to Canaan or to the other territories where they lived.

The next phase, Temple Judaism, arose after the establishment of an Israelite monarchy and the subsequent building of a temple in Jerusalem. At that time, the Hebrews (by then called *bnei Israel*—children of Israel or Israelites) were no longer pastoral nomads, but hillside farmers with livestock as a secondary pursuit. The core ritual of Temple Judaism continued to be animal sacrifice. It was, however, restricted. It could be done only inside the Jerusalem Temple and could be performed only by a hereditary priestly caste. Since the Israelites were by then hillside farmers practicing rainfall agriculture, concern with drought figured prominently in the scriptures dealing with this period. However, there is no evidence that rainfall-related texts were incorporated into daily and weekly liturgies. The core of Temple Judaism focused on thrice-annual pilgrimages to Jerusalem for animal sacrifices in the Temple, not on the daily synagogue liturgy, including prayers for rain, that is performed today.

All of this changed when the Temple was destroyed for the last time by the Romans in 70 CE, and Rabbinic Judaism emerged. The Jewish priesthood could no longer function in their major role (animal sacrifice). The new leaders who emerged were the *rabbis*, who had been scholars and teachers in the centuries when the Temple stood. Formerly of less authority than the Jerusalem high priesthood, the rabbis eventually found themselves in the position of leadership vacated by the now-unemployed sacrificial priesthood.

The rabbis preserved Judaism by switching the focus from animal sacrifice. Rabbinic Judaism focused (and still focuses) on daily and weekly prayers in the synagogue, study of sacred texts, and meticulous observance of behavioral commandments and prohibitions. It was under the rabbis that rainfall concerns were incorporated into the heart of the evolving Jewish liturgy. For centuries after the destruction of the Temple, Jewish farmers continued to live in Palestine under foreign Roman and later Byzantine rule. Because they were farmers, rainfall concerns were built into the newly constituted daily and weekly synagogue liturgies.

The rebuilding of the Temple and restoration of animal sacrifice in a messianic future is a theme that was incorporated into the evolving Jewish liturgy. However, Judaism switched its ritual focus. The focus now was on observance of detailed rules concerning daily prayer, strict sabbath observance, food restrictions, menstrual laws, studious analysis and commentary on the scriptures, and the careful observance of hundreds of additional commandments.<sup>3</sup> The rabbinic role and the meticulous observance of behavioral commandments had existed in embryonic form as local

religious addenda to the core sacrificial rituals of the high priesthood<sup>4</sup>. However, rabbinic authority went from the periphery to the core of evolving Judaism.

After destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, rabbinic leadership emerged when the majority of Jews in Israel were still farmers concerned with fickle weather. Rainfall-related texts had been drafted when the Temple was still standing. It was under rabbinic leadership that they were incorporated into a newly created Jewish prayer book (*siddur*) as one of the obligatory daily elements of the Jewish liturgy. One clarification deserves repetition. The texts regarding rain and crops apply only to the Holy Land, to the “good land which the Lord is giving you”.

## 2.2. Rainfall Ritual in Judaism

Let us now examine some of the rituals that to this very day religious Jews all over the world pray to ensure rains in Israel. Rabbinic Judaism mandates lengthy prayer three times a day, in the morning and afternoon, and in the evening after sunset. It emphasizes the obligatory nature of daily prayer, including those that allude to divine intervention in the rain and crops of Israel. Though of little direct relevance to Jews in the diaspora, they have been prayed by Jews, almost all of them in the diaspora, for two millennia.

There are at least four distinct elements of climate-related ritual in the Jewish prayer book, two of them part of the obligatory daily prayers: the *Shma Israel*, the *Amidah*, the Prayer for Rain, and the Prayer for Dew. The first is recited twice daily, the second thrice daily. The third and the fourth are each recited once per year when Israel’s rainy season is about to begin and end.

### Rain Passage 1: The Shma Israel: Twice Daily Weather-Related Ritual in Judaism

The core of the Shma Israel consists of a brief invocation (Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alones), followed by three scriptural passages. The second one (from the 11th chapter of Deuteronomy) focuses on rain.

And it will be, if you will hear and obey my commandments that I am giving to you today, to love the Lord your God and to worship Him with all your heart and with all your soul, I shall give rain for your land at the proper time, the early rain, and the late rain, and thou shalt harvest thy grain, thy wine, and thine oil. And I will give grass in thy fields for thy cattle, and thou shalt eat and be sated. Take care lest your heart be lured away, and you turn astray and worship other gods and bow down to them. For then the Lord’s wrath will flare up against you, and He will close the heavens so that there will be no rain and the earth will not yield its produce, and you shall swiftly perish from the good land which the Lord is giving to you.<sup>6</sup>

This passage has been read in public services twice a day by religious Jews minimally for 1200 years and possibly for two millennia. Several things should be noted.

As the text indicates, the promises and threats apply only to the land of Israel—“to the land which the Lord is giving to you”. If you disobey, you will “perish from the good land”. The passage specifically mentions the crops—grain (wheat and barley), grapes, and olives—that were among

the most important in the agriculture of the pre-monarchic Israelite farming tribes that inhabited the climatically challenged hill country east of the region's coastal plain.

What was the divine logic behind a puzzling gift of a climatically challenged Promised Land where the flow of milk and honey was so easily jeopardized? The same Deuteronomic text (11:10–12) explains why the Israelites were to practice rainfall agriculture rather than more prosperous irrigation agriculture.

For the land that you are entering to take possession of it is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you sowed your seed and irrigated it, like a garden of vegetables. But the land that you are going over to possess is a land of hills and valleys, which drinks water by the rain from heaven, a land that the Lord your God cares for. The eyes of the Lord your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year.

In other words, God himself would see to the watering of Israelite fields via rainfall. Unlike Egyptians with their irrigation systems, Israel instead would have to look up to heaven and trust God to supply water. This meteorological reminder has been repeated twice a day by religious diaspora Jews for close to two millennia.

## **Rain Passage 2: The Thrice-Daily Amidah: The “Standing Prayer”**

Along with the Shma Israel, the Amidah is the second core element in the Jewish daily prayerbook. It consists of 19 blessings (one of them inserted later as blessing #12). The Amidah is recited silently, by obligation, three times a day in a standing position facing the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. When praying in a morning or afternoon minyan (a required quorum of ten), the prayer leader recites the Amidah out loud after all have said it silently.

References to divine intervention in the climate of Israel occur in the second and ninth blessings. The wording, however, has to be changed according to the season. During Israel's rainy season, blessing #2 praises God, because he “mashiv haruach umorid hageshem” (brings the wind and causes rain to fall). During the dry season, either those words are omitted or (in certain *siddurim*) God is praised because he “morid hatal” (brings down dew). The worshipper must be sure to use the proper climate passage in the proper season. If a person makes a mistake and praises God for marshalling wind and rain during the dry season, the entire Amidah has to be repeated again from the beginning. Wind and rain could be harmful outside of their season. If the one praying mistakenly asks for dew instead of rain during the rainy season, there is less danger of grave harm, and the prayer need not be repeated.<sup>7</sup>

Whereas blessing #2 of the Amidah simply praises God's power over wind and rain, blessing #9 contains an explicit petition concerning crops and moisture. During Israel's rainy season, the wording is “Bless this year for us, O Lord our God, and all its crops...and give dew and rain as a blessing on the surface of the soil...” As with blessing #2, during the dry season the word “rain” is omitted. In some *siddurim* even “dew” is omitted.

The frequency of these climate-related prayers is astounding. Religious Jews all over the world recite blessing #2 21 times per week. Blessing #9 is recited 18 times during ordinary weeks, being omitted on Sabbath (and Festivals). Considering the Shma Israel and the Amidah, the frequency of obligatory, explicit climate prayers in Judaism is substantially greater than has been documented in any other known religious system.

### **Rain Passage Complex #3: The Seasonal Prayers for Rain and Dew**

There are, however, other prayers as well. Rainy seasons begin only once a year in Israel, usually in October/November. Shortly before the winter rainy season (hopefully) begins, a special additional prayer for rain is inserted during a joyful late-Autumn festival called Shemini Atzeret. This particular rain prayer, which was drafted later during the Common Era, has an anthropologically interesting twist to it: It alludes to an angel (Af Bri) who is “Master of the Rain”. In the evolution of Rabbinic Judaism, the number of angels was multiplied beyond the four who are mentioned by name toward the end of the Hebrew Bible.

Angels were conceived as having been given dominion by God over different natural phenomena. The angel Af Bri is the “Sar Matar” (master of rain). No prayer is directed to the angel himself. The prayer is to God, requesting that he instruct the angel Af Bri to distribute rainfall and to “soften the wasteland’s face when it is dry as rock”.<sup>8</sup>

### **2.3. Crisis Measures: When the Hoped-for Rain Does not Materialize**

The major biblically recorded climatological crises affecting Jews are almost all associated with drought, not with flooding. With one possible exception, there are no formulaic prayers in the Jewish prayer book specifically drafted to counteract an ongoing drought, which has been a major problem both in ancient and contemporary Israel. In rabbinic Judaism, the ordinary daily prayers for rain continue to be prayed during times of drought. Under the rabbis during the Second Temple period and after, one standard response to drought was collective penitential fasting combined with the recitation of prayers, many taken from the book of *tehilim* (Psalms).

The Talmud (**Talmud, Tanit 19a n.d.**) also describes a particular Jewish wonder worker who brought rain in times of a persistent drought in the Holy Land during the first century BCE. Honi ha-Meagel (Honi the Circle-Drawer) drew a circle in the ground, stood in the circle, raised his eyes (but probably not his fist), and warned God that he was not leaving the circle until God sent rain. A tiny sprinkle came. “Not enough!” shouted Honi. A deluge came. “Too much!” The entire population of Jerusalem had to flee up to the Temple Mount because of the flood waters. Finally, the right amount came. Some rabbis wanted to excommunicate Honi for his dangerous impertinence. However, common sense prevailed, and they backed off. (What if the rains suddenly stopped?). Some commentaries give a more benign interpretation of why Honi was not excommunicated. The rabbis admired him for treating God as a Father who can be badgered by his child. Whatever the case, in accordance with Jewish theology, the Talmud indicates that it was not Honi, but God himself, who produced the rain.

To summarize: for two millennia, urban religious Jews all around the world have been in effect petitioning for rain in Palestine three times a day. It should be noted: This does *not* mean that the focus of Judaism is the weather. It is simply being pointed out that, whatever is considered

to be Judaism's main focus, it is an empirical fact that climate issues are raised several times a day. If there has been a religion more concerned with the weather than Judaism, it has not yet been documented. The paradox is that virtually none of those diaspora Jews who for centuries prayed for rain in Palestine would have benefitted directly if the prayers were literally answered and the rain fell on Muslim farms. We will show in the analytic conclusion that in fact, despite the surface content of the liturgical texts, diaspora Jews were not in fact praying for the wellbeing of Palestinian Muslim farmers. However, first let us examine the rainfall concerns of two other religious systems.

## **5. Exploration of Causal Factors**

In the opening paragraphs, we indicated that it is not only the climate that behaves unpredictably; so do religious systems. In this final section, we will examine three paradoxes we have encountered in our comparative analysis and explore possible causal factors nudging each system into its particular ritual trajectory with respect to climate.

### **5.1. Israel: Sacred Texts and Adaptive Allegories for the Diaspora**

The paradox in Judaism consists of the survival, during over a millennium and a half, of thrice daily obligatory rituals regarding rainfall and agriculture in Israel that had virtually no relevance to the Jewish people at large, almost all of whom were pursuing non-agrarian urban pursuits in diasporas around the world. We can identify several factors—each of them necessary, but none of them alone sufficient—that have produced the current pattern of climate allusions in the daily liturgy of Judaism.

#### **Ecologically Stressed Agrarian Economy in the Israelite past.**

There are two major material factors—one ecological, the other economic—that led to the birth of a religious concern with Holy Land rainfall in Judaism. The ecological factor is the historically scarce and fluctuating rainfall regime of the Holy Land. The economic factor is the agro-pastoral status of the majority of the Jewish population at the time the two major liturgical texts (the Shema and the Amidah) were composed<sup>17</sup>. There was a Jewish farming population in Israel and (despite urbanization and occupational diversification) most Jews in Israel were still farming the land and raising livestock. It is no surprise that the religious leaders of an ecologically stressed agropastoral economy included climate issues in their public liturgies.

#### **The Reliance on Sacred Written Texts**

That, however, explains the origin, but not the survival, of rainfall rituals after they became irrelevant to the population reciting the prayers. A relatively brief period in the distant past of Jewish involvement in ecologically stressed agriculture does not explain the enigmatic survival of these prayers during two millennia of Jewish life in the urban diasporas of other countries. Muslim farmers had long-ago replaced the Jewish farmers in the territory that was once Israel. The Jews in the urban diaspora for millennia voiced daily rain prayers for Palestine. Did they entertain sustained conscious humanitarian concern for the Muslim farmers of Palestine? It is unlikely. Nor were the Jews primarily concerned with the land and crops of their diaspora settings. In the first

place, diaspora Jews were not and are not farmers. Furthermore, the rainfall texts in the Jewish liturgy apply only to the climate and soil of the Holy Land and immediate surroundings. So the question persists: Why have centuries of Jewish worshippers in the urban diasporas of Europe, North America, and South America continued expressing prayerful concern for rainfall that would benefit the harvests of Arab-speaking Muslim farmers in Palestine?

The answer is to be found in the coalescing of three conceptually independent historical processes that did not co-occur in Chinese shamanism or in Haitian Vodou:

1. reliance on written religious texts,
2. a belief in word-for-word divine revelation behind those texts, and
3. the eventual incorporation by the rabbis of some of these texts as obligatory daily prayers that have to be recited word by word several times a day.

We recall that the synagogue rabbis had replaced the Temple priests as the main religious authorities after the Roman destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. They are the ones who later designed the prayer books with substitute rituals. They are the ones who, out of respect for tradition, mandated diaspora Jewry to continue the daily climate prayers for the Holy Land from which most Jews had long ago emigrated.

Unlike the Chinese Tu and Haitian Vodou, Rabbinic Judaism is based on sacred texts. In Judaism, the most sacred text is the handwritten Torah scroll containing the Five Books of Moses. Every synagogue has one or more of these voluminous Torah scrolls. They must be handwritten by *soferim* (scribes), much as traditional accounts depict Moses writing down the first twelve Torah scrolls in the Sinai desert (one for each tribe).

However, sacred texts are not enough. The fact that a passage is in the Torah does not mean it will become a dynamic part of Jewish liturgical life. To attain its full power, a passage has to be selected and built into the official daily or weekly liturgy of the religious system. Whereas Judaism encourages spontaneous prayer from the heart, it differs from most other religious systems in the imposition by the rabbis of a daily obligation to recite lengthy formulaic prayers—i.e., pre-written texts that must be prayed word for word every day by religious Jews.

The written instrument for this is the *siddur*, the Jewish prayer book that places in order the multiple parts of the Jewish daily and weekly liturgy. Whereas the *sefer Torah*, the Torah scroll, functions as a sacred warehouse containing the entire contents of the five books of Moses, the *siddur* functions more as a catapult that organizes a subset of texts and prayers that will be shot heavenward several times a day. The *siddur* contains selections from the Torah and other parts of the Hebrew scriptures, as well as passages from later Jewish writings. The rainfall prayers were included in the two central elements of the *siddur*, the Shma and the Amidah. These two documents, the *sefer Torah* and the *siddur*, have been the core documents around which Jewish synagogue ritual has centered in the centuries following the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 A.D.

In short, it is the rabbis who have preserved earlier traditional prayer texts. It is also the rabbis who have required recitation of these prayers word for word several times a day from the *siddur*. In short, it is rabbinic decree that has perpetuated the expressions of climate concern in Judaism,

even when the passages voicing these concerns were of no relevance, or of marginal relevance, to the diaspora Jews praying the prayers.

## The Process of Rabbinic Allegorization

However, contemporary rabbis seem aware that rainfall in the Holy Land would be of little urgency to Jews in the diaspora. The rabbis have reestablished the relevance of these climate texts by re-defining the prayers for rain as allegories of something else. For the Jewish worshipper in the urban diaspora, the promise of rainfall and the threat of drought in the Shma Israel are frequently interpreted as a generic allegorical allusion to reward and punishment for obeying or disobeying divine commandments. **Donin (1980, p. 148)**, for example, spends nearly two pages discussing the weather passage in the Shma Israel without a single allusion to rain, drought, or crops. He discusses the text as though it concerned only the generic issue of reward and punishment for obeying or violating the 613 commandments binding on Jews. In other words, climate passages have been converted into an allegory of something else.<sup>18</sup> In a similar manner, modern exegetes or homilists may treat the Amidah's request that God bless the year with rainfall as a prayer that God will bless one's business, one's profession, or one's income. The human brain has the creative power to allegorize, to create similes and metaphors, and to see meaning beyond the literal meaning of words. This power is regularly marshalled, in Judaism, as in other religions<sup>19</sup>, with respect to prayers written thousands of years ago in situations that no longer apply.

Why not eliminate the prayers when they no longer apply to the current circumstances of the population? Some Reform prayer books have precisely done that. In the world of traditional Judaism, however, this is not feasible, desirable, or necessary. In view of the conservative power of the written word, especially the words of sacred texts, it is difficult to eliminate or even change the texts. One does not eliminate texts whose literal meaning has become irrelevant, one simply allegorizes them into some other meaning.<sup>20</sup> This maintains the relevance of the weather allusions in the Shma and the Amidah among modern Jewish populations where the literal meaning of the text has lost its urgency. Orthodox Jewish business owners, physicians, or lawyers in Paris or Manhattan have no need for rainfall for olive groves and grapevines in Palestine. They have none. However, rainfall and drought have been allegorically converted into promises of reward or threats of punishment for obeying or disobeying the commandments.

