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A Stam Story

*Foreword: What is “the Stam”?*

The Talmud is a compendium of Jewish legal argumentation; traditionally it is considered the Oral Torah, part of the Law handed down by God to Moses and passed through the generations to the era when it was written down. By academic standards, it is not a book of Jewish law, as it rarely concludes rulings, but rather documents the debates of the ancient rabbis about Torah and common practice of their time, including the unfavorable opinions. The Talmud is composed of two main pieces: Mishnah and Gemara. The Mishnah, written by Tannaitic rabbis, is an earlier work, with clearer beginning, end, and authorship. It tends to be more succinct, though still documents all sides of the arguments. On the other hand, the Gemara, attributed to the Amoraic rabbis, is made up of the later additions that flesh out the pieces of the Mishnah. The Gemara includes a wider range of possible authors and dates of redaction. The point of this study and the focus of this story is to explore exactly that range of possible authors and closing dates of the Gemara.

These sages, from the earliest days of the Tannaitic era before the title “rabbi” even existed yet, studied in pairs. The purpose of chavruta, or partner, study was to ensure that every voice would be heard and even minority opinions recorded. Only through deep partnered engagement with Jewish texts, including debates and arguments, could the true meanings of God’s Law be determined. To this day, Talmud is still studied in chavruta.

In traditional Talmudic study, the “Stam,” is understood simply as the anonymous voice in the Talmud (anonymous being the literal translation of the Hebrew word “Stam”), considered

to have been the narrative voice that connects the attributed dicta (statements of law or legal argument) of the Amoraic era; not a separate layer of history or identity of rabbis, but an inseparable part of the Gemara<sup>1</sup>. In modern academic Talmudic study, the “Stam” is understood to be the work of a separate historical layer of rabbis responsible for the construction of the Talmud as we know it today. The academic understanding of the Stammaim (plural of Stam, generally understood by most modern Talmud academics as any of the eras anonymous of rabbis responsible for piecing together the Talmud as it currently stands) as its own historical era and as the main editors and compilers of the Babylonian Talmud is relatively recent. The scholarship in this area is owed almost entirely to David Weiss Halivni and his book, The Formation of the Babylonian Talmud<sup>2</sup>, in which he analyzes in great detail the writings of the Talmud: the different expressions, noting different time periods and usages of language; the forced explanations, noting the obvious lack of full arguments from the Amoraic era of the construction of the Talmud. Halivni creates distinctive categories for the different historical layers of rabbis that contributed to this process of constructing the Babylonian Talmud, and then immediately blurs the lines he created. He establishes what he calls the Stammaim, those that created the dialectical argumentation that we have today as sugyot<sup>3</sup> from approximately 550-700 CE; the Saboraim, those that created the glosses and minor additions, from approximately 700-750; and the Compilers and Closers of the Talmud from 730-770 (when we might begin to see what we today would recognize as “Talmud”), though all of these layers fall under what has traditionally been known as “The Stam”.

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<sup>1</sup> Amoraic rabbis lived from 200-550 (mostly in Babylonia, although there are mentions in the Babylonian Talmud of rabbis crossing between Babylonia and the Land of Israel); they expanded upon the Mishnah, creating the Gemara out of the arguments on interpretations and legal implications, these arguments formed legal dicta later arranged by the Stam.

<sup>2</sup> Halivni, David Weiss. The Formation of the Babylonian Talmud. Introduced, Translated, and Annotated by Jeffrey L. Rubenstein. Oxford University Press, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Plural of sugya, a Talmudic passage that has a discrete structure

What follows is a fictional story about two made up men in the dead center of the prime Stammaitic era: rabbis circa 600 CE paired up to study together and argue and learn from each other, in chavruta. I wanted to explore what life might have been like for these rabbis about whom we know absolutely nothing, whose very existence was practically unknown a few decades ago. Centering around a perhaps particularly dramatic event in the lives of one of the rabbis, I could imagine how they would talk it out, refer to their teachers and sources, argue, and ultimately have to determine how their emotional responses and their legal and religious understandings of the world coexist, creating the anonymous arguments around the Amoraic or Tannaitic<sup>4</sup> dicta that we see written out in the Talmud we have today.

### *Glossary*

Chavruta – literally “partner”, a traditional way of engaging in Jewish study, with two people studying a text together in a deep way

Beit Midrash (plural: b'tei midrash) – study house

Shuk – market place

Halakha – Jewish Law

Yetzir Hara – the evil inclination

Seder, Masekhet, perek (plurals: Sedarim, Masekhyot, p'rakim) – varying levels of the breakdown in the voluminous rabbinic works. Seder, meaning order, would be most analogous to a volume. There are six Sedarim/volumes in the Mishnah. A Masekhet is a themed section within a Seder of the Mishnah, though in the Talmud the Masekhyot are often bound in their own volumes. A perek is analogous to a chapter within the masekhet.

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<sup>4</sup> The rabbis of the Mishnah, 1-200 CE, the earliest recordings of the Oral Torah, edited and composed by Rabbi Judah the Patriarch.

Example: the Seder Mo'ed [time] deals with the laws of Shabbat and holiday observance in 12 themed segments, including Masekhet Sukkah. Within Masekhet Sukkah, there are five chapters that address the laws of the holiday of Sukkot, the fall festival of booths

Ketubot – Masekhet that deals with the laws of marriage; plural of Ketubah, a prenuptial agreement, including alimony expectations

Yevamot – Masekhet that deals with the laws of a widow compelled to have a child by her deceased husband's brother, also addresses other potentially compulsory relationships

Nashim – Seder that contains the Masekhyot that deal with the laws of women

Talmidei Chachamim– wise students (plural of Talmud Chacham, a wise student)

Sanhedrin – the Masekhet dealing with the laws of the Sanhedrin, the distinguished court of rabbis in early antiquity, likely established in the last century BCE and dissolved with the increased persecutions of the early Church in 358 CE

Rodef – literally “the pursuer”, specifically one who chases after sin

Sheva Berachot – literally “seven blessings”, a traditional recitation at Jewish weddings

Chuppah – the wedding canopy

Mamzer – a bastard child born through a union not recognized by Jewish law

Tefillin – boxes containing Scriptural verses, one is placed on the hairline with the straps hanging loosely around the head and the other on the bicep with straps wrapped around the arm and hand, used every weekday in morning prayer

Baraita (plural: Baraitot) – teachings of the Tannaitic sages that did not make it into Rabbi Judah's Mishnah

*A Stam Story*

Yitzhak hurried to the Beit Midrash. He knew Yonatan would be upset with him for being late. Yonatan was always such a stickler for rules, always favoring the harsher interpretation of the Law, always arguing that too many Jews were not serious enough about study and prayer. Being late would be seen as a great affront to the importance of study and Yitzhak didn't think Yonatan would understand or be forgiving about his reasoning. He wasn't so sure he understood or felt forgiving of himself either.

That morning Yitzhak's wife had disclosed information that Yitzhak was unsure how to feel about, what the law would say about the situation. She was pregnant and wasn't confident the baby was his. She claimed that several weeks ago a man came to their home while Yitzhak was out at the Beit Midrash. She had just returned from the market and was beginning to prepare the evening meal when there was a knock at the door. When she opened it, an unfamiliar man was standing there holding out a kerchief that she had just purchased at the shuk and had apparently dropped while finishing her shopping. Grateful to this man for his consideration in tracking her down and returning her new acquisition to her, she invited him in. That was where the story started to get hazy for Yitzhak. Why would his wife invite a strange man into their home while she was home alone? What a foolish and dangerous thing to do, not to mention being contrary to Jewish tradition! But of course, pointing that out to her was also a foolish and insensitive thing to do, and had elicited much crying from her. He was of course sure to comfort

and calm her before heading out to study, which only caused him to be even later to meet Yonatan. Sometimes women just couldn't seem to fight their yetzir hara and abide by tradition, but that didn't mean they should have to face such a trauma. In fact, Yitzhak reasoned with himself, given that they did not understand all the law and logic that men did, women should be expected all the more so to deviate and should be met with patience rather than punishment. Still, even as he found himself able to think rationally about all this, he just didn't feel comforted or calm yet. He would ask Yonatan what he thought, and they would determine what the Halakha said about such a situation.