Now that Jews constitute a 74% majority in Israel, however, and now that about half the Jews in the world live in Israel, the prayers for rain retrieve their original relevance. A particularly serious five-year drought ended in 2018. Though much farming is now dependent not on rainfall, but on sophisticated computerized drip irrigation systems, the main source for those systems is water pumped from the Sea of Galilee, a lake in northern Israel. By 2018, the lake had dropped to its lowest recorded level since 1920 and was just centimeters from the ecological point of no return in terms of salinity. The Minister of Agriculture called for a special day of prayers. The Chief Rabbis of Israel summoned people to the Western Wall in Jerusalem, Judaism's holiest site, inviting them to pierce the heavens with prayers for rain. (They were warned to bring umbrellas). In line with standard procedure for Jewish weather-crisis rituals, the day chosen was a fast day.

Thousands prayed for rain at the Western Wall, in synagogues throughout Israel, and in the diaspora. It turned out that no umbrellas were needed on that day in Jerusalem. However, as one

religious source happily reported (**FFOZ 2018**), less than a week later, despite gloomy weather forecasts, suddenly "...the heavens did open up and poured down. It rained for days, filling streams and streets till they gushed, and it even raised the Sea of Galilee..." For centuries, the rabbis in the diaspora had treated the daily prayers for rain in the Holy Land as allegories of something else. Since the return of Jews to this ecologically vulnerable country, however, the climate prayers for rain have ceased being allegorical. Those reciting them mean exactly what is written.

## Summary and Conclusion: Identifying a Common Causal Force

### 6.1. The Impact of State Power on the Evolution of Religion

In this final section, we will discuss a unifying theme that has informed the evolution of all three systems: response to State behavior. In all three systems, a macro-political variable—the behavior of the State—not directly linked to ecological concerns has exerted a major impact on the evolution (or suppression) of rain rituals. We can summarize the dynamics sequentially.

#### Impact of State power on Judaism

It was the power of the Roman State in 70 CE that destroyed the sacrificial rituals of Temple Judaism and led to the emergence of contemporary Rabbinic Judaism. The Jewish farming population survived in Palestine under later Roman and early Byzantine States. Daily synagogue prayer and textual exegesis replaced animal sacrifice as the major ritual focus. It was at this phase that rain rituals, of importance to the Jewish farmers who were still a majority in Palestine, entered the Jewish prayer book under rabbinic authority.

However, the arrival of another State—the Islamic State—in 636 CE eventually brought an end to Jewish farming in Palestine, as most Jews eventually opted for emigration from the Holy Land. However, since the rainfall passages had become a core element in the Shma Israel and the Amidah prayers, these prayers for rain in Palestine were carried by Jews, under rabbinic supervision, into the diaspora. No longer of literal relevance, we have seen that the logic of the rainfall passages was preserved by converting them into allegories of reward and punishment for obeying or violating the 613 commandments. As a further causal insight, we can see that the Hebrew-language *siddur*, the Jewish prayerbook, was a unifying force contributing to the survival of the Jewish population as an ethnic minority under the different States of the diaspora. The invention of printing led to a further homogenization and standardization of different variants of the Hebrew *siddur* in different parts of the Jewish world (**Jacobson 1966**). The daily use of the Hebrew prayerbook by Jews who no longer spoke Hebrew as their mother tongue contributed to continuity of Jewish religious and cultural identity in settings in which other groups were absorbed into local cultures and disappeared as discrete sociocultural entities. Jewish rainfall rituals are part of this historically unusual survival story, as Jews have adapted to different State powers throughout history.

We can see three distinct phases of Jewish response to State power. (1) the Roman State destroyed Temple Judaism and paved the way for Rabbinic Judaism. (2) the Islamic caliphates in

Palestine led to emigration and conversion of Jews into stateless minorities in different lands; and (3) the rabbinic success in preserving daily prayers in Hebrew for Jews around the world who no longer spoke Hebrew allowed Jews to resist the State-supported forces for religious and cultural assimilation that led to the disappearance of other ethnic minorities. Therefore, the rabbinically mandated rainfall prayers for Palestine, recited thrice-daily in Hebrew, were among the vehicles that contributed to the unusual survival of Jews as a distinct, self-conscious ethnic group in States around the world that successfully absorbed, diluted, assimilated, and eliminated other ethnic minorities.

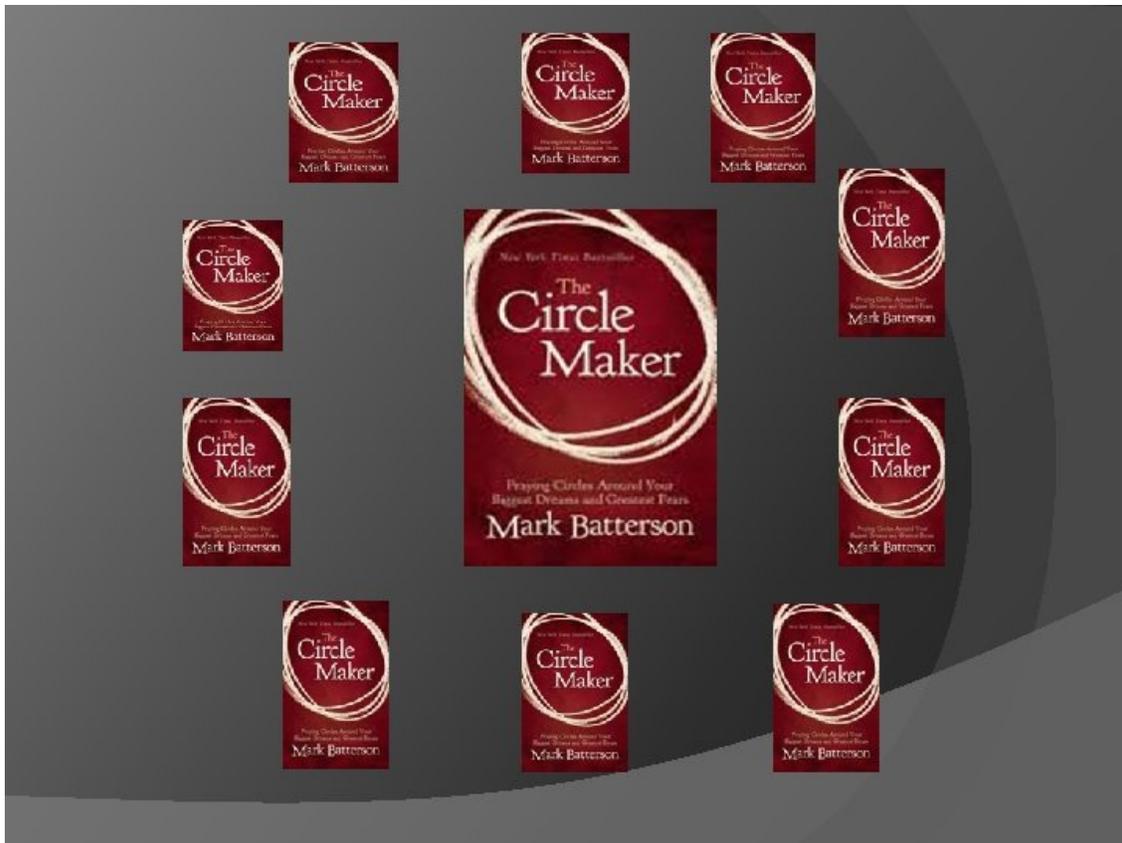
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1	The <b>Central Intelligence Agency (2019)</b> factbook, which compiled the statistics, also included the Golan Heights and East Jerusalem.
2	There was always a small Jewish presence in Byzantine and Ottoman Palestine. However, this Jewish “Yishuv” was not agricultural. It consisted of urban religious Jews dedicated to Torah study, principally in Jerusalem but also in Safed and other cities. They were supported during centuries, not by farming, but by the <i>halukka</i> system, which solicited funds from the Jewish Diaspora for Jews studying Torah in the Holy Land.
3	The traditional number of commandments by which Jews are bound is listed as 613. Of these, 248 deal with mandatory behaviors and 365 deal with forbidden behaviors. Except for seven “Noachide” laws binding on all humans, the 613 commandments are largely viewed as binding only (or principally) on Jews. Non-Jews, for example, are not viewed as sinners if they eat pork or work and travel on Saturday.
4	This is seen in the New Testament in differences between the strict ritual demands of the Pharisees and the more relaxed approach common in the popular Judaism of northern Galilee. This set the backdrop of the famous conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees (Pharisee in Hebrew means “separated— <i>perushim</i> ”—not “hypocrite”).
5	A traditional translation says, “the Lord is One”. The original command was an explicit prohibition against worshipping the deities of the nations that surrounded Israel. The ordinary English translation, however, construes the passage as a metaphysical affirmation of God’s unity rather than a prohibition against idolatry. This affirmation of God’s unity came to be emphasized by the rabbis in Christian Europe, with its trinitarian theology. This is a reinterpretation of the meaning of the original text: worship only the Hebrew God.
6	The translation is by Murray and departs slightly from conventional translations. At a certain point, our translation uses the archaic “thou” and “thy” forms to indicate that the Hebrew suddenly (and enigmatically) switches from the you-plural to the you-singular, which is not distinguished in modern English. The verb עָבַד (“avad) is translated as “to worship” rather than the more conventional “to serve”. Anglophones generally go to religious events in synagogue, church, or mosque to “worship” rather than to “serve”.
7	The ArtScroll Siddur ( <b>Sherman and Zlotowitz 1985, pp. 1078–79</b> ) lists eighteen complex rules governing procedures if an individual praying privately mixes up Israel’s dry and rainy season in prayer. Recitation of the proper climate prayer is so crucial that many synagogues post a sign reminding those praying which passage to pray during the current season. See also ( <b>Donin 1980, pp. 78–80</b> ).
8	<b>Sherman and Zlotowitz (1985, p. 753)</b> . The Hebrew verb (yatriach), which we have rendered as “instruct”, usually means “harass” or “bother”. God is apparently being urged to make sure that Af Bri distributes the upper waters. The passage is written in a later (and often cryptic) form of Hebrew liturgical poetry called “piyyutim”. The allusion to divinely provided rainfall, however, is clear.
9	A list of publications (many of them in Mandarin) dealing with the Monguor/Tu can be found online at <a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monguor_people">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monguor_people</a> .
10	Having the likeness of an animal. The term zoomorphic spirit (having a life-like form) is also used, which could include both non-human animal spirits and plant-like spirits.
11	<b>Cartwright (2017)</b> also points out the difference between the Chinese and the Western dragon figure.
12	Kinanbwa is the pseudonym of a village in Haiti’s Cul de Sac Plain.
13	Vodou adherents are also involved in Catholic rites. The Catholic group here refers to the subgroup of Catholics ( <i>katolik fran</i> ) that distance themselves from Vodou. Based on 100% survey of the research village, public adherents of Vodou constituted 62% of the village population, 23% were <i>katolik fran</i> , and 15% were evangelical Protestants. ( <b>Murray 1977</b> ). In the intervening decades the evangelical sector has become the majority.
14	We are following current practice and call it Vodou, as many anglophone and francophone writers currently do. The term “Vodou” avoids images of “sticking pins in dolls” that the eerie word “voodoo” evokes. Villagers traditionally had no separate noun for their folk-religion; they referred to it with a verb phrase “serving the lwa (spirits)”.

- 15 **Hebblethwaite (2015)** analyzes historical data on the slave trade from **Geggus (1996)** to reconstruct the sequence by which different lwa reached the colony of Saint-Domingue from different parts of Africa.
- 16 **Murray (1991)** documents a similar ritual ploy surrounding the fertility of the female womb. Only God can decree that a child be conceived in the womb. Once the child is there, however, sorcery can “trap” it and arrest its growth. The affected woman is “in perdition”. A childless woman may be diagnosed by an *oungan* as having a child in the womb that has been trapped by a force that the *oungan* can deal with. This ritual fiction provides hope for the woman (and income for the *oungan*).
- 17 Religious Jews might argue that the texts of the Shma were dictated by God to Moses in the Sinai desert. Secular scholars assume that they were written later, when the Jews were already farmers in the Holy Land.
- 18 **Corrigan et al. (1998)**, in their comparison of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam,) go even further. Their discussions of Jewish ritual look favorably on Reform efforts to update Judaism. Belief in post-mortem reward and punishment, alive and well in the traditional community, is seen by many in the Reform community as part of the obsolete archaisms that should be purged from Jewish religious life. In their treatment of the Shma, they mention neither the literal text of the weather nor the allegorical theme of reward and punishment.
- 19 Cf. multiple allegorical passages in the New Testament, such as the enigmatic injunction by Jesus not to cast your pearls before swine. The Galilean Jewish disciples to whom this Sermon on the Mount (Mt. chap. 5–7) was directed presumably had few pearls and no pigs.
- 20 Israeli farmers today, who constitute less than 1% of the local Jewish population, have no need to allegorize the climate references in the Shema and the Amidah. The Hebrew-speaking settlers in Gaza, among whom (deleted for peer review) lived for several months before their expulsion and the demolition of their homes by the Israeli government, did not depend on rain for their greenhouses, but on a sophisticated computerized drip irrigation system. This system, however, was fed by pipes from northern Israel. Their irrigation system in Gaza, close to Egypt in the south, depended on rain falling up north. They did not grow wheat, grapes, and olives, but flowers for export, including poinsettias for the Christmas market in New York City. Unlike diaspora Jews, these Israeli farmers, who prayed in synagogue every day, had no need to allegorize the rainfall texts. They literally depended on the rain to feed the lake that fed their drip irrigation system. (The past tense is being used. The farmers were subsequently expelled from Gaza by the Israeli government.)
- 21 It must be pointed out that TCM does not entail spirit healing. A major diagnostic emphasis is on discovering imbalances in the flows of energy (*qi*) in the human body of a sick person. Healing entails the reestablishment of the proper energy flows. Neither in diagnosis nor in therapy do TCM doctors invoke or consult with spirit beings.
- 22 To avoid romanticizing, recent events involving the Muslim Uighur of Xinjiang and crackdown on Christian churches could be interpreted as the pendulum swinging back. In the case of Islam, the reversal could also be seen as simply a continuation and radical application of a fierce determination to stamp out any perceived threat to “national unity”, as defined by the Party. If this interpretation is correct, ethnic diversity will continue to be supported as long as it does not cross certain political lines. The final chapter has yet to be written.
- 23 Some scholars view the revolutionary role of Vodou as a romanticized exaggeration. The discussion falls outside this article.
- 24 The hypothesis could be validated or falsified by searching for rainfall rituals in other well-known Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Brazilian religious systems that also arose during slavery. Among these are Trinidadian Shango, Cuban Santeria, and Brazilian Candomble. In a brief perusal we have found no rain rituals. But systematic research on this specific question has yet to be carried out.



## “Coming Full Circle”

**RABBI WAGENSBERG** writes:<sup>16</sup>

Parshas Bechukosai begins by telling us that if we involve ourselves in the study of Torah (Rashi Bechukosai, 26:3, citing Toras Kohanim, 26:2), we will receive rain and produce (Parshas Bechukosai, 26:4), and we will live in peace (Parshas Bechukosai, 26:6).

It turns out that three points have been made here: 1) engage in the study of Torah, 2) receive parnessah (livelihood; represented by the rain and produce), and 3) live in peace. One question that could be raised is, “What is the connection between these three points?”

In order to begin answering this question, we are going to turn to a fascinating story that is found in the Talmud.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://myemail.constantcontact.com/Rabbi-Wagensberg--on-Parshas-Behar-Behuchosai-2020.html?soid=1104865020373&aid=68GhqShru4M>

The Gemara (Ta'anis, chap. 3, "Seder Ta'aniyos Eilu", pg. 23a) tells us that once upon a time, there was a terrible drought. Most of the winter had already passed, and there was still no rain. A delegation went to Choni Hama'agal (Choni the Circle Drawer) and begged him to daven to Hashem that it should rain. Choni "ug uguh" (drew a circle) on the ground and stood inside of it. Choni said to Hashem, "***Master of the Universe, Your children have turned to me for I am like a member of Your household. I swear by Your Great Name that I am not going to budge from here until You have compassion on Your children.***"

Immediately, it began to drizzle lightly. Choni said to Hashem, "That is not what I asked for. I asked for rain that would fill cisterns, ditches, and caves." Suddenly, it began to rain with tremendous force. Choni said to Hashem, "That is not what I asked for. I asked for rain of benevolence, blessing, and bounty." Then it began to rain normally, and it continued to rain so steadily that there was flooding, and the people had to climb to the top of Har Habayit (the Temple Mount) to save themselves from drowning.

The people said to Choni, "Rebbi, just as you davened that rain should fall, daven that it should go away." Choni said to them, I received a tradition that teaches that one should not pray to remove excessive good. However, I understand the predicament that we are in, so I will pray."

Choni said to Hashem, "Master of the Universe, Your Nation Israel whom You have taken out of Egypt cannot endure excessive punishment nor excessive good. If You get angry with them, they will not be able to endure, and if You shower abundant bounty upon them, they will also not be able to endure. May it be Your will that the rains stop so that there will be relief in the world."

Suddenly, the wind blew and dispersed the clouds. The sun began to shine, and the people went out to the fields and began collecting truffles (a rich flavored fungus that grows underground and is valued as a delicacy) and mushrooms.

There are a number of questions that come to mind regarding this story. For instance, what was the meaning behind drawing a circle in the ground? This circle was so momentous that from that day forward Choni was nicknamed "Choni Hama'agal" (Choni the Circle Drawer). What was that circle all about?

Additionally, how was it ok for Choni to swear by God's Name that he would not leave the circle until Hashem brought rain? Since when is it OK to give God an ultimatum? Was Choni threatening God? How was it Ok to force God's hand, so to speak? And yet, it worked. How did it work?

The story continues. Afterwards, Shimon ben Shatach sent a message to Choni. In that message, Shimon ben Shatach was very upset with Choni. So much so, that Shimon ben Shatach said that he should place Choni under a ban for causing there to be a chilul Hashem (a desecration of God's name).

You see, there were worshippers of an idol called Ba'al. Those idolaters said that their god, Ba'al, would make it rain. In order to disprove Ba'al and those idolaters, Eliyahu Hanavi swore that it would not rain for three years (Melachim Aleph, 17:1). But now Choni swore that it should rain.

Therefore, no matter what happens, Choni's words will cause there to be an oath in vain, because if it does not rain as Eliyahu Hanavi swore, it will make Choni's oath in vain, and if it does rain as Choni swore, it will make Eliyahu's oath in vain. Either way, there will be a chilul Hashem. Therefore, Shimon ben Shatach wanted to excommunicate Choni Hama'agal for creating a situation which would result in a desecration of God's Name.

However, Shimon ben Shatach said, "What can I do? You (Choni) are like a son who acts petulantly (unreasonably impatient) before God, and He (God) still grants your every wish. You are like the son who asks his father for a hot bath, and then changes his mind for a cold shower, and the father gives his son whatever he wants. You are like the son that asks for nuts, almonds, peaches, and pomegranates, and the father delivers his every whim. About you (Choni) it is said, 'Your father and mother will be glad, and the one who bore you will rejoice' (Mishlei, 23:25)."

Another difficulty with this story is Shimon ben Shatach's criticism. Apparently, there was no chilul Hashem between the two oaths because Choni Hama'agal did not live at the same time as Eliyahu Hanavi. Rather, Choni lived hundreds of years after Eliyahu Hanavi. Therefore, both oaths could be fulfilled without any contradiction. Eliyahu's oath that there should not be rain came true in his day, and Choni's oath that there should be rain came true in his day. If so, what was bothering Shimon ben Shatach?

The Shvilei Pinchas begins by answering the first question, at least partially. One connection between parnassah and shalom (points 1 & 2 of Parshas Bechukosai) is based on a Gemara in Baba Metzia (chap. 4, "Hazahav", pg. 59a) where Rav Yehuda said that one should be very careful with one's produce (i.e. money) because many arguments break out in a household because of financial difficulties (see Tehillim, 147:14). In fact, Rav Papa said that there was a common phrase that people used to repeat which says, "When the barley is gone from the pitcher, strife comes knocking at the door."

From this source we see that a good parnassah breeds shalom because when there is enough money to go around, people are more relaxed, and harmony prevails. This source just explained the connection between points 2 & 3 in Parshas Bechukosai.

The Shvilei Pinchas adds that the answer to the other part of the first question (concerning the connection between Torah study and parnassah and peace) can also be understood in light of the fact that the study of Torah serves as a segula (charm) which brings parnassah, as it says, "If there is no Torah, there is no flour (meaning parnassah; Avos, chap. 3, "Akavya", Mishna 21; the opinion of Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria).

Not only is Torah study connected to parnassah, but it is also connected to peace. This is found at the end of Meseches Berachos, (chap. 9, "Haroe'h", pg. 64a) where Rabbi Elazar said in the name of Rabbi Chanina, "Torah scholars increase peace in the world."

Therefore, the three points made at the beginning of Parshas Bechukosai are all connected. The first point about Torah study, leads to the second point about parnassah, and it also leads to the third point about peace. It seems that peace is a goal that we should be striving to achieve.

Now we can begin to address the questions related to the story of Choni Hama'agal, because we are going to see that this story was also about peace. But first, we must share two other Talmudic passages.

The Gemara (Berachos, chap. 1, "M'eimasai", pg. 4b) cites Rabbi Yochanan who asked why the letter nun is missing from the Ashrei prayer. Meaning, although the Ashrei prayer goes along the acrostic of the Aleph Beis, there is no sentence in Ashrei which begins with the letter nun. The question is, "Why?"

He answered that it is because the letter nun stands for the "nefilah" (downfall) of the Jewish people (see Amos, 5:4). Since the first letter of "nefilah" (downfall) begins with the letter nun, it makes the letter nun an ominous letter. Therefore, Dovid Hamelech did not want to begin a verse with the letter nun.

However, Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak said that Dovid Hamelech still found a way of incorporating the letter nun into Ashrei. The letter nun is found in the verse that begins with the letter samech. That verse reads, "Somech Hashem L'chol Hanoflim" (Hashem supports all the fallen ones; Tehillim, 145:14). The word "noflim" (fallen) in this verse begins with the letter nun, and yet the verse begins by saying that Hashem "somech" (supports) all those noflim.

So, it turns out that since the letter samech is the first letter of the word somech, it stands for support, and since letter nun is the first letter of noflim, it stands for fallen. We are about to see a Mishna and a Gemara which are going to shed more light upon these two letters.

The Mishna (Ta'anis, chap. 4, "Bishlosa Perakim", Mishna 8, pg. 26b) quotes Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel (Rashb"ag) who said, "There were never joyous days for the Jewish people like Tu B'Av (the fifteenth day of the Hebrew month Av)." This statement has perplexed even the greatest of minds over the centuries. In what way is Tu B'Av the most joyous of all other days? What happened on Tu B'Av that made it the happiest day of the year?

Although the Gemara itself provides several answers to this question, Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heshel of Apt (the Apter Rebbe, 1748 Poland – 1825 Ukraine) in his sefer Ohev Yisrael (Shavuot, pgs. 266-267; Likkutim Chadashim, pg. 330) offers a phenomenal approach in understanding the meaning of Tu B'Av. His explanation will become clearer through the lenses of another Talmudic passage.

At the end of Meseches Ta'anis (chap. 4, "Bishlosa Perakim", pg. 31a) Rabbi Elazar says that, in the future, in Gan Eden, Hashem is going to make the tzaddikim sit in a "mechol" (circle). Hashem's Divine Presence will be in the center and each tzaddik will point to the Shechina in the center and say, 'Behold, this is our God, we hoped to Him that He would save us, this is Hashem to Whom we hoped, let us exult and be glad in His salvation,'" (Yeshaya, 25:9).

The Apter Rebbe explains the idea behind this circle of tzaddikim in the following way. He says that each tzaddik has his own unique approach in serving Hashem. All of these approaches are beautiful and true (Eirubin, chap. 1, "Mavui Shehu Gavoah", pg. 13b) because each tzaddik uses his God given talents and strengths to serve Hashem in the best way that he can. Each tzaddik was

meant to fulfil his own unique function and mission in this world. As such, all tzaddikim are equal because they all participated in Divine service to the best of their abilities.

Therefore, each tzaddik is equally close to Hashem. This is why Hashem will have these tzaddikim sit in a circle with Hashem's Divine Presence in the center. This will demonstrate that each tzaddik is equally close to Hashem. At that time, there will be tremendous rejoicing amongst everybody because of the equality and comradery that will exist between everyone.

The Apter Rebbe says that now we can understand the Rashba's statement a little bit better. The Rashba said, "There are no happier days on the Jewish calendar than TU B'Av." We thought that the Rashba was referring to a specific date on the Jewish calendar. However, there is an alternative understanding of "Tu B'Av." "Tu B'Av" does not just mean the "fifteenth day of Av," but rather it could also mean the "fifteenth letter of the Aleph Beis." This is because the word "Av" is spelled aleph beis. Therefore, "Av" can refer to the Aleph Beis.

The fifteenth letter of the Aleph Beis is the letter samech. The shape of a letter samech is round. Therefore, the letter samech represents the circle of tzaddikim in Gan Eden. This futuristic event will take place after the final Geula. At that time, there will be no jealousy, but rather boundless joy amongst everyone because of the equality between them.

This is what the Rashba meant when he said that there is no joyous occasion that can compare with Tu B'Av because Tu B'Av refers to the celebration that will happen when we are all sitting in a circle around Hashem's Shechina, represented by the fifteenth letter (Tu) of the Aleph Beis (Av). At that time there will be more joy than we have ever experienced before.

The Shvilei Pinchas adds that this will help us understand why the letter nun represents nefila, whereas the letter samech represents semicha. It is not just because the word nefila begins with a nun, and the word semicha begins with a samech. It is much more than that.

A regular letter nun is in the shape of a half-broken circle. This brokenness hints at sinas chinum (baseless hatred) and argumentativeness which 'breaks' people apart. This is what causes our nefila.

The tikkun of this brokenness is hinted to in the letter samech. This is because the shape of a letter samech is round which is a complete circle without any brokenness. This completeness will transpire when we are all sitting in a circle equally close to Hashem. When we strive for such unity, we will merit the redemption and that will be our somech (support).

Therefore, the meaning of the verse, "Somech Hashem L'chol Hanoflim" is that some people nafli (fell) in sinas chinum. But Hashem will somech (support) them by making us all like a samech, sitting in a circle equally close to Hashem. Then there will be no jealousy or strife; just unity and love.

Now we can understand another meaning behind why Choni drew a circle. The Shvilei Pinchas says that Choni saw that there was no rain. As such, there was no produce. That meant that there

was no parnassah. As a result of that, there was no harmony because very often financial difficulties arise when money is tight (Baba Metzia ibid).

Therefore, Choni specifically drew a circle because a circle is the same shape as the letter samech. By drawing a circle, Choni was saying that he wanted to connect to the energy of the letter samech. The energy of a samech is peace because it represents the peace between everybody sitting in a circle around the Shechina in Gan Eden.

Choni was trying to say that he was going to work on shalom (peace) and achdus (unity). When Hashem sees that we are in pursuit of shalom, Hashem will grant us our wishes, measure for measure, and give us something that will help achieve that desired shalom. That something is rain, because when it rains, there is produce. Then there is parnassah, and then people will be more relaxed, and then there can be harmony and peace.

In order to address the remaining questions (how Choni could give God an ultimatum; and what was bothering Shimon ben Shatach if there would be no chilul Hashem because Choni lived hundreds of years after Eliyahu Hanavi), we are going to have to share a kabbalistic secret.

The Rama M'Fano (Rabbi Menachem Azaria of Fano, Italy, 1548-1620) in his sefer, Gilgulei Neshamos, (#8), cites his Rebbi, Rabbi Yisrael Sarug Ahkenazi, who received a teaching from the Arizal who said that Choni Hama'agal was a gilgul (reincarnation) of Eliyahu Hanavi.

The Shvilei Pinchas says that there are some sources which support this notion. The Gemara (Ta'anis ibid) quotes Rebbi Yochanan who said that Choni was bothered by a verse in Tehillim (126:1) which seems to imply that a person can sleep for seventy years (see Rashi ibid). Choni wondered how a person could possibly sleep for seventy years.

So, once upon a time, Choni was walking down the road when he saw a man planting a carob tree. Choni asked him how long it takes for this tree to bear fruits. The man said that it takes seventy years. Choni asked, "Are you certain that you will be alive in seventy years from now to enjoy its fruits?" The man responded, "When I came into this world, there were carob trees here for me to eat from. A long time ago, my forefathers planted them for me. Therefore, I am planting this tree for my descendants in the future.

Satisfied with that answer, Choni sat down to have a meal.

Suddenly, sleep overcame him. As he slept, a rocky formation enclosed over him which hid him from sight. He slept for seventy years. When he woke up, he saw a man gathering fruit from the carob tree. Choni asked him, "Are you the man who planed this tree?" The man responded, "No, my grandfather did, I am his grandson." Choni said to himself, "I must have slept for seventy years."

Choni rushed home. He saw a man in his house. Choni asked him, "Are you the son of Choni Hama'agal?" He replied, "No, Choni's son has passed on, but I am Choni's grandson." Excited, Choni said to him, "I am Choni Hama'agal," but his grandson didn't believe him.

Disappointed, Choni went to the Beis Midrash. He overheard the scholars there discussing a Torah topic, and finally they said, “The law is as clear to us as in the days of Choni Hama’agal. Remember how Choni was able to field any question that the Sages posed? This was because Choni had such clarity in Torah that he was able to resolve any difficulty. Well, today we feel that we reached the clarity of Choni about our subject matter.”

Excited, Choni said to them, “I am Choni!” However, nobody believed him. Choni felt saddened. Therefore, he prayed that Hashem should take his soul away, and Hashem answered that prayer of his as well.

The Shvilei Pinchas points out that from this story we see that Choni had the ability of answering all questions and resolving all doubts. It is interesting to note that this is precisely the same ability that Eliyahu Hanavi possesses. We can see this from the following.

When the Sages of the Talmud are engaged in a heated debate, and they cannot conclude, the discussion ends with the word “teiku.” As a word, “teiku” means “unresolved.” However, the Tosafos Yom Tov (Rabbi Yom Tov Lipman Heller, 1579 Poland – 1654 Prague; Meseches Ediyos, chap. 8, “Heyid”, Mishna 7) says that “teiku” is also an acronym which stands for, “Tishbi Yitaretz Kushyos Va’abayos” (the Toshabite [a reference to Eliyahu Hanavi] will answer questions and problems). This means that one day Eliyahu Hanavi will come and resolve these unanswered debates in the Talmud.

By the fact that both Choni and Eliyahu possessed the same ability of resolving even the most perplexing aspects of Torah, it lends support to the idea that Choni was indeed a gilgul of Eliyahu.

Moreover, there is a historic pattern which supports this idea as well. In Seder Hadoros (Rabbi Yechiel Halprin, Minsk, Belarus, 1660-1742), regarding his biographical sketch of the Tanaim and Amoraim (#8), it says that the drought in the days of Choni lasted for specifically three years before they came to him to pray on their behalf.

Interestingly, the drought in Eliyahu Hanavi’s time also lasted for three years until Eliyahu prayed that it should rain again. This identical pattern further indicates that these two personalities (Choni and Eliyahu) were connected to each other spiritually.

This information will be very helpful in answering the remaining questions. This is because Rabbi Yehoshua said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai, in the name of his Rebbe, in the name of the Rebbe before him, going all the way back to a Halacha from Moshe at Sinai, that one of the primary functions of Eliyahu Hanavi is to bring peace to the world (Meseches Ediyos, chap. 8, “Heyid”, Mishna 7). This peace is meant to prepare the world for the ultimate peace that will exist in the circle that we will sit in around Hashem.

Since Choni was a gilgul of Eliyahu, it would stand to reason that he also had that same purpose of bringing peace to the world. Since this mission was not completed in the days of Eliyahu, he had to come back as Choni and continue doing that job.

This is how Choni was allowed to speak to God with force. Choni was saying to Hashem that the mission which God had sent him to the world to do was make as much peace as possible so that the world would be ready for the totality of peace which will be experienced as we sit around Hashem's Shechina in Gan Eden.

Choni argued that rain must come so that there will be parnassah which breeds peace. This would help prepare the world for the ultimate peace in Gan Eden. This was the mission that God sent Choni on to begin with. Therefore, Choni knew that he could make demands of God and give Hashem ultimatums because Choni knew that this in and of itself was Hashem's will. This is precisely what Hashem wanted of him.

It turns out that Choni's ughah (circle) was meant to generate peace which would prepare the world for the ultimate peace that will be experienced in the "mechol" (circle) of tzaddikim around Hashem's Shechina. The Ben Yehoyada (Meseches Ta'anis, pg. 23a; Rabbi Yosef Chaim of Bagdad, Iraq, 1835-1909) points out that the words "ughah" and "mechol" share the same numerical value, 84. This numerical equivalency teaches us that Choni's ughah was in order to prepare the world for the future mechol.

The Shvilei Pinchas adds that this is why Choni's nickname was Hama'agal after the circle that he drew. This nickname meant to convey that Choni was the one whose mission was to bring peace to the world represented by the circle which hinted at the future circle of the tzaddikim in Gan Eden.

The Shvilei Pinchas says that this also explains what was bothering Shimon ben Shatach. Shimon ben Shatach claimed that although Choni lived hundreds of years after Eliyahu, nevertheless, to the trained eye that can kabbalistically see that Choni was a gilgul of Eliyahu, there is going to be somewhat of a chilul Hashem because Eliyahu took an oath that there should not be rain, and yet Choni swore that there must be rain. This looks like a contradiction stemming from the same person. That was the chilul Hashem.

However, Shimon ben Shatach did not excommunicate Choni because, on the contrary, people will also see Hashem's incredible Hashgacha Pratis (Divine intervention) by causing there to be reincarnations spanning the generations. Meaning, Eliyahu had sworn that it should not rain in order to disprove the worshippers of Ba'al who claimed that Ba'al could make it rain. Although Eliyahu had good intentions, simultaneously, Eliyahu caused the Jewish people to suffer in a terrible drought for three years.

Therefore, Hashem brought Eliyahu back down to Earth in the form of Choni so that Choni would bring relief to the world which was suffering from a drought that Choni did not cause. When Choni davened and brought the rain, he fixed the old problem of withholding rain from the Jewish people when he was Eliyahu.

This explains why Shimon ben Shatach compared Choni to a son whose father fulfills his every wish. The word for son is "ben." The word "ben" is numerically 52, which is the same exact numerical value as the name "Eliyahu." This shows us that Shimon ben Shatach understood who Choni's previous transmigration was.

Shimon ben Shatach had added that Choni was like the son who demands nuts, almonds, peaches, and pomegranates from his father, and is granted it. Shimon ben Shatach meant to say that he understood that Choni just wanted to bring the Jewish people produce (represented by those fruits) so that they would have parnassah and subsequently have peace which would help prepare the world for the final Geula when complete peace will prevail.

In conclusion, this story about Choni Hama'agal is all about peace, which is also one of the messages of Parshas Bechukosai, as we mentioned earlier.

As a means of a practical application of this teaching, let us try, a little bit more, to daven, not just for ourselves, but for each other. This means not just to daven for our families, friends, neighbors, and co-workers, but to daven even for strangers. May I be so bold as to suggest that we even daven for people that we cannot stand.

In this way we demonstrate that we want to live in peace and harmony with each other. As such, we will be zocheh to the Geula Shileima when there will be total peace as we dance in a circle around the Shechina in Gan Eden.