“Ach! About time you should walk in the door, Yitzhak!” Yonatan spat as soon as Yitzhak entered in through the doorway. “All the other chavruta pairs have been bent over their passages for ages already! We're continuing our study of Masekhet Sukkah; we should finish Chapter Two today. Now, ‘All seven days of the Festival one must make his sukkah permanent and his house temporary’ ...”

“Forget about that, I need to discuss something personal, and I need to know what the Law says about it. Let's look at somewhere in Seder Nashim – maybe Masekhet Ketubot or Yevamot –”

“Yitzhak, what are you babbling about? Why do I feel like I constantly have to remind you how we study?! We don't just select whatever we want to study at random on any given day! We study what the Rav assigns us, what everyone else is studying. We recite the Mishnah that we spent years in Sura learning and memorizing. We discuss and debate them in our chavruta, maybe bringing in any recitations we can remember from the later sages, even though we know we have lost much of their Halakha. And then we discuss and debate as a whole study house, and

hear the Rav's lecture, and decide what makes sense from what we have left from our Sages of the days of old. Besides, just yesterday we discussed that women are exempt from the laws of the Sukkah, what else could you need to know about women right now? What is this sudden burning desire to study specifically women's issues? Troubles in your marital home?"

Yitzhak couldn't stand Yonatan's ribbing at that moment and didn't want to argue about the proper, prudent way to study. How could it possibly really matter if they studied in some exact order? All the same legal dicta they had memorized from the Mishnah and the sages who followed would still be in their heads day after day, no matter in which order they recited and dissected it. He waved the Rav, the head of the Beit Midrash of Pumbedita, over.

"Yes, Talmidei Chachamim?" The Rav rasped, his voice low and soft and teeming with decades of Divrei Torah. Yitzhak always loved the way his teacher spoke. From his earliest memories of studying as a Bar Mitzvah, he appreciated the croak of Rav's lectures, as though the generations of sages that had come before them were crawling out of Rav's mouth, the memorized teachings scraping along his throat as he coughed between each recited passage.

Yonatan looked pointedly at Yitzhak. Yonatan prided himself on being a perfect student and rarely asked questions, other than the sort that seeks validation and approval for what he is already certain is correct. Yitzhak preferred the learning process and was less concerned about being right. He wanted to be sure he really understood what the sages had meant, how they had interpreted the Torah for their time, and what it meant for them now. He wasn't afraid of the Rav or being wrong or looking foolish. He didn't care for rules that made no sense to him, that didn't seem to actually help people live and be holy unto God. He and Yonatan constantly argued about

the point and purpose of their time in the study house and the intent of the rabbinic teachings they studied, in addition to the requisite debate about the legal rulings.

“Rav, I would like to study something different today, if that’s alright,” Yitzhak began tentatively, unsure of how to tell the Rav or Yonatan what had happened with his wife. “I know you’ve assigned this recitation from Sukkah, but I have questions regarding my wife and was wondering where in Nashim I might find some dicta regarding a married woman impregnated by a home intruder?” Yitzhak could feel Yonatan’s eyes on him. Out of his peripheral vision Yitzhak could see Yonatan’s eyes bulging out of his face, his jaw dropped. Yitzhak knew he was blushing, but he kept his own eyes locked on the Rav’s, who looked intently back at him, apparently oblivious to Yonatan’s reaction or the idea that that might, in fact, be the appropriate one.