So, may we all be blessed with the willingness to follow in the path of Choni Hama'agal and daven for each other's physical and financial well-being, so that we bring peace to the world, and thus deserve to witness Hashem somech – or shall I say samech - us noflim at the time of the Geula, when Hashem will perform Nissim for us, when we will point to the Shechina with our fingers as we sit in a circle around Hakadosh Baruch Hu, which will give Eliyahu Hanavi such nachas that his mission has finally been fulfilled.



# The Dream of Exile: A Rereading of Honi the Circle-Drawer

*Hyim Shafner*

IN RECENT DECADES THE REREADING OF TALMUDIC narratives, of *aggadah*, has uncovered a surprising plethora of modern and post-modern philosophical resonances. At first glance talmudic stories often seem to be merely that — slices of life from long ago. But if the Talmud is viewed as a closely edited book in which words and images are carefully chosen, the extra word used in such a story or the fantastic image chosen for portrayal can be deciphered to expose messages that go beyond the plain meaning of the text. These generally reveal deeper theological ideas and often psychological conflicts and philosophical conundrums which resonate in our own time; for in the end, humans and the central issues of their lives and their relationships to God and one another have changed little over the millennia.

*Honi HaM'agel* — Honi the Circle-Drawer — is a puzzling “rabbi” who appears only once in talmudic literature, in Tractate Ta’anit. Such an enigma can only demand “*Dorsheini!*” — examine and expound upon me. The following is a close reading of the unique story of Honi and his moment in the talmudic spotlight. An examination of the specific images and words that the Talmud employs will help to reveal the deeper Jewish, and I think universally human, messages which reside between the lines.

Rabbi Yohanan said: “This righteous man [Honi] was troubled throughout the whole of his life concerning the meaning of the verse, *A Song of Ascents: When the Lord brought back those that returned to Zion, we were like dreamers.* [Honi asked] Is it possible for seventy years to be like a dream? How could anyone sleep for seventy years?”

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<sup>17</sup> <http://kerem.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Kerem-12-Hyim-Shafner-....-The-Dream-of-Exile.pdf>

One day Honi was journeying on the road and he saw “that” man planting a carob tree. He asked, “How long does it take [for this tree] to bear fruit?” The man replied: “Seventy years.” Honi then further asked him: “Are you certain that you will live another seventy years?” The man replied: “I found [already grown] carob trees in the world; as my forefathers planted those for me so I too plant these for my children.”

Honi sat down to have a meal and sleep overcame him. As he slept a rocky formation enclosed upon him which hid him from sight and he slept for seventy years. When he awoke he saw a man gathering the fruit of the carob tree and Honi asked him, “Are you the man who planted the tree?” The man replied: “I am his grandson.” Thereupon Honi exclaimed: “It is clear that I have slept for seventy years.” He then caught sight of his ass which had given birth to several generations of mules, and he returned home. There he inquired, “Is the son of Honi the Circle-Drawer still alive?” The people answered him, “His son is no more, but his grandson is still living.” Thereupon he said to them: “I am Honi the Circle-Drawer,” but no one would believe him.

He then repaired to the *beit ha-midrash* [study hall] and there he overheard the scholars say, “The law is as clear to us as in the days of Honi the Circle-Drawer,” for whenever he came to the *beit ha-midrash* he would settle for the scholars any difficulty that they had. Whereupon he called out, “I am he!” But the scholars would not believe him nor did they give him the honor due to him. This hurt him greatly and he prayed for mercy, and he died. Raba said: “Hence the saying, ‘Either companionship or death.’” (B. TA’ANIT 23a)

The Talmud here presents us with a seemingly pedestrian story, but the way the Talmud sets up the narrative seems to be a response to Honi’s painful, lifelong conflict with the psalmist’s vision of the exile and redemption of the Jewish people — not a small matter at all. Our undertaking will be to understand the story and in the process decipher its enigmatic turns of phrase and uniquely depicted images to uncover the Talmud’s deeper theological messages hidden in the narrative.

## Honi's Discord

The Talmud introduces Honi by telling us he was perplexed his entire life by the first verse of Psalm 126, *A Song of Ascents: When the Lord brought back those that returned to Zion, we were like dreamers*. The Aramaic word used here to describe Honi's emotional state is *mitzta'er*, pained. Why is Honi, clearly a wise man, and according to the Talmud, more capable of bringing rain than any other rabbi of his time, so pained by this verse? Why, specifically, by the implication that a person could sleep for seventy years? And why is this the way in which the Talmud sums up *the* theme of Honi's life? The Talmud, or Honi, seems to be deliberately misreading the verse in Psalm 126. Clearly the psalm is referring not to an individual sleeping or dreaming for seventy years, but to the nation of Israel likened to dreamers when they were returned to Zion after the seventy years of the Babylonian exile.

If Honi's question is metaphoric — sleep equaling exile — his deep perplexity and pain are still no easier to comprehend. The source of his bewilderment seems not to be the torment of exile itself but something seemingly far more mundane — the notion of its length and similarity to actual sleep, as he states: “Is it possible for seventy years to be like a dream? How could anyone sleep for seventy years?”

## The Value of Exile

The Talmud's answer to Honi's question begins with a journey. His question cannot be answered in the Talmud's standard dialectical manner because it is not based on faulty logic or missing information. Honi asks about the ability of a people to hold onto its dream through an entire exile. He wonders how it is at all possible for the Jewish people, or anyone, to keep dreaming for seventy years without seeing that dream realized. How can one weather such a state for seventy years?

Honi's question is not a merely factual or logical question but one which emerges from the way in which he sees the world and experiences his life and the life of his people. Accordingly, it must be answered not through reason or added knowledge but through Honi's personal experience. To explore and perhaps answer such a question must involve an internal process whereby Honi's view changes because the question itself ceases to exist,

because he himself and the way he sees the world have been altered, in this case through a journey. That the story happens on a journey is not merely incidental, but integral to it; Honi must go on a hopefully life changing journey. Journeys are a process toward, not an end in themselves, much like the growth of a tree. This is the lesson meant for Honi — that the journey, like exile itself, is *something*, a valuable something, not just an insignificant prerequisite for a desired end.

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The first thing Honi sees on his journey is “that man” planting a carob tree. The man remains nameless. “That man” is not someone important or even a specific character but he is called a *gavra*, implying that though he was not necessarily a scholar, he was a mature, upstanding man.

“Are you certain that you will live another seventy years?” Honi cannot imagine why the man is going to plant a tree whose fruit he will not eat. For Honi, eating the fruit is the point of planting a tree. Without this end in sight, the planting becomes absurd. Learning from the man that dreaming for seventy years is not only possible but productive will be Honi’s challenge.

The planter of the carob tree is essentially a dreamer. Through planting he dreams of the future though he will not see its actualization. Only after seventy years will the dream of the fruit become realized. The lesson for Honi is that as it is with carobs, so too with the Jewish people; the fruit of redemption can ripen only on the vine of exile. Exile is a long sleep, an entire lifetime.

The Jewish exile of seventy years is so long that a new generation, born in exile and knowing nothing else, will come to be. For them to imagine something different than exile while still living in it takes dreaming. The man’s answer is that he is not planting for himself but for the future. Preparing for the future is worthwhile in and of itself, he tells Honi. Without preparation there can be no fruition. Without exile, no redemption.

## Rage Against the Night

This is a difficult lesson for Honi to grasp and he has no response for the man. His only reaction is to stop journeying.

Honi sat down to have a meal and sleep overcame him. As he slept a rocky formation enclosed upon him which hid him from sight and he slept for seventy years. When he awoke he saw a man gathering the fruit of the carob tree and Honi asked him, "Are you the man who planted the tree?" The man replied: "I am his grandson." Thereupon Honi exclaimed: "It is clear that I have slept for seventy years." He then caught sight of his ass that had given birth to several generations of mules; and he returned home.

Even after the lesson from the carob tree planter, Honi cannot fathom the role of the dream state of exile. Honi attempts to pass over this planting, this exile, and go directly to the carob fruit, to the way things ought to be, seventy years later. In Honi's view there will be no waiting and watching this tree grow, he will cut to the chase and skip to the fruit. But in so doing Honi must skip over

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Even if it were possible to eliminate exile  
and jump to the time of redemption,  
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seventy years, his whole lifetime. Honi wakes exactly seventy years later to find that indeed he has arrived; one *can* sleep for seventy years and wake to find the fruit! He has passed over the tree's exile and woken in its redemptive state, under the tree's fully formed fruit, his world view vindicated — but not for long. When he returned home,

There he inquired, "Is the son of Honi the Circle-Drawer still alive?" The people answered him, "His son is no more, but his grandson is still living." Thereupon he said to them, "I am Honi the Circle-Drawer," but no one would believe him.

Honi discovers that even if it were possible to eliminate exile and jump to the time of redemption, the price he must pay is the sacrifice of himself, of his own lifetime. One cannot go to a different time and still be oneself. We must be who we are, suggests this story in the Talmud, we each have our role in the

universe. Whether to plant or to reap, to dream or to wake, to be in exile or to be redeemed, it is of no matter; one state is not less valuable than another, and both are interdependent. Being satisfied where one is, even if that means living in a state of unredeemed expectation, is as worthwhile as being redeemed, at least according to the carob tree planter.

He then repaired to the *beit ha-midrash* and there he overheard the scholars say, “The law is as clear to us as in the days of Honi the Circle-Drawer,” for whenever he came to the *bet ha-midrash* he would settle for the scholars any difficulty that they had. Whereupon he called out, “I am he!” But the scholars would not believe him nor did they give him the honor due to him. This hurt him greatly and he prayed for mercy, and he died. Raba said: “Hence the saying, ‘Either companionship or death.’”

Why did the scholars not ask Honi for the answers to their questions? Why did they not determine who he was and accept him? Was he not as wise and learned now as he had been before?

Perhaps not, suggests the Talmud, as he had no way to incorporate or take into account the accumulated knowledge, reasoning, and experience of the previous seventy years. What each of us contributes to the universe is not just the sum of what we have to offer but a unique structure only we can bring to a certain time, place, and state of the world. We are not just the substance of our knowledge, emotion, and personality, but a specific form, woven into a certain historical time, generation, and *zeitgeist*. Seventy years later there was no place for this *tzaddik* (righteous person), not in his own family and not in the *beit ha-midrash*. Though he was the illuminator of his generation, only in his ordained time could he be who he was. Although he might have been able to convince them of his actual identity, he could only be Honi, he could only light the way for his own generation and not for any other.

There is another prominent figure in Jewish history who was similar to Honi in this respect. A figure who after faithfully leading his generation desired with all his heart to cross over into a redemptive state that was not ordained to be his.

## Honi and Moses

When Honi sleeps his seventy year sleep through the tree's growth, the Talmud tells us a very strange detail. "As he slept a rocky formation enclosed upon him which hid him from sight and he slept for seventy years." Why does the Talmud tell us this seemingly extraneous detail? I think the Talmud here hints at another dreamer — our greatest, though ultimately unfulfilled dreamer, who also gets covered in a rocky formation — Moses.

Moses too has a moment in which he wishes to be in the ultimate redeemed state, to fully know the Infinite Divine. God responds to Moses that he cannot, since "no one can see My face and live." Such a redeemed state is impossible until the exilic journey of this world is successfully traversed and we are no longer alive. God continues, *And it shall come to pass, while my glory passes by, that I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and will cover you with my hand while I pass by. And I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen* (EXODUS 33:22-23). Moses does not get his wish; he must remain a limited human in this world of exile from the Divine, and on this journey the cleft of the rock is what hides him from his longed-for redemptive moment. The cleft of the rock symbolizes, for Moses as well as Honi, the journey itself, the impossibility of being in the destination sooner.

Moses taught our people to dream, to see the state of exile in the desert as a productive time, but at the end of the journey, he was not allowed to realize the great dream into reality. Moses could only be the leader in exile. He dedicated his life to the preparation and to the planting, but ultimately was not permitted to reap its fruit and see the redemption in the land of Israel.

Moses knew that there is an *avodah* — a holy service — unique to the desert exile and that this exile must precede redemption. Nevertheless, he desired with all his heart to lead the people into the Land of Israel. According to the midrash, Moses presented God with one argument after another to enter the land, resorting to one trick after another, only to be refused by God.

The comparison between Honi and Moses goes even further. When Moses' prayer is not answered, he too, like Honi, draws circles in protest to God.

When, however, Moses saw that the decree against him (to enter the Land of Israel) had been sealed, he began to fast, and drew a small circle and stood therein, and exclaimed: 'I will not move from here until You annul your decree.' (DEUTERONOMY RABBAH 11:10)

Moses, like Honi, is a man of redemption never satisfied with the state of exile. Moses beats his fists upon the doors of redemption, drawing a circle and demanding of God. But perhaps it is precisely this dissatisfaction with exile that made both Honi and Moses the great leaders they were.

## Like a Child Before God

What is it about Honi that makes it so hard for him to fathom exile? Why is he the one who must be shown the lesson of the carob tree? To answer this we must turn to the beginning of our story about Honi the Circle-Drawer — the story that accounts for his unusual name. Immediately preceding the carob tree section of the story, we learn:

Once it happened that the greater part of the month of Adar had gone and yet no rain had fallen. The people sent a message to Honi the Circle-Drawer, “Pray that rain may fall.” He prayed and no rain fell. He thereupon drew a circle, stood within it...and declared, “Master of the Universe, Your children have turned to me since I am like a son in Your household. I swear by Your great name that I will not move from this circle until You have mercy upon Your children!”

Rain began to drip and Honi exclaimed: “It is not for this that I have prayed, but for heavier rains to fill cisterns, ditches and caves.” The rain then began to come down with great force. Thereupon Honi exclaimed, “It is not for this either that I have prayed, but for rain of benevolence, blessing, and bounty.” Then rain fell normally until the Israelites were compelled to [seek shelter] because of the rain. His disciples said to him, “Master, in the same way that you have prayed for the rain to fall, pray for the rain to cease.”

[Honi prayed and brought a thanksgiving offering.] Immediately the wind began to blow and the clouds were dispersed and the sun shone and the people went out into the fields and gathered for themselves mushrooms and truffles. Thereupon Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach sent this message to Honi, “Were it not that you are Honi I would have placed you under excommunication...but what shall I do to you who acts petulantly before the Omnipresent and He

grants your desire, as a son who acts petulantly before his father and he grants his desires. He says to him, Father, take me to bathe in warm water, wash me in cold water, give me nuts, almonds, peaches, and pomegranates, and he gives them unto him. Of you Scripture says, *Let your father and your mother be glad, and let she that bore you rejoice.* (PROVERBS 23:25)

The Sanhedrin sent Honi the Circle-Drawer an interpretation of the following verse, *You will decree and it will be fulfilled, and light will shine upon your affairs.* (JOB 22:28) ‘*You will decree*’ — You [Honi] have decreed [on earth] below and the Holy One, Blessed be He, fulfills your word [in heaven] above. ‘*And light will shine upon your affairs*’ — You have illumined with your prayer a generation in darkness. (B. TA’ANIT 23a)

Part of Honi’s inability to comprehend the preparatory exilic state is that he is beyond it. In exile the Divine is mostly hidden and so we do not see our prayers immediately answered. But for Honi, there is immediate gratification. For him God is not in hiding, He is revealed to Honi and close to him like a parent. Honi is not bound by the limitations of the veiled physical universe. Though this Divine awareness is the source of his greatness, it also prevents him from relating to its opposite, exile — our people’s exile, its value and necessity. Honi’s despair in the face of exile/planting/dreaming results from his inability to fathom, and therefore experience, distance from the Divine.

One of Honi’s special qualities, according to the rabbis in the Talmud, was that his prayers illumined the darkness of his generation. Honi is able to connect people, even other rabbis, directly to the Divine, “as a son...before his father.” Indeed this theme of light continues as the Rabbis remarked, “It is as clear (lit., bright or lighted) to us as when Honi the Circle-Drawer was alive.”

What was it about Honi, so different from his rabbinic colleagues, that allowed him to relate directly to the Divine? Perhaps it was his other unique characteristic that we see in the story: his childlike quality. Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach wonders, “But what shall I do to you who acts petulantly before the Omnipresent and He grants your desire, as a son who acts petulantly before his father and he grants his desires; thus he says to him, Father, take me to bathe in warm water, wash me in cold water, give me nuts, almonds, peaches, and pomegranates and he gives them unto him.”

Honi even refers to *himself* as a child: “He exclaimed, Master of the Universe, Your children have turned to me in that I am like a son/child in Your household.” Honi’s circle drawing and insistence that God answer him immediately are also childlike actions. There is no formality between Honi and God since he is “like a son before the Divine.”

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Perhaps because Honi approaches God as his parent,  
God treats him, in return, like His child.

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Honi demands rain and is answered, but God sends the wrong kind of rain. Honi asks a second time and once again God sends the wrong rain until at last Honi is specific. It is almost as if God is playing a game with Honi. He cannot refuse him, His son, so he plays a little game to remind Honi who is who. Perhaps because Honi approaches God as his parent (and not as his King), God treats him, in return, like His child.

But if Honi, who is like a child to the Divine, has God’s ear, why doesn’t God answer Honi when he prays? What is it about Honi’s seemingly childish circle sitting that impels an omnipotent God to give in to his people more so than prayer? Surely God does not feel ‘forced’ by Honi’s tantrum-like behavior?

I think the answer is that adult prayer has its limitations. It is more of a level-headed conversation with God, a formal beseeching, often in community. Honi’s uniqueness is manifest in his intimate child-parent relationship with God. Strangely Honi is closest to God and God hears him most clearly not when he prays, but when he draws a circle and insists that he is not leaving until God does what he wants.

Honi’s actions are a different way of relating to God, like a child’s immediate insistence. His strange circle drawing is only appropriate to, and possible in, a context of the child-parent relationship, one in which no introduction or formal dialogue is required. Ironically perhaps, demands are sometimes the language of love in that they suggest preconditions of intimate familiarity and devotion.

## The Big Picture of Exile

Exile is akin to a state of suspended animation, a state of being that is less than real, less than perfect. In a sense, the defining point of exile is that it looks ahead to a different time, a more redeemed time. That is what makes it exile. The redemptive state is the state that needs for naught, that requires no referent. In redemption one has reached the goal. But exile is the state of wanting, of constant desire.

When dreaming in exile one does not dream of what is but of an other time, of what is yet to be. Dreaming harbors unlimited potential which reality does not. I can dream of what might be, of the way things ought to be. It is the act of dreaming that brings the possibility of a greater future into consciousness. In some sense, then, exile is also greater than redemption. For only in exile may one dream of redemption.

The child in Honi says that perfection must be right now! How is it possible for a whole people to live in a state of exile for seventy years, only dreaming? How can they keep the dream alive for seventy years? Who wants to live in a state of desire for something else? Wouldn't it be better to skip directly to redemption?

Honi's answer comes specifically from someone the Talmud calls a *gavra* — a mature man — because Honi's inability to see emerges from his state of childlikeness. It is a great irony that Honi's childlikeness lets him see through the veils which hide the Divine, but it also prevents him from seeing what grownups can see — the long term. It prevents him from finding the value in that which is not perfect. It inhibits him from appreciating exile for what it can offer in the present.

The child lives in a state of redemption, the adult in a state of exile. The exile of adulthood is an exile from many things — the primordial garden, one's youth, life eternal, purity and sinlessness — and an exile from always having what one wants (direct access to the redemptive/to the parent/to God). Honi cannot bear this, and so he cannot clearly see the value which comes with the sacrifice of being separated from God, from being grownup. But grow up we must. It is the way God made the world since the sin of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Children grow, peoples are exiled, and all must ultimately return to the dust from which we came.

Superficially at least, Honi's demise is sad and without purpose. But upon deeper examination his protest against exile, for which he sacrifices his very life, is an inevitable outcome of that which makes him great. In the end, Honi's ability to demand and produce rain when no one else could helps to quench the thirst of a despondent people.



# The Death of Honi the Circle Maker

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## Abstract

Ancient literature preserves two accounts of the death of Honi the Circle Maker. One is in Josephus, where Honi is murdered by Jews after failing to participate in the Hasmonean civil war; the other is found in B. Ta. 23a, where Honi prays for death when nobody recognizes him after he awakes from sleeping for seventy years. While these two accounts seem to have no relation to each other, upon comparing the Bavli story to other tales of saintly long sleepers it appears that the Bavli story is a negative twist on the classic plot. The Bavli story is now understood as an aggadic version of the Josephus story, in the same category as the Bar Kamtza story and other similar explanatory narratives meant to highlight the reasons for tragedies in Jewish history.

Honi the Circle Maker (*Honi haMeagel*) is a well known figure in Jewish folklore. He is named after an episode recounted in M. Ta. 3:8,<sup>1</sup> where during a severe drought he drew a circle and, placing himself within it, prayed: "Creator of the Universe! Thy children have always looked up to me as being like a son of Thy house before Thee. I swear, therefore, by Thy Great Name, that I will not move from this place until Thou wilt have compassion on Thy children." It began raining lightly, and Honi prayed for a strong rain. When the rain was too

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<sup>1</sup> For this derivation, see Rashi, B. Men. 94b, *d'agil*; Emil Schurer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2014), p. 235, n. 6. There is an alternative approach, that he is named after a place; see Herschell Filipowski, ed., Abraham Zacuto, *Sefer Yuchsin haShalem* (London: Chevrat Meorerei Yeshenim, 1858), p. 63.

forceful, Honi prayed for rain of blessing. Subsequently, due to flooding, he had to pray for the rain to stop. Additional details appear in the versions at B. Ta. 23a and Y. Ta. 3:9, but the story is fundamentally the same.<sup>2</sup>

There are two accounts of the death of Honi the Circle Maker.<sup>3</sup> The earlier version is found in Josephus (*Antiquities* 14:2:1) and takes place during the struggle for power between Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II, sons of the Hasmonean Queen Alexandra Salome:

The followers of Hyrcanus laid siege to the Temple, where Aristobulus had fled, and sought assistance from Honi: Now there was a certain Honi (called Onias in Josephus), who, being a righteous man and dear to God, had once in a rainless period prayed to God to end the drought and God heard his prayer and sent rain.<sup>4</sup> This man hid himself when he saw that the civil war continued to rage, but he was taken to the camp of the Jews and was asked to place a curse on Aristobulus and his fellow rebels, just as he had by his prayers put an end to the rainless period. But when in spite of his refusals and excuses he was forced to speak by the mob, he stood up in their midst and said, "O God, King of the Universe, since these men standing beside me are Thy people, and those who are besieged are Thy priests, I beseech Thee not to hearken to them against these men nor to bring to pass what these men ask Thee to do to those others." And when he had prayed in this manner, the villains among the Jews who stood round him stoned him to death.<sup>5</sup>

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2 Jacob Neusner, *The Rabbinic Traditions about the Pharisees before 70* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), p. 177.

3 The early discussion of these two versions appears in Joseph Derenbourg, *Essai sur l'histoire et la géographie de la Palestine* (Paris: 1867), pp. 112–113.

4 For a discussion of the parallels between this episode in Josephus and the Honi story in M. Ta. 3:8, see Otto Betz, "The Death of Choni-Onias in Light of the Temple Scroll from Qumran," in A. Oppenheimer, ed., *Jerusalem in the Second Temple Period: Abraham Schalit Memorial Volume* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 1980), pp. 86–89 (Hebrew).

5 Ralph Marcus, trans., Josephus, *Antiquities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), vol. 14, pp. 13–15. The version found in the medieval Jewish historical work *Josippon*, based on Josephus, accepts this story of the death of Honi over the one found in the Talmud. See David Flusser, *The Josippon* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1981), vol. 1, pp. 148–149, and the discussion in vol. 2, p. 113. On the various editions of *Josippon*, see A.M. Haberman, "Sefer Josippon and Its New Edition," in *Sinai* 85, 1978, pp. 172–184 (Hebrew).

A later account<sup>6</sup> is found in B. Ta. 23a:

R. Yohanan said: This righteous man [Honi] was throughout the whole of his life troubled about the meaning of the verse, “A Song of Ascents, When the Lord brought back those that returned to Zion, we were like unto them that dream” (Ps. 126:1). Is it possible for a man to dream continuously for seventy years? One day he was journeying on the road and he saw a man planting a carob tree; he asked him, “How long does it take [for this tree] to bear fruit?” The man replied: “Seventy years.” He then further asked him: “Are you certain that you will live another seventy years?” The man replied: “I found [ready grown] carob trees in the world; as my forefathers planted these for me so I too plant these for my children.” Honi sat down to have a meal and sleep overcame him. As he slept a rocky formation enclosed upon him which hid him from sight and he continued to sleep for seventy years. When he awoke he saw a man gathering the fruit of the carob tree and he asked him, “Are you the man who planted the tree?” The man replied: “I am his grandson.” Thereupon he exclaimed: “It is clear that I slept for seventy years.” He then caught sight of his ass who had given birth to several generations of mules; and he returned home. He there enquired, “Is the son of Honi the Circle Drawer still alive?” The people answered him, “His son is no more, but his grandson is still living.” Thereupon he said to them: “I am Honi the Circle Drawer,” but no one would believe him. He then repaired to the study hall and there he overheard the scholars say, “The law is as clear to us as in the days of Honi the Circle-Drawer,” for whenever he came to the study hall he would settle for the scholars any difficulty that they had. Whereupon he called out, “I am he;” but the scholars would not believe him nor did they give him the honor due to him. This hurt him greatly and he prayed [for death] and he died. Rava said: “Hence the saying, ‘Either companionship or death.’”<sup>7</sup>

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6 It is not clear exactly when this story originated, but it is clearly between the time of Yohanan (ca. 250) and Rava (ca. 350), who tell and comment on the story. See Neusner, *The Rabbinic Traditions*, p. 182. Regarding the disparate elements of the story and their authorship, see Jeffrey Rubenstein, *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), pp. 63–68.

7 Adapted from the Soncino 1961 translation. The story is also found in *Midrash Tehillim* 126:1. For a discussion of the textual variants, see Henry Malter, *Treatise Ta’anit* (New York: The Academy for Jewish Research, 1930), pp. 98–99; Rubenstein, *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud*, pp. 74–76.

The Josephus story of the death of Honi during the civil war between Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II (64 BCE) is clearly talking about the same Honi as M. Ta. 3:8<sup>8</sup> and fits within the reported timeframe of that episode, which ended with Shimon b. Shetah's speaking to Honi.<sup>9</sup> It is generally understood that there is no parallel to the Josephus version in the rabbinic literature<sup>10</sup> or anywhere else.<sup>11</sup> The two accounts of the death of Honi are understood to be contradictory.<sup>12</sup>

Y. Ta. 3:9 tells of an earlier Honi the Circle Maker, grandfather of the Honi from M. Ta. 3:8, who lived right before the destruction of the First Temple. He fell asleep in a cave for seventy years and woke up once the Second Temple had been built.<sup>13</sup> When he awoke people did not believe who he was until he proved his identity:

8 Otto Betz, "The Death of Choni-Onias," p. 85.

9 Gad Ben-Ami Sarfati, "Chasidim v'Anshei Ma'aseh v'ha-Nevi'im haRishonim," in *Tarbiz*, vol. 26:2 (1956), p. 127. Betz, "The Death of Choni-Onias," p. 86, notes that the Josephus episode took place when Honi was already an old man.

10 Jacob Neusner, *The Rabbinic Traditions about the Pharisees before 70*, p. 177; Betz, "The Death of Choni-Onias," p. 85; Yonah Fraenkel, *Midrash and Agadah* (Tel Aviv: The Open University of Israel, 1993), pp. 351–352 (Hebrew); Federico M. Colautti, *Passover in the Works of Josephus* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), pp. 91–92.

11 Tessel Marina Jonquiere, *Prayer in Josephus* (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2007), p. 200.

12 Attempts were made in later rabbinic literature to resolve the contradictory accounts. In his commentary to B. Ta. 23a, R. Shmuel Eidels (Maharsha, 1555–1631) explains that because Honi disappeared for so long during his extended sleep, a rumor took hold that he was killed during the civil war, and this is what formed the basis of the account in Josephus. It is for this reason that nobody believed Honi when he awoke. See also the resolutions offered in Yechiel Halperin, *Seder haDorot* (Warsaw: 1882), vol. 2, p. 148, n. 1; Aharon Heiman, *Toldot Tanaim v'Amoraim* (Jerusalem: Machon Pri haAretz, 1987), vol. 1, pp. 412–413.

13 This story is also found in *Midrash Tehillim* 126:2, right after the Bavli Honi sleeping story. It is not entirely clear whether the Honi who falls asleep in the JT story is meant to be understood as the same Honi as in M. Ta. 3:8 (and thus a different version of the Bavli when he fell asleep), or as his grandfather (who fell asleep for seventy years as his grandson would later do as well). In terms of the time in history when the Honi from the M. Ta. 3:8 lived, it is more reasonable to understand that the Yerushalmi is talking about his ancestor. See Gad Ben-Ami Sarfati, "Chasidim v'Anshei Ma'aseh v'ha-Nevi'im haRishonim," p. 127; Shulamis Frieman, *Who's Who in the Talmud* (Northvale: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1995), p. 122. For traditional rabbinic approaches to working out the contradictions between the Bavli and Yerushalmi Honi stories and known history, see Yechiel Halperin, *Seder haDorot* (Warsaw: 1882), vol. 2, p. 148, n. 1; Aharon Heiman, *Toldot Tanaim v'Amoraim* (Jerusalem: Machon Pri haAretz, 1987), vol. 1, pp. 412–413.

Said R. Yudan Gira: This is Honi the Circle Maker [of M. Ta. 3:9], the grandson of Honi the Circle Maker. Near the time of the destruction of the Temple, he went out to a mountain to his workers. Before he got there, it rained. He went into a cave. Once he sat down there he fell asleep. He remained sound asleep for seventy years, until the Temple was destroyed and it was rebuilt a second time. At the end of the seventy years he awoke from his sleep. He went out of the cave, and he saw a world completely changed. An area that had been planted with vineyards now produced olives, and an area planted with olives now produced grain. He asked the people of the district, "What do you hear in the world?" They said to him, "And don't you know what the news is?" He said to them, "No." They said to him, "Who are you?" He said to them, "Honi the Circle Maker." They said to him, "We heard that when he would go into the Temple courtyard, it would be illuminated." He went in and illuminated the place and recited the following verse of Scripture, "When the Lord restored the fortune of Zion, we were like those who dream" (Ps. 126:1).<sup>14</sup>

This story has many elements in common with the Talmudic story: a protagonist named Honi, the same verse from Psalms, a seventy year sleep, the pastoral setting, and questioning the sleeper's identity. This suggests that the Babylonian Talmud presented a reworking of a Palestinian tradition.<sup>15</sup> There are a number of differences between the Bavli's and Yerushalmi's narratives, for example, the emphasis on the *beit midrash* and study in the Bavli and emphasis on the Temple in the Yerushalmi,<sup>16</sup> but, even more significantly, the tragic ending in the Bavli, where Honi dies alone and unrecognized, and the happy ending in Yerushalmi, where Honi sees the Temple, illuminates it, and is recognized for who he is. If we compare these two Honi long sleep stories to other stories of this genre, it emerges that the Yerushalmi version follows the classic resolution of the story, and the Bavli's version radically diverges from it.

In the Pseudepigrapha, in 4 Baruch, we find a story of Abimelech the Ethiopian servant, who sleeps for sixty six years.<sup>17</sup> There Jeremiah prays that

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14 Adapted from Jacob Neusner, ed., *The Talmud of the Land of Israel, vol. 18: Besah and Taanit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 226.

15 Rubenstein, *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud*, p. 68.

16 *Ibid.*, pp. 69–70.

17 Regarding the authorship of 4 Baruch, and the date of its composition, see Herzer, *4 Baruch*, pp. xxx–xxxv. He concludes that it "was originally the work of a Jewish author that was given an additional ending by Christian circles." See also Pieter W. van der Horst, "Pious Long-Sleepers in Greek, Jewish, and Christian Antiquity," in his *Studies in Ancient*

Abimelech be spared seeing the destruction of Jerusalem (4 Bar. 3:13), because he had earlier saved Jeremiah's life (Jer. 38:4–13). After awakening and praying to God, Abimelech was brought by an angel to Baruch who recognized him and was happy to see him (4 Bar. 6:1–6). This story in 4 Baruch has many literary parallels with the Honi sleeping story.<sup>18</sup>

Another example of this motif is the story of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus,<sup>19</sup> who fall asleep in a cave during the persecution of Christians under the Roman emperor Decius and awake almost four centuries later to find that Christianity has become the official religion of the Roman Empire.<sup>20</sup> They were awakened by God to help the Christians of that time, “to confirm their faith in the resurrection of the dead.”<sup>21</sup> They were ultimately recognized through the ancient coins that they tried to use to buy food.

In these stories, the character sleeps through the troubled times and awakens to discover that the “terrible dream has passed.”<sup>22</sup> The Islamic version of the Seven Sleepers, the “Companions of the Cave,” contains the same elements of sleeping through a time of paganism and religious persecution to awaken when that time is over.<sup>23</sup> This story is also ultimately based on 4 Baruch and contains many parallels to it.<sup>24</sup>

The Koran (Sura 2:259), in another narrative containing many parallels to the story of Abimelech in 4 Baruch, tells of Ezra's sleeping for a hundred years.<sup>25</sup> In this story, Ezra falls asleep in a time when “the people had long been lost,” and he is awakened by an angel a century later, after “there had been

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*Judaism and Early Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 259–260; S.E. Robinson, “4 Baruch,” in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), vol. 2, p. 414.

18 Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), vol. 2, p. 1091, n. 58; Gad Ben-Ami Sarfati, “Chasidim v'Anshei Ma'aseh v'ha-Nevi'im haRishonim,” pp. 152–153.

19 See the full study in Bernard Heller, “Éléments, parallèles et origines de la légende des sept dormants,” pp. 190–218. For the date of composition, see the overview in Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'an and Its Biblical Subtext* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 181, n. 628.

20 For the different versions of this story, see Robert Thomas Hampson, *Medii ævi Kalendarium: or Dates, Charters, and Customs of the Middle Age* (London: Henry Kent Causton and Co., 1841), vol. 2, pp. 353–354.

21 W.G. Ryan, Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 401–403.

22 Jens Herzer, *4 Baruch*, p. xv.

23 Reynolds, *The Qur'an and Its Biblical Subtext*, p. 167–178.

24 Jens Herzer, *4 Baruch*, p. 89, n. 37.

25 J. Rendel Harris, *The Rest of the Words of Baruch* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1889), pp. 41–42.

changes in Israelite affairs.” Ezra’s long sleep demonstrates that God revives the dead. As with the long sleepers in the other stories, Ezra returns home and proves his identity by performing a miracle.<sup>26</sup>

The archetype for all of these stories<sup>27</sup> is the Greek legend of the long sleep of Epimenides, recorded by Diogenes Laertius in the early third-century BCE:<sup>28</sup>

He once, when he was sent by his father into the fields to look for a sheep, turned out of the road at mid-day and lay down in a certain cave and fell asleep and slept there fifty-seven years; and after that, when he awoke, he went on looking for the sheep, thinking that he had been taking a short nap; but as he could not find it he went on to the field and there he found everything changed, and the estate in another person’s possession, and so he came back again to the city in great perplexity, and as he was going into his own house he met some people who asked him who he was, until at last he found his younger brother who had now become an old man, and from him he learnt all the truth. And when he was recognized he was considered by the Greeks as a person especially beloved by the gods, on which account when the Athenians were afflicted by a plague, and the priestess at Delphi enjoined them to purify their city, they sent a ship and Nicias the son of Niceratus to Crete to invite Epimenides to Athens; and he, coming there in the forty-sixth Olympiad, purified the city and eradicated the plague for that time.... And the Athenians passed a vote to give him a talent and a ship to convey him back to Crete, but he would not

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26 Ismail ibn Umar ibn Kathir, *Stories of the Prophets* (Saudi Arabia: 2015), pp. 133–134. See the discussion in Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds: Medieval Islam and Biblical Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 57, n. 25.