Instead, he calmly told the chavruta pair, “Rather than in Seder Nashim, you might start with Sanhedrin, toward the end of chapter eight. In the laws regarding the rodef, our Mishnah says that one who pursues after a betrothed maiden to ravage her must be stopped even at the cost of his life. Surely your wife, not only betrothed to you, but already living in your marital home, after I officiated at your beautiful wedding under the chuppah, complete with the holy recitation of the sheva berachot, would fall under such protection. Now, since the question of stopping her attacker is moot, what course of action should follow next?”

Yitzhak opened his mouth to speak, but found himself interrupted by Yonatan, who appeared to have picked his jaw off the floor and found his voice again. “But Rav!” he exclaimed, “Does not that ruling apply only to the betrothed virgin, and not to a married woman who has already been deflowered? Surely the loss to Yitzhak is less than if he had been deprived



of his holy and wholesome wedding night. And anyway, does not the Scripture say that if a man finds a woman in the city and lies with her, they should both be stoned? If this man attacked Yitzhak's wife in their own home, surely she should have cried out, and a neighbor would have come to her rescue. I'm sorry, Yitzhak," Yonatan continued, turning to his chavruta partner with apologetic eyes, "But how do you know she didn't invite the strange man into your home with the intent to seduce him?"

Yitzhak was silent. He was heartbroken, that his partner could think so little of his wife and marriage. Yonatan had no right to make such accusations. Yitzhak's wife had never given him any reason before to mistrust her. She came from a good family, kept a clean kosher home, and was a dutiful wife. The Law was clear that even when one has doubts, one does not make such public accusations against another whose righteousness has never before been doubted, not even against a woman. Moreover, though, Yitzhak was heartbroken that Yonatan's uncouth verbal accusations echoed his own doubts. In any case, whatever had happened to his wife was undoubtedly terrible for him, and most likely even more terrible for her. He looked down at his hands, took a deep breath and looked back at the Rav who was still standing over them. By now Yitzhak was aware that people kept glancing at them. The Rav usually floated among the pairs deep in study, making himself available to all questions. The fact that he had been standing with Yitzhak and Yonatan for so long was attracting attention, and the tense energy of the pair was palpable today. All the chavruta were made with the intent that men with opposing views would be paired, in order that dissent and debate would help to uncover the essential truths of each teaching from the previous sages and the Scriptures. That Yonatan and Yitzhak often disagreed wasn't unusual. But today, it was clear to everyone in the study house that they were not merely arguing about how to make a sukkah as a permanent home, as they all were. It was clear to

everyone that they were not merely arguing about Halakha at all. Something real, something personal and intense, was happening between Yitzhak and Yonatan today, something that required the special attention of Rav. But they knew better than to try to figure out what it was. Idle chatter would lead to gossip, harmful speech, and they'd do best to try to stay focused on their own work.

Yitzhak stood up to leave, but the Rav put his hand on his shoulder. "How about switching now to Ketubot, in Seder Nashim, as you originally guessed? You might find more to help you there, too," the Rav gently suggested to Yitzhak. Yitzhak looked at Yonatan, who nodded eagerly, ready to dive into the practical study of this matter for his partner now that they had been given permission by their teacher. Yitzhak sighed again, glancing around one more time at the Beit Midrash, as the other students tried to hide their obvious glances and straining to hear their conversation.

"Thank you, Rav," Yitzhak replied, "we'll do that. But, Yonatan? Do you mind if we recited and discuss the material outside? I need air. I'm sure we can come back in and wave down the Rav again if we have more questions." Yonatan nodded and the two walked out the door, feeling Rav's eyes still on them as they went.

Yonatan and Yitzhak walked for a while in silence, before Yonatan finally said, "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Huh?" Yitzhak looked up, startled, as though he wasn't aware that Yonatan had been walking with him for the last few minutes. "Oh, uh, yes, so Ketubot, where do you think we should start? Chapter two deals with when to take a woman's word, but chapter three deals with the recourse of the crime..."