27 William Hansen, *Ariadne’s Thread: A Guide to International Tales Found in Classical Literature* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 398. Even before the story of Epimenides, Aristotle in *Physics* IV (218b23) mentions the fabled Sleepers of Sardinia, but these are understood to be heroes who died in Sardinia, and after death their bodies did not corrupt, giving the appearance of sleep. See Sam Broadie, trans., Philoponus, *On Aristotle Physics 4.10–14* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), p. 17; Carolyn Dinshaw, *How Soon Is Now? Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), pp. 8–9.

28 For other versions of the Epimenides story and a discussion of when the tale originated, see Pieter W. van der Horst, “Pious Long-Sleepers in Greek, Jewish, and Christian Antiquity,” in his *Studies in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), p. 251.

accept the money, but made a treaty of friendship and alliance between the Gnostians and Athenians.<sup>29</sup>

As in all later versions except for the Bavli Honi story, Epimenides was ultimately recognized for who he really was, and while this story does not have Epimenides sleeping through a period of disaster or tragedy, the long sleep has positive results for Epimenides, being “considered by the Greeks as a person especially beloved by the gods.” As in the later versions of this story, “the long sleep is regarded as a divine gift, as a sign of favor on the part of heaven.”<sup>30</sup>

Even the well known story of Rip van Winkle follows this pattern;<sup>31</sup> his long sleep enables him to avoid the Revolutionary War and wake up once the colonies have gained their independence. His long sleep also allows him to escape his wife’s nagging.<sup>32</sup> He too was recognized, by his now adult daughter.

The Honi stories are ultimately based on the legend of Epimenides, providing “evidence for knowledge of Greek classical traditions and their reuse in Jewish circles.”<sup>33</sup> The Epimenides story provided the folkloric motif that the rabbis attached to Honi,<sup>34</sup> which was used also in the story of Abimelech and from there made its way into the Christian legend of the Seven Sleepers and later to Islamic versions.<sup>35</sup> Even some rabbinic writers recognized that the Honi story was not intended to be understood literally.<sup>36</sup>

While all these tales stem from one basic motif, the Bavli Honi story is the only one that has a sad ending: nobody recognizes Honi and he prays for death. All the other stories have the sleeping character ultimately recognized and accepted by others,<sup>37</sup> as was Epimenides in the archetypal legend. Even Ezra,

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29 Diogenes Laertius, transl. C.D. Yonge, *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* (London: Henry Bohn, 1853), 1.109, pp. 50–51.

30 van der Horst, “Pious Long-Sleepers in Greek, Jewish, and Christian Antiquity,” p. 255.

31 For the literary connection between Rip van Winkle and the story of Epimenides, see Marvin L. Colker, “A Medieval Rip van Winkle Story,” in *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 76, no. 300 (April–June, 1963), pp. 131–133.

32 See the discussion in John Limon, *Writing after the War: American War Fiction from Realism to Postmodernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 9–10.

33 Herzer, *4 Baruch*, p. 88.

34 Gad Ben-Ami Sarfati, “Chasidim v’Anshei Ma’aseh v’ha-Nevi’im haRishonim,” pp. 151. He charts the points of comparison and differentiation on pp. 152–153.

35 Jens Herzer, *4 Baruch*, p. 90.

36 See for example, Herschell Filipowski, ed., Abraham Zacuto, *Sefer Yuchsin haShalem* (London: Chevrat Meorerei Yeshenim, 1858), p. 16.

37 Note that in *4 Baruch* 6:1–2, the angel came in response to the prayer of Abimelech, as opposed to the prayer of Honi that brought death.

who is portrayed in the Koran in a negative light and is caused to sleep by God because he questioned God's ability to revive the dead,<sup>38</sup> ultimately is recognized by others and lives on with a positive resolution to his story. Only in the Honi story does the sleeper die at the end. Even more jarring, in all the other stories, the sleeping character was spared witnessing a great calamity or time of trouble, and so the long sleep is seen as a divine blessing. In 4 Baruch the sleep even comes as the response of God to the prayer of Jeremiah. Yet, in the Bavli Honi narrative, the long sleep does not save Honi from any negative events and at the end actually leads to his death. In all the other stories, sleep preserves life; only in the Bavli Honi story, it leads to death.<sup>39</sup> It is for this reason that scholars assume that the Yerushalmi Honi story preceded the Bavli version, since it adheres more closely to the earlier source material.<sup>40</sup>

Up until the end of the story, there is no departure from the classic paradigm. It is only when Honi returns home and goes to the study hall, where in the archetypal story he would in some fashion be recognized, that the account varies from the standard happy resolution. Scholars have understood that this part of the narrative "appears to be a Stammaitic supplement that shifts again the thrust of the earlier tradition" and reflects Stammaitic concerns.<sup>41</sup> However, since without this addition the story is missing an ending and important plot element—the return home/recognition—it is reasonable to understand that the ending cannot completely be a later creation; it was, at least in some form, part of the original Bavli version of this story. By having a radically different ending than the expected long sleep story, the Bavli Honi story is structured as a negative twist on the other, fundamentally positive, familiar folkloric motif

38 Lisbeth S. Fried, *Ezra and the Law in History and Tradition* (Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 2014), p. 129.

39 Jens Herzer, *4 Baruch*, pp. 86–87. In the later Swiss folktale of Pror Evo, he crumbles to dust when he realizes that he slept for 308 years, but even there it is only after he was recognized. See Max Luthi, *Once upon a Time: On the Nature of Fairy Tales* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 44; William Hansen, *Ariadne's Thread: A Guide to International Tales Found in Classical Literature* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2002), pp. 397–398.

40 Gad Ben-Ami Sarfati, "Chasidim v'Anshei Ma'aseh v'ha-Nevi'im haRishonim," pp. 151. See the discussion in Bernard Heller, "Éléments, parallèles et origines de la légende des sept dormants," in *Revue des Études Juives* vol. 49 (1904), pp. 206–207; Michael Huber, *Die Wanderlegende von den Siebenschläfern. Eine literarische Untersuchung* (Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1910) 418–422; Jens Herzer, *4 Baruch*, p 84, understands that the Honi legend emerged by "the middle of the first century."

41 Rubenstein, *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud*, p. 65. The Stammaitic concerns revolve around the importance of the beit midrash and scholarship.

of a person sleeping through troubled times to awaken in a different era and ultimately be recognized and accepted. The Bavli Honi story should then be seen as an intentional twist on a classic paradigm. Today most readers of B. Ta. 23a are unfamiliar with the other versions of the long sleep stories and so do not recognize that it is an intentional subversion of the classic plot.

Why create a jarring and negative version of the long sleep story and attribute it to Honi? It would seem that the tale is in fact an aggadic retelling of the more historical account of the death of Honi as found in Josephus.<sup>42</sup>

Yohanan is mentioned hundreds of times in the Talmud. Attributed to him are many stories and statements regarding tragic historical events from the Second Temple period. Yohanan makes the famous statement, “The destruction of Jerusalem came through a Kamza and a Bar Kamza; the destruction of Tur Malka came through a cock and a hen; the destruction of Betar came through the shaft of a litter” (B. Git. 55b) and proceeds to tell stories of particular episodes that led to destruction in Roman times. He also relates that Jerusalem was destroyed “because they based their judgments [strictly] upon biblical law and did not go beyond the requirements of the law” (B. B.M. 30b).

The stories attributed to Yohanan recounting episodes that led to destruction are meant to convey the lessons to be learned from these tragedies. The story of Bar Kamza uses a case of personal animosity to teach that “political factionalism caused the destruction of Jerusalem.”<sup>43</sup> The destruction of Tur Malka and Beitar both involve Roman ignorance and disregard towards Jewish customs and the Jews’ misunderstanding the intentions of the Romans. The lesson here seems to be that “the key to avoiding war is knowledge and appreciation of the culture of the other” and “trivial matters snowball into serious violence.”<sup>44</sup>

The Bavli Honi story should be seen as part of this genre of aggadic explanatory stories attributed to Yohanan, an aggadic retelling of the more historical

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42 That the Josephus account is the starting point for the Talmudic legend was noted by Bernard Heller, “Éléments, parallèles et origines de la légende des sept dormants,” p. 206. Regarding parallels between stories in Josephus and the Babylonian Talmud, see the overview in Tal Ilan and Vered Noam, “Remnants of a Phariasic Apologetic Source in Josephus and in the Babylonian Talmud,” in *Tradition, Transmission, and Transformation from the Second Temple Literature through Judaism and Christianity in Late Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 112–116.

43 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Heavenly Torah: As Refracted through the Generations* (New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2006), p. 389.

44 Jeffery Rubenstein, *Rabbinic Stories* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2002), p. 50. See also Eli Yassaf, *The Hebrew Folktale: History, Genre, Meaning* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 134.

account of the death of Honi in Josephus. The Josephus account already contains one plot element from the long sleeper stories, Honi “hid himself when he saw that the civil war continued to rage.”<sup>45</sup> This parallels the sleeper’s being hidden from view as he sleeps through the period of crisis. In Epimenides, Yerushalmi Honi, and later the Seven Sleepers, this is always a cave. Seeing as the Bavli Honi story is understood to be a reworking of the Yerushalmi story, we now can understand that the author of the Bavli version, noting parallel elements in the historical version, created an ironic play on the Yerushalmi Honi story. In Josephus Honi hides but cannot avoid death, leading to the Bavli version where Honi sleeps for a long time only to die.

More significantly, the lesson of both the Bavli and Josephus accounts is the same. In Josephus, Honi tries in vain to avoid the raging civil war, and in his prayer asks God not to aid either side, effectively asking for the conflict to end. The Jews refuse to accept this and murder Honi. This is paralleled in the Talmudic account by the concluding statement of Rava, emphasizing the moral of the story, “Either companionship or death.” In recounting Pompey’s conquest of Israel as a result of the power struggle between Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II, Josephus writes of the Jewish casualties, “The greatest part of them were slain by their own countrymen of the adverse faction.”<sup>46</sup> It was the civil war between the Hasmonean brothers that brought in Pompey and Roman rule in Israel, ending the Hasmonean dynasty. The companionship Rava notes in the legendary account in Bavli is not meant to refer to Honi personally, but to the Jewish People as a whole, just as the animosity between the host and guest in the Bar Kamza story represents the rampant factionalism throughout the nation.

Once the thematic connection between the accounts is understood, another layer of meaning in the Bavli Honi story emerges. The murder of Honi precedes the Roman takeover of Israel and end of the Hasmonean era. Thus, in the story about Honi sleeping, rather than sleeping through the bad times and awakening in a happier era when the problems have been resolved, Honi never gets to see the positive new era. The Bavli account frames the story as

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45 The element of hiding would also figure in Hanan haNichbeh (the Hidden), grandson of Honi, in B. Ta. 23b. On the theme of being hidden, see Robert Eisenman, *Maccabees, Zadokites, Christians, and Qumran* (Nashville: Grave Distractions Publications, 2013), p. 31, n. 82. In *Josippon*, it is explicit that Honi hid himself because he was righteous and would not get involved in a civil war. See Flusser, *The Josippon*, vol. 1, pp. 148–149, and the discussion in vol. 2, p. 113.

46 William Whiston, trans., Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews* (New York: Digireads Publishing, 2010), 1:7:6, p. 20.

a reversal of the standard tale; here the promise created by Hasmonean rule proves to have dissolved into a dream that has passed. There is no positive resolution. Instead of “A Song of Ascents, when the Lord brought back those that returned to Zion, we were like unto them that dream” (Ps. 126:1) referring to a bad dream that the Jews awaken from, as in the Yerushalmi Honi story, here the Hasmonean dynasty is a dream that ends in catastrophe for the Jewish people. A similar idea was already noted in the sixteenth century by R. Moshe ben Yitzchak of Bisenz, in his work *Derash Moshe* on the aggadic portions of the Talmud. He writes that since Honi lived at the time of the conflict between Hyrcanus and Aristobulus, when the story tells of Honi’s wondering about the interpretation of Ps. 126:1, it is an expression of the wonder that the Jews have learned nothing from the destruction of the First Temple and Babylonian Exile and continue their infighting and rebellion against God, the lessons of the past appearing to them as a dream.<sup>47</sup>

The seventy year duration of sleep is also used in the Bavli account in an ironic way. Whereas in the Jerusalem Talmud it represents the time between the Temples that the ancestor of Honi slept through, if we count seventy years back from the conquering of Jerusalem by the Romans under Pompey in 63 BCE as a result of the conflict between Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II, we arrive at the beginning of the rule of John Hyrcanus, the beginning of the second generation of Hasmonean kings. John Hyrcanus subdued Samaria and Idumea and incorporated them into his kingdom, destroyed the Samaritan temple at Mount Gerizim, and generally was seen as restoring the Israelite kingdom to its biblical heyday.<sup>48</sup> Understanding that the Babylonian Talmud accepted the historical fact that Honi was killed during the civil war, in the tale Honi goes to sleep just as the Hasmonean kingdom was beginning its time of growth and expansion, to wake up for its dissolution.

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47 Moshe ben Yitzchak of Bisenz, *Derash Moshe* (Cracow, 1595), p. 43a, ma’amar 125. This explanation is quoted in the classic collection of commentary on the aggadic portions of the Talmud, *Ein Ya’akov*, in the “Chidushei Geonim” section. On this work, see Avraham Eisen, “The Composition “Derash Moshe” by R. Moshe of Bisenz and its Place in the Interpretation of Talmudic Aggadah in the Ashkenazi-Polish Milieu in the Sixteenth Century,” thesis submitted to Ben Gurion University, May, 2010. See also Bernard Dov Cooperman, ed., *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century* (Harvard: Harvard University Center for Jewish Studies, 1984), p. 160, n. 5.

48 Menahem Stern, “The Period of the Second Temple,” in H.H. Ben-Sasson, ed., *A History of the Jewish People* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1969), p. 219.

Although there was not wholesale rabbinic criticism of the Hasmoneans,<sup>49</sup> the dispute between Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II, which led to Roman intervention, was viewed negatively and along with “the internal decline and decadence of the Hasmonean dynasty” ultimately “led some Jews to believe that the Hasmoneans were no longer worthy of the crown and only a Davidic king was acceptable.”<sup>50</sup> The pseudepigraphic “Psalms of Solomon,” understood to have been composed about a generation after I Maccabees, considered “the subsequent Roman domination of Judea to be nothing but a recent variation on the punishment God had earlier visited on the sinners of the First Commonwealth.”<sup>51</sup> Josephus (*Antiquities* 14:3:2) specifically notes that as a result of the conflict between the Hasmonean brothers, Pompey was asked by the Jews not to be ruled by kings but only by priests.<sup>52</sup>

The Honi story in Josephus has two important biblical parallels. He is approached to curse Jews, similar to Balaam. Yet while Balaam accepted the job, Honi righteously refused to do so.<sup>53</sup> More ominously, the story parallels the murder of the prophet Zechariah:<sup>54</sup>

Then the spirit of God enveloped Zechariah son of Jehoida the priest; he stood above the people and said to them, “Thus God said: Why do you transgress the commandments of the Lord when you cannot succeed? Since you have forsaken the Lord, He has forsaken you.” They conspired against him and pelted him with stones in the court of the House of the Lord by order of the king (2 Chron. 24:20–21).<sup>55</sup>

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49 Gedalyahu Alon, “Did the Jewish People and Its Sages Cause the Hasmoneans to Be Forgotten?” in *Jews, Judaism and the Classical World* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1977), pp. 1–17.

50 Eyal Regev, *The Hasmoneans: Ideology, Archaeology, Identity* (Bristol: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), pp. 164–165.

51 Stuart Cohen, *The Three Crowns: Structures of Communal Politics in Early Rabbinic Jewry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 92. See also Regev, *The Hasmoneans*, p. 96.

52 Stuart Cohen, *The Three Crowns*, p. 104.

53 See Federico M. Colautti, *Passover in the Works of Josephus* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), p. 92. The story of Honi’s praying for rain has also been compared to the Balaam episode. See Jacob Neusner, *First Century Judaism in Crisis* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1975), p. 215.

54 On the connection between Honi and other wonder workers and prophets, see Gad Ben-Ami Sarfati, “Chasidim v’Anshei Ma’aseh v’ha-Nevi’im haRishonim,” pp. 144–148.

55 Alluded to in the NT in Matthew 23:35 and Luke 11:50–51.

There a prophet of the Lord is stoned to death by the Israelites when rebuking them, identical to the fate of Honi when he spoke out against the civil war. In rabbinic literature the murder of Zechariah was understood to have led up to the destruction of the First Temple. B. Git. 57b relates that when Nebuzaradan entered the area of the Temple,

He noticed the blood of Zechariah bubbling up warm and asked what it was. They said: It is the blood of the sacrifices that have been poured there. He had some blood brought, but it was different from the other. He then said to them: If you tell me [the truth], well and good, but if not, I will tear your flesh with combs of iron. They said: What can we say to you? There was a prophet among us who used to reprove us for our irreligion, and we rose up against him and killed him, and for many years his blood has not rested. He said to them: I will appease him. He brought the great Sanhedrin and the small Sanhedrin and killed them over him, but the blood did not cease. He then slaughtered young men and women, but the blood did not cease. He brought school-children and slaughtered them over it, but the blood did not cease. So he said, "Zechariah, Zechariah. I have slain the best of them; do you want me to destroy them all?" When he said this to him, it stopped.<sup>56</sup>

The aspect of blood is emphasized in the version of the Josephus account recorded in the medieval Jewish historical work *Josippon*, where the plague that comes after Honi is murdered is said to have been sent by God "on account of the blood of Honi."<sup>57</sup> Taking the Talmudic understanding of the retribution for the murder of Zechariah into account, the murder of Honi can be understood to have resulted in the destruction that followed at the hands of the Romans.

Although Honi was a righteous figure and beloved miracle worker, he was criticized by Simeon ben Shetah, who said his method of demanding rain from God was demanding and inappropriate.<sup>58</sup> Part of the expanded critical statement of Simeon ben Shetah in B. Ta. 23a is that Honi is overstepping his bounds by demanding the Key of Rain, something only entrusted to Elijah the Prophet. In B. Ta. 2a, Yohanan states, "Three keys the Holy One blessed be He has retained in His own hands and not entrusted to the hand of any messenger,

<sup>56</sup> Similarly in B. San. 96b, *Lamentations Rabbah* 4:13.

<sup>57</sup> Flusser, *The Josippon*, vol. 1 pp. 149.

<sup>58</sup> B. Ta. 19a, 23a. For a discussion of this criticism, see Anson Laytner, *Arguing with God: A Jewish Tradition* (Hoboken: Jason Aronson, 1998), pp. 95–97.

namely, the Key of Rain, the Key of Childbirth, and the Key of the Revival of the Dead.” Based on this Yohanan can be understood as sharing Simeon ben Shetah’s criticism of Honi, who overstepped his bounds to take control of the Key of Rain. The story of Honi’s death, as told by Yohanan, can be seen as a criticism as well.<sup>59</sup> In this light, Honi in this story also functions as the overly righteous figure who helps bring about disaster, an idea found in another story of Yohanan.<sup>60</sup> At the end of Yohanan’s story of Bar Kamtza and the destruction of the Second Temple in B. Git. 56a, we find:

He [Bar Kamtza] went and said to the Emperor, “The Jews are rebelling against you.” He said, “How can I tell?” He said to him: “Send them an offering and see whether they will offer it [on the altar].” So he sent with him a fine calf. While on the way he made a blemish on its upper lip, or as some say on the white of its eye, in a place where we [Jews] count it a blemish but they do not. The Rabbis were inclined to offer it in order not to offend the government. Said R. Zechariah b. Abkulas to them: “People will say that blemished animals are offered on the altar.” They then proposed to kill Bar Kamza so that he should not go and inform against them, but R. Zechariah b. Avkulas said to them, “Is one who makes a blemish on consecrated animals to be put to death?” R. Yohanan thereupon remarked: “Through the scrupulousness of R. Zechariah b. Avkulas our House has been destroyed, our Temple burnt and we ourselves exiled from our land.”

It may well be that Honi’s refusal of any sort of compromise position in the civil war, leading to his murder, was interpreted as an event that led to the Roman takeover. The fact that Honi’s death as a martyr was replaced by Yohanan with a miserable, lonely, and perhaps even selfish death, is itself part of the criticism of Honi.<sup>61</sup>

Although the two accounts of the death of Honi, in Josephus and in B. Taanit, were always understood to be contradictory, the Bavli account can be

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59 Yonah Fraenkel, *The Aggadic Narrative: Harmony of Form and Content* (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meuchad, 2001), pp. 185–189 (Hebrew); Rubenstein, *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud*, p. 67.

60 It may also be implied in Yohanan’s statement that Jerusalem was destroyed “because they based their judgments [strictly] upon Biblical law, and did not go beyond the requirements of the law” (B. B.M. 30b).

61 Aharon Agus, *Binding of Isaac and Messiah: Law, Martyrdom, and Deliverance in Early Rabbinic Religiosity* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 82.

seen as an aggadic narrative using a twist on the folkloric long sleeper motif to frame the historical death of Honi in the Hasmonean era as a lesson regarding the necessity of Jewish unity, much as the Bar Kamtza story provides an aggadic lesson in the context of the cause of the destruction of the Second Temple. Furthermore, in this narrative, Honi is the overly righteous figure whose actions inadvertently lead to more destruction, much as the prophet Zechariah in B. Git. 57b and R. Zechariah ben Avkolos in B. Git. 56a.

We have seen that the Bavli account should not be seen as a typical sleep saga and should instead be placed in conversation with the Josephus account. In two important respects the Bavli departs from the structural pattern of all other Rip Van Winkle-like sleep stories that began with Epimenides and permeated late antique literature: all other such stories have happy endings, and a recurrent theme is that sleep is a blessing that spares the hero from witnessing a calamity. The dark twist is an intentional part of the original Bavli version and is to be understood as part of the genre of stories attributed Yohanan regarding the lessons to be learned from the destruction of the Second Temple.



## Honi the Circle Drawer

Isaiah Ben-Pazi writes:<sup>18</sup>

### 1 Background and State of the Research

The Mishnah describes a miracle ascribed to Honi the Circle Drawer (hereafter: Honi), and the sharp response he received from Simeon son of Shatah (hereafter: SBS). The text of the Mishnah describes a situation that it was in the middle of the winter, and still it had not rained. The Mishnah says:<sup>1</sup>

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1 m. Ta'an. 3:8 and parallel sources that are primarily b. Ta'an. 23a-b, y. Ta'an. 3:8 (66d-67a). The story of Honi is found also in Josephus, *A. J.* 14.22, and in Megillat Ta'anit (Lichtenstein

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<sup>18</sup> Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period , 2017, Vol. 48, No. 4/5 (2017), pp. 551-563

They said to Honi the Circle Drawer: “pray for rain.”

He said to them: “Go and take in the clay ovens used for Passover so that they not soften [in the rain that is coming].”

He prayed but it did not rain.

What did he do?

He drew a circle and stood in the middle of it and said before him, “Lord of the world! Your children have turned to me, because before you I am like a member of the family (*ben bayit*). I swear by your great name—I’m simply not moving from here until you take pity on your children”!

It began to rain drop by drop.

He said: “This is not what I wanted but rain for filling up cisterns, pits and caverns.”

It began to rain violently.

He said: “This is not what I wanted but rains of good will, blessing and graciousness” . . .

Simeon b. Shatah said to him: “If you were not Honi, I should decree a ban of excommunication against you.<sup>2</sup> But what am I going to do to you? For you importune before the Omnipresent, so he does what you want, like a son who importunes his father,<sup>3</sup> so he does what he wants.”<sup>4</sup>

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ed., 92). The current discussion will address primarily the wording of the metaphors in the Mishnah, and only when necessary will relate to the other sources.

2 The text follows the Kaufman manuscript. However, in the Vilna text of the Mishnah, in the Babylonian Talmud, and in the Jerusalem Talmud the reading is “You need to excommunicate” (לנדות), which is a figurative way of expressing that would literally mean that Honi has the ability to excommunicate sbs, but of course it is stating that Honi should be excommunicated. In the Parma MS it says: “You need to be excommunicated,” which is more direct.

3 The Kaufman manuscript reads “*mithateh le’avi*” meaning: “he importunes his father.” Neusner translates the Mishnah as “importune before the Omnipresent”; this reading indicates a difference between the relationship of man and God—man importunes before God while a son importunes his father directly. In Maimonides’s commentary of the Mishnah (Kappah ed.), a Yemenite manuscript (Nahum collection), British Library 5508, Munich MS 95, and in an unknown printing (Pizzaro or Constantinople) it says “like a son who importunes before his father.” This reading uses the same language when referring to God or to man. In the Cambridge manuscript (36), Paris MS 328, Munich 140, and Oxford 366, Leiden manuscript, the Mishnah in the Jerusalem Talmud, Pizzaro printing, and a Spanish printing, it states “like a son who importunes on his father.” In the Mishnah that is printed in the Babylonian Talmud and in the Vatican MS 134 “like a son who importunes לאל his father,” which could mean “next to” his father or “addressing” his father. This reading also differentiates between God and man. In the Napoli printing there is a strange reading, simply: “like a *ben bayit* who importunes his father.”

4 m. Ta’an. 3:8, according to the Kaufman MS. The English translation is based on Neusner, 312-13. For research of various aspects of this narrative see: G. B. Sarfatti, “Pious Men, Men

There is a conflict here between Honi and SBS. The conflict is so sharp that SBS, who was a very influential leader at the time, says to Honi that he deserved to be excommunicated. This is a very severe action to be taken against a religious personality and rarely takes place in rabbinic literature. The Mishnah does not explain the conflict between the two. It does not explain why SBS scolded Honi and did not agree with the way he was conducting his actions.

Various approaches were taken to explain this exchange. Yasif, Urbach, and other commentators saw the conflict as a reflection of tension between the rabbinic elite and the miracle-makers, particularly rain-makers who were closer to the common people.<sup>5</sup> They felt that the public would mistakenly

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of Deeds, and the Early Prophets," *Tarbiz* 26 (1956-1957): 126-48 [Hebrew]; S. Lieberman, "On Adorations among the Jews," *Tarbiz* 27 (1958): 183-89; J. Goldin, "On Honi the Circle Maker—A Demanding Prayer," *HTR* 56 (1963): 233-37; S. Safrai, "The Teaching of the Pietists in Mishnaic Literature," *JJS* 16 (1965): 15-33; A. Büchler, *Types of Jewish Piety from 70 BCE to 70 CE* (New York: Ktav, 1968), 196-264; G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (London: Collins, 1973), 67-69, 210; D. Daube, "L'Enfant Terrible," *HTR* 68 (1975): 371-76. W. S. Green, "Palestinian Holy Men, Charismatic Leadership and Rabbinic Tradition," *ANRW* 2.19:619-47; G. Alon, *The Jews in Their Land in the Talmudic Age*, trans. G. Levi (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1980), 199; M. Hirschman, "Changing Foci of Holiness: Honi and His Grandsons," *Tura* 1 (1989): 109-18 [Hebrew]; A. J. Levine, "Introduction," in *The Historical Jesus in Context*, ed. Levine, D. C. Allison, Jr., and J. D. Crossan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 1-39, esp. 2, 28; A. J. Avery-Peck, "The Galilean Charismatic and Rabbinic Piety: The Holy Man in the Talmudic Literature," in Levine et al., *Historical Jesus*, 149-65; S. L. Stone, "On the Interplay of Rules, 'Cases,' and Concepts in Rabbinic Legal Literature: Another Look at the Aggadot on Honi the Circle Maker," *Dine Israel* 24 (2007): 125-55; Ch. Halberstam, "Encircling the Law: The Legal Boundaries of Rabbinic Judaism," *JSQ* 16 (2009): 396-424; M. Simon-Shoshan, *Stories of the Law: Narrative Discourse and the Construction of Authority in the Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 149-66.

5 A. Yasif comments on this story in the context of other stories of rain-making in rabbinic literature. The phrasing of most of the stories emphasizes the conflict of the rabbinic establishment with the Hasidim. The rabbinic establishment learned Torah and had normative prayers while the Hasidim were more spontaneous in their religious conduct and were able to bring rain even when the rabbinic system of prayer and fast days failed. In the stories about Honi the circle drawer and his grandson Abba Hilkiyah, the miracle they achieved is not the main issue in the story, it is the conflict between the two social groups. See A. Yasif, *The Hebrew Folktale: History, Genre, Meaning* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 116, 243; D. Noy, *Introduction to the Aggadic Literature*, ed. M. Gannan (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press, 1966), 39-51 [Hebrew]; H. Z. Hirschberg, "The Keys of Rains," *Yidi'ot Behakirat Eretz Yisrael Veatiqoteha* 11 (1945): 46-54 [Hebrew]; Z. Kagan, "The Case of Honi: The Path of Mystical Structure to Modern Hebrew Literature," in *Sefer Hayovel Leshimon Halkin Bimlot lo Shivim Vechamesh Shana*, ed. B. Sachvitz and M. Peri (Jerusalem: Reuven Mas, 1975), 489-501 [Hebrew]. According to Kagan this complex structure of adoration of the miracle-maker, and a tragic end, is typical for legends that deal with miracle-makers. See recently: L. Novakovic,

attribute the miracle to the miracle-maker and not to God. The antagonism of the rabbis was sharper when the miracle-maker presented himself boldly and emphasized his contribution to making the miracle. Honi performed with confidence as if he was in charge, and it could seem that the rain was a result of Honi's actions and not God's.<sup>6</sup> Alon identified the circles of Hasidim criticized by SBS with the false prophets mentioned by Josephus that were misleading the people.<sup>7</sup>

The drawback of the above explanations is that they do not derive their interpretation from the text. They attribute the disagreement to a general conflict between different approaches and interests. The assumption of the researchers was that the text is too concise and anecdotal to contain a plausible explanation of the conflict. However, there are expressions in the text that can supply explanation of the nature of the conflict.

## 2 Shimon ben Shatah versus Honi the Circle Drawer Revisited

Honi states that the Jewish people see him as a *ben bayit* in front of God, while SBS relates to Honi as a "son who importunes his father." Exposing the meaning of the phrase *ben bayit* used by Honi and *son who implores on his father* from the textual point of view and through comparison to other sources can explain the basis of the conflict. In this way it is possible to find the principle ideological difference between these two sages and suggest a more accurate reading of this legend than has been suggested previously. Simple translation of the term *ben bayit* as a "member of God's household" would mean that Honi was modest and portrayed himself with a title of a mere "member" of God's household—a title that could fit any Jew. The term "a son" used by SBS makes him even closer to God than a member of the household, giving him more

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"Miracles in Second Temple and Early Rabbinic Judaism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Miracles*, ed. G. H. Twelftree (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 95-112. These researchers see an inherent conflict between rabbinic sages and miracle workers and therefore did not search for a specific issue in Honi's behavior that justified SBS's harsh reaction.

6 E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, trans. A. Abrahams, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 1:103-4, 2:726, n. 19. See also: D. Levine, *Communal Fasts and Rabbinic Sermons: Theory and Practice in the Talmudic Period* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2001), 203 [Hebrew]; A. A. Halevi, *Gates of the Aggada* (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1982), 171 [Hebrew], esp. n. 6 where Halevi emphasizes that "A human being cannot force his will on God." See also A. Aderet, "Hasipur Besefer Ha'agada," *Alei Siach* 3 (1976): 174-77.

7 Josephus, *B. J.* 2.264. See G. Alon, *History of the Jews in the Land of Israel in the Period of the Mishnah and Talmud, Part 1* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1953-1956), 124 [Hebrew].

honor than he claimed for himself. However, careful analysis exposes a different understanding.

Most modern commentary on the Mishnah does not distinguish between *ben bayit* and “son who importunes.” G. Vermes suggests that they are interchangeable.<sup>8</sup> Neusner states that SBS says about Honi more or less what he had said about himself.<sup>9</sup> It seems that the reason for this is that they did not carefully analyze the meaning of the term. Melamed explained the term *ben bayit* as referring to a slave who works in his master’s household.<sup>10</sup> They cite the words of Rabbi Yohanan son of Zakkai explaining to his wife why Hashem accepted Haninah ben Dosa’s prayer and not his because he is “like a minister of the King” while Haninah is a “slave of the King” and therefore he always has audience.<sup>11</sup> Others explained the term *ben bayit* as a term that means closeness. One dictionary defines it as: “A friend and relative; someone who is a frequent visitor to the house.” A third translation is simply “a member of the family.”<sup>12</sup> According to these explanations, there is no substantial difference between the relation of Honi to God in SBS’s description versus the way Honi described himself. They therefore see the description of Honi as a “member of

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8 Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*, 210.

9 J. Neusner, *Judaism: The Evidence of the Mishnah* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 318-19 and n. 19.

10 E. Z. Melamed, “Lilshona shel Masseket ’abot,” *Leš. 20* (1956): 106-11, esp. 110-11; however, he comments that this interpretation does not coincide with the m. Ter. 3:4, that mentions side-by-side a maid, a slave, and a *ben bayit*, meaning that the *ben bayit* is not a simple slave. Büchler compares the expression to the Latin *familiaris* since a similar word *familia* appears in rabbinic sources in a baraita in y. Soṭah 73c; stated by Rabbi Yishmael and Abba Shaul in Sifra Lev. 19:1, 86c for all slaves in the household.

11 This story appears in b. Ber. 34b. Rashi comments on the two concepts. The slave goes in and out of the king’s audience whenever he wants, while the minister requires an invitation to come to the king. In a similar way Rabbi Samuel Eidels (Maharsha) explains the term Honi used: “I am like a slave of God and therefore I come and go whenever I want” (Maharsha on Ta’an. 23a Hidushei Aggadah). Some researchers accepted this interpretation. See A. Büchler, *Types of Jewish Palestinian Piety* (London: Oxford University Press, 1922), 203. Safrai also accepts this interpretation and in one place states that the *ben bayit* is like the personal slave of the master. See S. Safrai, *Biymeï Habbayit Uviymeï Hamishnah* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1984), 505, 518 and Sarfatti, “Pious Men,” 129. On the linguistic aspect see Halevi, *Gates*, 169 n. 3; Melamed, “Lilshona,” 106-11. He does not distinguish between *ben bayit* in single and *inei bayit* in plural.

12 Hirschman, “Changing Foci of Holiness,” 12 n. 12. He proves his interpretation from Qoh. Rab. 2:8. Solomon said: “Uvnei bayit haya li” (Qoh 2:7); the exegesis explains: “that is the divine spirit” that King Solomon contained. However, it is not proof because the expression there is plural and here it is single which is completely different in rabbinic language.

God's household" as the reason that SBS did not excommunicate Honi, even though he objected to the way he operated. A careful examination of the term *ben bayit* shows that the term can have a different meaning that explains the criticism of Honi by SBS.