“Yitzhak,” Yonatan said softly, reaching out for his partner’s hand. “Stop a moment. Look at me.” Yitzhak turned and faced Yonatan, the latter holding both of his hands in his own, staring deeply into his eyes, as though seeing him for the first time. “Do you want to tell me what exactly happened? Or at least what she told you? I know we spend most of our time together arguing, but as my chavruta partner, you are my best friend, my closest partner, my peer that I hold utmost respect for. If something is deeply disturbing to you, we should talk about that, you should get it off your heart and release some of the emotion a bit before we can dive into study on these topics.” Yonatan paused and Yitzhak took a deep breath. He really never gave Yonatan’s emotional sensitivity enough credit. He had always been quick to judge Yonatan for being too academic, too much of a doctrinaire, and here he was encouraging Yitzhak to really open up and talk about his feelings before they could begin study. “Besides,” Yonatan continued, “how will we know whether to start with Chapter two or three until you tell me what happened and we can determine if we should question her honesty or begin right away with determining the punishment of her attacker, assuming her story is true?” Ah yes, that sounded more like the Yonatan Yitzhak was used to.

Yitzhak pulled his hands from Yonatan and continued walking. They had been circling a small reservoir beside the Beit Midrash. On the far side of the pond, there was a bench that sat facing the Beit Midrash. Yitzhak had often wondered why the bench was there. Who would need to sit looking at the wall of the study house? He had always wished there was a bench right next to the study house, so he could sit outside, looking across the pool of water and listen to the din of the Beit Midrash behind him. Today, though, as he walked around the pond to the bench that sat on the far side, facing the study house, he was grateful for a little more distance and quiet. As he sat down on the bench, Yonatan caught up with him and sat down beside him.

“She told me she was pregnant as she was serving breakfast this morning. I was ecstatic. You know we’ve been married three years already and have had trouble conceiving. I was starting to worry there was something wrong with her fertility. I guess now we know that she is still fertile. She must feel more certain than ever now that there’s something wrong with me.” Yitzhak took another deep breath and shook his head, as though trying to shake free all the negative thoughts buzzing at his head, before continuing. “As soon as I jumped up to hug and kiss her and celebrate, she put her hand out to stop me and told me not to get too excited, that she isn’t sure the baby is mine. Naturally, I was furious at that revelation. I don’t know that I could go through with the proscribed punishment of condemning her to death for her adultery, but I was certainly ready to consider her as dead to me. But then she told me about this intruder.”

“And you’re sure she didn’t just make up the story on the spot when she saw how angry you were?” Yonatan asked. “Maybe she saw it as a way to assuage your anger.”

“I don’t know about that Yonatan,” Yitzhak replied. “You’re asking me if I think my wife committed adultery and then lied to me, making up a story about a violent crime and implicating a perhaps otherwise innocent man in the process. How can I think so poorly of a woman I’ve committed my life to, a woman I’ve shared a bed with for three years, and whom I’ve come to love?”

“So, what was her story? What happened with the intruder?” Yonatan pressed further.

Yitzhak found this line of questioning agitating and inappropriate. He was losing his patience with Yonatan. “What do you think the story was, Yonatan?! You’re supposed to be the smart one, the logical brain, the Talmud Chacham! I think you could figure out what happens next. She says the man returned something to her that she had dropped in the shuk. So she

invited him in for a cup of ale to show her gratitude and hospitality. She was behaving like our ancestors Abraham and Sarah in welcoming in the stranger, behaving like Rebecca in showing kindness, like Miriam in conjuring up refreshment to the weary traveler. And in return, he attacked her!” Yitzhak ran his fingers through his hair and adjusted his kippa, taking the minute to collect himself again. “She says they were talking,” he continued, “That she learned that he was new to Pumbedita, having just come to Babylonia from Eretz Yisrael. She says she remembered noting that because she couldn’t imagine why someone would want to permanently relocate to exile from the Homeland! After they had each had a full cup of ale, she stood up to see him out, to get back to her chores, and she says that’s when he attacked her. He embraced her, lay with her, and then left her apparently pregnant.”

Yitzhak couldn’t believe the whole story poured out of him like that. Did that count as gossip or harmful speech, to share his wife’s secrets with his chavruta partner like that? So often, the students of the Beit Midrash shared their own secrets with their partners that they wouldn’t even share with their own wives. The pathway to become a great and learned scholar like their Rav was long and required many more hours in the study house than at home, forming more intimate relationships between chavruta partners than between spouses. Still, this was so personal for Yitzhak’s wife and he wasn’t sure if he had gone too far this time.

Yonatan was looking at his hands, puzzled. Yitzhak wondered why he hadn’t responded at all through the whole story. He gently nudged Yonatan’s arm with his elbow and raised his eyebrows at his suddenly silent partner.

“I’m sorry,” Yonatan said, “I’m just still not convinced of your wife’s story or what recourse you have. Why didn’t she cry out or why didn’t anyone come to rescue her? And how

would you propose to find this supposed attacker anyway if you did want to exact punishment on him. Have you heard of any new students or permanent merchants from Eretz Yisrael? He may not be who he told her he was or who she told you he was.”

Yitzhak nodded slowly. He would have to ask his wife those questions if he wanted to follow through on her claims and determine his own feelings on the matter. It was at least true that he hadn't heard of any newcomers to Pumbedita, and surely that news would have reached the study house. Even if he was certain of his wife's honesty and faithfulness, he would need more information to pursue justice for her. In the meantime, however, he and Yonatan could still get to work studying Ketubot for the sake of determining the course of action they might take once he did have more details from his wife. He said as much to Yonatan, and they started back toward the Beit Midrash to argue over the laws of forbidden relations with a woman.

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That night at home, Yitzhak was terse and anxious through evening meal. He didn't know how to ask the questions Yonatan had raised earlier that day, but he felt foolish not asking them. His wife knew what was going on, but thought it would be best to wait from him to be ready to talk about it. She also felt nervous about the situation, unsure of whether he believed her or what he would do, how they would find the man who did this to her, wondering if she had done the right thing in telling him. She hadn't planned on doing so, and was able to keep silent about it for weeks, but upon discovering she was pregnant, she became worried that the child would not look at all like Yitzhak and he would know something was wrong. She and Yitzhak had been trying for a baby for so long, what were the odds that he had finally gotten her pregnant just now, just in the same time frame as her encounter with the stranger. She thought for sure the baby was her rapist's and it would be better to tell Yitzhak now, while there may still be time to get rid of the baby if need be. She had already talked to the midwife about it; the midwife was the one to

convince her to tell Yitzhak in the first place. Maybe he'll be understanding and willing to raise this child regardless, the midwife had suggested. But now that they sat in silence, stealing furtive glances at each other over their soup, she was not sure he understood or that he was going to accept this child. She was unsure that he even still accepted her.

As she began to clear the dishes, he seemed to find his voice. "We studied the laws of the *rodef* in Sanhedrin today," he said.

That meant practically nothing to her. She knew that "*rodef*" specifically referred to the violent pursuer who must be killed rather than be allowed to continue with their goal of murder, breaking the Sabbath, or raping a virgin, but she didn't know what else the Sages had to say about the matter. She understood even less why Yitzhak was saying this now. He never shared information about the goings on of the study house. Women just didn't need to know what the men studied. They only needed to know the rulings that applied to them, like the laws of their monthly purification or how to keep a Kosher kitchen. They certainly didn't need to know about what crimes were punishable by death. Judgment and Justice was men's domain.

"Then we moved on to *Ketubot*, the dicta determining how to believe a woman's unsubstantiated claim, and how to distinguish the proper punishment for a seducer versus a violator," Yitzhak continued.

Some connection to their conversation that morning was starting to dawn on her, but she still didn't know enough about any of the teachings he was referencing to fully understand where he was going with this.