### 3 The *Ben Bayit* in Rabbinic Literature

Examination of the term *ben bayit* used by Honi shows that it is not identical to the term "son" used by SBS. This can be seen clearly from the following Mishnah:

[In a case in which one] gave permission to a member of his household (*ben bayit*), to his slave, or to his maidservant to separate heave offering . . . It is valid.<sup>13</sup>

The Mishnah shows that the two terms "slave" and "member of household" are different but does not show what the difference is. Examination of additional Tannaitic literature shows that the term *ben bayit* assumes one of two meanings. One relates to friendship or familial ties: a person who is often in the house. The second is an occupation: one who administrates the house. Both meanings appear side by side in one Tosefta. The Mishnah had said that a man can demand that his ex-partner in business swear that he did not steal from the partnership, even though he does not have a concrete claim. This law applies to sharecroppers, custodians (of orphans), and to the *ben bayit*.<sup>14</sup> The Tosefta explains what the *ben bayit* under discussion is:

The *ben bayit* mentioned is not the kind who comes in and out, rather the kind who brings in fruit and takes out fruit, hires workers and fires workers.<sup>15</sup>

The Tosefta clearly sees two possible meanings for the term and is stating that in the case of the obligation to swear, the Mishnah had referred to the type of *ben bayit* who is involved in the business aspect of the home. The obligation

13 m. Ter. 3:4. Translation is based on Neusner, 90.

14 m. Šebu. 7:8.

15 t. Ketub. 8:9. See also b. Šebu. 48b: "The Baraita taught: *Ben Bayit* that was said, not that he enters and exists on his feet, rather he brings him workers and removes workers, brings in fruit and takes out fruit."

to swear shows that the *ben bayit* under discussion was someone who had a measure of independence running the owner's assets and therefore could be suspected of embezzlement. If he had been merely a house worker, then he would be no different than any other worker who does not swear unless his employer has a specific claim against him of whom he is convinced is true.<sup>16</sup> The authority to "hire workers and fire workers" indicates a position of trust that involves a delegation of authority by the homeowner similar to those given to a custodian.<sup>17</sup>

This position of the *ben bayit* who has authority over the property of his employer is expressed in a later rabbinic source. It shows that there could be tension between the *ben bayit* and employer when the employer is displeased with the independent actions of the *ben bayit*.

Rabbi Judah says: a parable to a King that had a "ben bayit" and he gave him authority over all that he had. The "ben bayit" went and lent to people through guarantors, to this one he lent 50 gold pieces and to that one hundred and to another two hundred. The borrowers fled. After a while the King heard and felt bad. He said to him: I gave you control over mine for you to destroy! The "ben bayit" answered: I lent and it is my responsibility to pay it all, I have one person who is guarantee for one hundred, another for fifty.<sup>18</sup>

16 The Babylonian Talmud and Jerusalem Talmud understand the term in the same way. The *ben bayit* is a decision maker in the house with periodic inspections or examination by the owner. Similarly the following exegesis presents it: "The homeowner has a *ben bayit*. When he comes to calculate with him . . . what does he say to his *ben bayit*? Pay attention how much wheat you put in storage . . ." (Pesiq. Rab. 10 Ki Tisa [Ish Shalom ed., 35b]); cf. Num. Rab. 4:1; 21:15.

17 The difference between the guardian mentioned in the Mishnah and the *ben bayit* is that the former is usually someone appointed to take care of an estate inherited by young orphans or a widow, while the *ben bayit* was appointed to administrate the property of an existing owner that for some reason does not want to do it himself.

18 Exod. Rab. (Vilna ed.), Parashat Ki Tisa, Parsha 43. The independence of the *ben bayit* who is the one who lends the money can cause the illusion that he is the owner of the property. This could mislead the *ben bayit* to deny his subservience to the owner. This situation can possibly be seen in the following quote: "What was Pharaoh similar to? A King went overseas and deposited all his property with his *ben bayit*. After some time he came back and asked for his property. The *ben bayit* answered: 'I am not your slave and you did not deposit anything with me.' He took him and hung him in the gallows. He then said: 'I am your slave and everything you deposited with me I will pay'" (Pesiq. Rab Kah. 14, Mandelbaum ed., 245). It seems that the slave was able to deny it because he was a *ben*

Examination of the context in which the concept *ben bayit* is used in the exegesis literature also shows a special relationship between the owner and the *ben bayit* that involves emotional closeness and trust. The *ben bayit* is a servant who feels emotionally close to his master,<sup>19</sup> eats from his table,<sup>20</sup> and enjoys his protection.<sup>21</sup> The master is good to the *ben bayit* beyond supplying his basic needs and provides for him like one of the family.<sup>22</sup> The master is not embarrassed to be dressed informally in the presence of the *ben bayit*.<sup>23</sup> The *ben bayit* does for the master the regular service of a slave,<sup>24</sup> but is also considered a confidant of the master. It is found that the *ben bayit* has much authority in the household of the owner. He employs workers,<sup>25</sup> buys and sells property, and even runs the master's treasure.<sup>26</sup> Sometimes the *ben bayit* is given the responsibility to take care of the children of the master and their education.<sup>27</sup> The

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- bayit* and depositing the property with him meant that he was to manage them and not merely watch them. Therefore, he felt that he can claim to be the owner of the property.
- 19 b. Sanh. 106a: "And then she says to him you are like a *ben bayit*, sit and choose your own."
- 20 Pesiq. Rab. 25 Aser Te'aser (Ish Shalom ed., 126b): "God said: 'I did not say that you should honor me from yours only from mine . . . you are my *ben bayit*, if I gave you and it is in your hand, give me from my own.'"
- 21 y. Ber. 13a and parallel sources: "If a human has a patron and they tell him that his *ben bayit* was captured he says: 'I exist through him.'" Exod. Rab. 15:18 "A parable to a *ben bayit* that was caught by his employer and imprisoned. His master says to him: 'Don't worry, I will come and take you out.'"
- 22 Sifre Num. 78, Lekha Itanu (Horowitz ed., 76): "Is there a *ben bayit* of someone that is not bestowed good?" Cf. also: "A parable to a King who had a *ben bayit* and he gave him a field as a present" (Sifre Num. 117 Vayedaber [Horowitz ed., 135]).
- 23 Lev. Rab. 1:14 (Margaliyot ed., 32), "A parable of a King who appeared to his *ben bayit* in his real face."
- 24 Cant. Rab. 5:3, "Rabban Gamliel had a *ben bayit* who would take a box of forty se'ah and bring it to the baker." Compare Lam. Rab. 4:3 Ma'aseh Shehaya. Yal. Mishlei 950 shows that the master trusts only his *ben bayit* and no other person.
- 25 Sifre Zuṭa Num. 12:5 "A parable about a King who was hosting his friend and needed to say something to his *ben bayit*." Instead of sending his friend outside, he and the *ben bayit* go outside to confer.
- 26 m. Šebu. 7:8: "These swear without a claim: the partners . . . the *ben bayit*." See y. Šebu. 38a.; m. Ter. 3:4 (quoted above; "If he allowed his *ben bayit*, his slave or his maid to separate tithes—it is valid"); and Pesiq. Rab. 10 Ki Tisa (Ish Shalom ed., 35b), that discusses what the *ba'al bayit* calculates with his *ben bayit*. Cf. Num. Rab. 4:1; 21:15.
- 27 Lev. Rab. 2:5: "A parable to a King who had an only son. Every day he would command his *ben bayit*: 'my son ate,' 'my son drank,' 'my son went to school,' 'my son came from school.'"

*ben bayit* had social esteem because of his position at his master's house, and sometimes he was viewed as a partner in the actions of his master.<sup>28</sup>

The status of the *ben bayit* contained a legal aspect as well. The above sources indicate that the *ben bayit* had the ability to do various legal actions in the name of the master. He did not have to receive individual permission for each action he did, and they obligated the master even if he would not have authorized it if he had been consulted. This gives the *ben bayit* the ability to make independent decisions.

It is impossible not to notice the built-in dichotomy of the status of the *ben bayit*. On the one hand, he is legally a servant, but on the other he is seen as a family member. On the one hand, he is completely loyal to the master; on the other hand, he can make independent decisions. On the one hand, he owns nothing of his own; on the other hand, he controls much property and can spend much money in the name of his master. He is expected to be subservient, but he has power to do things independently.

Based on the above analysis, I wish to suggest that the concept *ben bayit* that appears in the story of Honi the Circle Maker is a manager who enjoyed the trust of the owner and had the authority to administer his property. Honi is presenting himself as someone who has authority granted to him by God to open the gates of heaven and bring rain. He does not see himself as a mere slave who has to beg things from the master, rather as someone who can make decisions on behalf of the master. Therefore, Honi's request of Hashem for rain is more like a demand than a plea. Honi sees himself as a manager in God's court who has authority to bring rain for the people when they ask him. When the rain comes he even regulates how it should come down: not too soft and not too hard.

#### 4 SBS Objects to Seeing Honi as a *Ben Bayit* of God

SBS does not repeat the term *ben bayit* when referring to Honi. He objects to the self-definition of Honi who compared himself to a *ben bayit*, and instead compares him to a "son who implores his father." On the one hand, SBS

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28 Midr. Pss. (Buber ed. 24b): "A parable to a King who had a *ben bayit* in town and the townspeople would honor him saying that he is the *ben bayit* of the King. If the King sold the town to others they started to mistreat the *ben bayit*." Yal. 34 "To a King who had a *ben bayit* that he gave authority over all he had. The people started saying that he is his partner. What did the King do—he dismissed him. Thus God dismissed man from the Garden of Eden."

describes Honi as a son of God rather than a slave, but the difference is that a son has no authority over his father's estate while a slave who is a *ben bayit* does. The BT supplies an explanation for the words of SBS.

SBS sent to him: "If the years were the years of Elijah and the keys of rain were in his hands, would not the name of God be desecrated?"<sup>29</sup>

This statement is cryptic. I suggest an explanation that since the keys for rain were given to the prophet Elijah, no one else can claim to have them in his possession. This means that SBS is objecting to the claim of Honi that he does not merely pray to God, but that he actually takes action to bring the rain. He says this cannot be true. It could seem that he does have power because when he asks to increase the force of the rain it increases and when he asks to decrease it, it decreases. However, SBS claims that this is not true. It is just God responding to the requests of Honi like a father responds to his child's desires. Indeed, it could be that the story in the Babylonian Talmud is actually later commentary of the event, nevertheless it shows the way the BT explained the antagonism of SBS toward Honi.<sup>30</sup>

The baraita quoted in the Jerusalem Talmud presents a somewhat different interpretation but there is a similar undertone. The baraita says:

From this it can be learned that SBS did not like it that Honi is using a decree in order to bring rain rather than praying politely in front of God. It also states that only the prophet Elijah can hold the key to rain and no one after him.<sup>31</sup>

SBS does not deny Honi's ability to bring rain. He objects to his aspiration to be an independent player in God's court who was granted power. In order to emphasize this, SBS changes "slightly" Honi's title to "A son who implores on his father." The first thing is that the relationship between Honi and God is not like a slave and master, rather it is like a father and son. But that is not all. SBS describes Honi as a child who is spoiled by his father. He asks many things from his father, who has a soft spot for him and gives them to him. In this way

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29 b. Ta'an. 23b.

30 A number of studies were devoted to the agenda of the later rabbis who transcribed the Honi story and the difference between the various accounts of the story in the Mishnah, Jerusalem Talmud, Babylonian Talmud, and possibly the Tosefta. See Avery-Peck, "Charismatic"; Stone, "Honi"; Halberstam, "Legal Boundaries"; and Shoshan, *Stories*.

31 y. Ta'an. 66d-67a.

he explains how Honi was able to control the strength of the rain to make it stronger and then to make it weaker.<sup>32</sup> In addition he narrows the meaning of the father-son relationship that Honi has with God to the aspect of spoiling, which is especially relevant to a young child and not to the relationship of a mature child who is negotiating with his father.

The Jerusalem Talmud then adds to the father and son metaphor:

He says to him: "Father, take me to wash me in hot water, wash me in cold, give me nuts, almonds, peaches, and pomegranates—and he gives him."<sup>33</sup>

The father is willing to fulfill his son's request even though they are numerous and even contradictory. The details of the metaphor require explanation. It seems that it is relating precisely to two episodes that happen in the interaction between fathers and sons. The first episode is when the child asks for a bath. First, he wants hot water. Then, he says the water is too hot, please make it colder. The doting father does it all for his son. The second episode is that the child says he is hungry. He gives him nuts. He eats a bit and asks for something else. The father gives him almonds. He gives him a peach, but the child says he does not like it and the father gives him a pomegranate. SBS is attributing Honi's success at bringing rain as a result of God's mercy and not as a result of power that God gave him.

## 5 Was Honi a Typical "Hasid"?

There are a number of personalities in rabbinic literature that are referred to as a Hasid. These included a number of individuals who were known primarily for their devotion to God and the miracles they performed, and not for their Torah scholarship. Some researchers identify Honi as a Hasid.<sup>34</sup> The source

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32 The term used in the Mishnah is *mithat̄te*. It is a rare form. Commentators of the Mishnah explained it according to the similar Arabic word that means "spoiled." See Tg. Ps.-Jon. Deut 28:54 when describing a very pampered person; saying "the person that is *mehatt̄i*." Similarly in the Samaritan translation, the *Aruch* "*het*," Maimonides in his commentary of the Mishnah translates *mithat̄te* as "causes emotion."

33 b. Ta'an. 23b.

34 Safrai, "Pietists"; Sarfatti, "Pious Men"; Vermes, *Jesus*, 13; M. Wilcox, "Jesus in the Light of his Jewish Environment," *ANRW* 2:131-95; J. D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 140-42; D. Flusser and R. S. Notley, *Jesus* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2001), 113-17; P. J. Tomson, "Jesus and his Judaism," in

that supports this approach is the parallel Tosefta Ta'anit that is similar to the above Mishnah:

Once they said to one Hasid: "Pray that rains may fall." He prayed and rains fell. They said to him: "Just as you prayed and they fell, so pray that they should cease." He said to them: "Go out and see if a man stands at the summit of the Ofel and shakes his feet in the Kidron valley we will pray that the rains shall not fall but we are certain that the omnipresent will not bring a flood to the earth . . ."35

Other researchers disagree. The debate relates to the question of whether the Mishnah and Tosefta are dealing with the same person that the Mishnah identifies as Honi and the Tosefta "one Hasid," or are the Mishnah and Tosefta independent of each other. This issue goes beyond this local question and relates to the question of the relationship between the Tosefta and the Mishnah in general. If the Tosefta is later than the Mishnah, certainly the story of the "one Hasid" is not describing Honi; had it related to Honi, the Tosefta would mention the name, as well. However, if the Tosefta contains ancient material independent of the Mishnah, it could be another account or version of the story of Honi the rainmaker.<sup>36</sup>

However, in light of what was seen above it seems that there is a fundamental difference between Honi and the other Hasidim. This distinction has not been made previously because previous research overlooked the specific meaning of a *ben bayit*, which indicates power and autonomous decision making. The sources do not explicitly refer to Honi as a Hasid. Research found that the typical Hasid defined his relationship with God in the father-son aspect and not the *ben bayit*. Hanina son of Dosa and Rabbi Pinchas son of Yair were

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*The Cambridge Companion to Jesus*, ed. M. Bockmuehl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 33.

35 t. Ta'an. 2:13.

36 Sarfatti, "Pious Men," posits that the Tosefta is a later abridgement of the Mishnah. S. Lieberman, *Tosefta Kifshuta*, 10 vols. (Jerusalem: JTS, 1992), 5:1096 maintains that this Tosefta has an independent source. An original approach is that of S. Friedman, "The Primacy of Tosefta to Mishnah," in *Introducing Tosefta: Textual, Intratextual, and Intertextual Studies*, ed. H. Fox and T. Meacham (Hoboken: Ktav, 1999), 99-121. He shows that there are Tosefta that are prior to the Mishnah and the Mishnah is reworking the Tosefta. However, he does not posit that all of the Tosefta is prior to the Mishnah. In this case it is unlikely because the Tosefta seems to be completely different. The personality involved is obscure, but the dialogue between the Hasid and the people is more elaborate. Lieberman's position regarding this Tosefta seems the most valid as will be shown below.

characterized by modesty and not as managers for God.<sup>37</sup> Honi sees himself as a *ben bayit*, his self-confidence is evident, and he knows he has power in the divine court. The other Hasidim are modest and humble in front of God. All this leads to the following conclusion: it is unclear whether Honi should be defined as a Hasid. He shared with them the emphasis on his worship of God and his prayer, but was different from the others in that he attributed to himself power and had much self confidence in his ability to perform miracles.<sup>38</sup>

## 6 Conclusion

The conflict between Honi and SBS was because Honi saw himself as a *ben bayit* of God, which is someone who is, on the one hand, a slave of a master but, on the other hand, has confidence from his master who gives him authority to make decisions by himself concerning the household. This description seems to be upheld by the way he was able to ask for hard rain or soft rain at will. SBS was afraid that this presentation would lead to divination of Honi by the masses and this, in turn, would be an infraction on the pure monotheism of the Jewish religion. He therefore refers to Honi as “a pampered son” who asks his father for all that he wants and his father grants it to him, even if they are contradictory requests such as hot water and cold water. This definition can explain Honi’s accomplishments without leaving room for divination. This understanding separates Honi from the typical Hasid in that he does not share the humility and simplicity of the Hasid but rather sees himself as a powerful *ben bayit*.

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37 Safrai, “Mishnat Hasidim,” 138 n. 13 connects the concept of Hasidism in the Second Temple period with modesty. Vermes as well saw Hasidism in this light.

38 It should be noted that many researchers compare Jesus to Honi. The comparison could be valid even though the term Hasid may not be appropriate for Honi. Jesus, like Honi, saw himself close to God and had self confidence in his ability to act on behalf of God like a *ben bayit* though he did not use the term explicitly. See the sources cited above in comment 34. In addition see Avery-Peck, “Charismatic.”