“Yitzhak,” his wife said in an even, understated tone. She was hoping her bewilderment and terror at that moment was not evident, and that simply stating his name would bring him back to the moment at hand and he could get to the point.

Yitzhak looked up and locked eyes with his wife. “I ... I need to know... I mean, I am sure I already know, but I just need to ask ...”

“Yitzhak.” His wife repeated her declaration of his name in her effort to move this stammering along.

“Why didn’t you cry out when the man attacked you?” He slammed his hands down on the table as his questions finally erupted from him. “Why didn’t any of our neighbors come to your rescue? How could a strange man come and go from our home and assault you in this way without anyone noticing and how could this secret be kept from me for weeks?!”

As Yitzhak looked at his wife with pleading eyes; she could see that he had tears in them. She knew that voicing these questions was difficult for him and she should understand where he was coming from. However, she couldn’t help but feel betrayed and attacked. She was unsure of how to respond, how to convince him any further than she already had that morning. How else could she say clearly what happened to her in a way that would somehow be more credible to him?

Yitzhak’s wife took a deep breath before responding, “I know the Scripture says that if a man finds a woman and lies with her in the city, she must be liable for adultery as well, for surely the specification of “in a city” is meant to show that someone would surely hear and rescue her if she is truly being raped.” She glanced at the window, noting the complete lack of passersby even at this hour when the men were coming home from their work or the houses of



study and worship. “But we live far from the market center. Our walls are close with that of our neighbors, but in the middle of the afternoon there are not a lot of other people around. You know this; I’ve told you this when we’ve argued about our lack of children. I am often lonely and feel completely alone in the world when I’m home all day waiting for you.” She turned away from the window, looking intently at Yitzhak, who by now was staring into his cup of ale.

“When the man came to return my kerchief to me, it was nice to have someone to talk to for a bit. When he attacked me, of course I cried out. Not only in fear and out of the desire to stop, although obviously those were factors as well. But also, anyone, even the most adulterous woman in the unhappiest of marriages, would of course cry out at least in surprise if someone suddenly grabbed at them the way that man grabbed at me. Why didn’t anyone hear or respond? I don’t know,” she sighed, shrugging and looking up at the ceiling. “There wouldn’t be any other men within earshot at that time of day, and if the other wives of your fellow scholars heard and chose to do nothing, who could blame them? What woman would put herself in potential danger trying to get involved with something that has nothing to do with them? If I heard the muffled screams of a neighbor, I have to admit I might not rush to help her, without knowing what situation I might be running into. As for how much time has passed without you knowing, I had hoped you might never need to know. But when I realized I was pregnant, I was afraid that the baby might be noticeably not yours, and thought you deserved a warning for that possibility.”

She paused to straighten out her dishtowel on its drying rack, unsure of how to say the next part, if it would help garner sympathy for how serious this was to her or further incriminate her as an unfeeling woman. “I spoke with a midwife about terminating a pregnancy for fear that if I told you about this, you would accuse me of adultery and have me killed or divorce me without due ketubah money and I wouldn’t be able to afford to care for my body or child anyway. She

convinced me to discuss this with you, but if you can stand the idea of staying with me and can't stand the idea of raising a mamzer, I could still go back to the midwife before it's too late."

"No!" Yitzhak exclaimed, so immediate and vehemently, he surprised even himself. "No," he said again, more softly this time, "I believe you and I will raise this child as my own. Many sons do not look like their father. Even if the child comes out looking like this other man, no one else will need to know if he is a mamzer."

Yitzhak stood and walked over to his wife, taking her into his arms. He could feel her start to cry, her body shaking as they both finally let go of the tension they had both been holding all day.

"Oh," Yitzhak said suddenly. "Except ..."

"Except?" His wife asked, pulling away just enough to look up into his face.

"I already told Yonatan and the Rav today at the Beit Midrash." Yitzhak could see his wife's face starting to contort in anger and fear as his words sunk in. "What could I do?!" Yitzhak quickly began protesting, "I didn't know what to think about all you told me this morning and I needed to determine what the Law was!"

As Yitzhak fumbled his way through his explanation to his wife, two important realizations came upon him, both making him realize that for all his emotional insensitivity, Yonatan was most definitely the smart one in their pair. The first realization was that, yes, as he wondered earlier, disclosing the information about his wife's pregnancy and the potential father most definitely was harmful gossip. Now the Rav would know if the child turns out to be a mamzer. Whatever the law determined about her status as a married rape victim, or whatever

actions were available to them in seeking justice from the attacker, the law was at least clear that the child would never be considered his, would never enjoy the full rights of a legitimate child. And of course, the second realization was that he still had no idea what the law determined about her status as a married rape victim or what actions were available to them in seeking justice from the anonymous attacker!

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The next morning, Yitzhak was on his way to the Beit Midrash when suddenly the sky darkened. At first he thought it must be a passing dark cloud, so he hurried his pace to get to the Beit Midrash before the inevitable rain started. In a matter of minutes, however, the world became dark as night and Yitzhak knew this could be no mere cloud. He froze in his spot, unsure of what to do, what was happening. He glanced up and saw that the sun had completely disappeared, but it hurt to look toward to the ring of light that surrounded the spot where the sun should be, so he averted his gaze quickly. Unsure of how long this might last and unconfident in his ability to find his way to the Beit Midrash without injury in the dark, Yitzhak slowly sat down, feeling the dirt around him as he eased himself down on the side of the road. Staring intently at his hands, trying to train his eyes to see clearly in the dark, he traced with his fingertips the lines left in the skin of his arm from wrapping his Tefillin straps too tightly during his morning prayers.

As he waited for the sun to return, a baraita came to him. He recited aloud to himself, “Our Rabbis taught, ‘On account of four things is the sun in eclipse: On account of a vice president of the Sanhedrin who died and was not mourned fittingly; on account of a betrothed

maiden who cried out aloud in the city and there was none to save her; on account of sodomy, and on account of two brothers whose blood was shed at the same time. And on account of four things are the luminaries in eclipse: On account of those who perpetrate forgeries, on account of those who give false witness; on account of those who rear small cattle in the land of Israel; and on account of those who cut down good trees’.”

They currently did not have a Sanhedrin in Babylonia and Yitzhak wasn't exactly sure what was going on in Eretz Yisrael. Although occasionally great scholars would travel from one community to the other, Yitzhak rarely paid attention to the political news they brought, something he suddenly regretted. He listened attentively to the guest lecturers at the Beit Midrash from the scholars of Eretz Yisrael, but found annoying the students who nosed their way into lunch with the visiting rabbis or who bothered for news their own teachers returned from visits abroad. He never wanted to impose himself on the great men of their time with gossip and questions of things out of their control. Anyway, he was fairly certain that even if there was still a Sanhedrin in Israel, and even if their vice president had recently died, and even if he had not been mourned properly, he didn't see why the community in exile would be punished for that.

Similarly, there was no war currently affecting the Jewish community. No two brothers could have been simultaneously killed recently, or he for sure would have heard about such a horrible double homicide. Unless, again, it had happened outside of Babylonia, but then, again, he didn't think that would plunge him into darkness like this.

That left only the possibilities that this darkness came to punish them for turning a deaf ear to a woman's cries, or to sodomy. Of course, he had no way to know if anyone in his community could have committed sodomy in secret, and frankly he did not want to know.

Occasionally rumors would reach his ears about how a certain chavruta pair was too close for the comfort of the other students and speculation about how intimate was their relationship outside of their study sessions skittered through the Beit Midrash, but Yitzhak did his best to stay out of such conversations. To him, now, that meant that only his wife's unheeded cries could have brought on this darkness. Surely, Rav was right that as his wife she deserved the same protection and justice as a betrothed virgin. Even if he had not been robbed of his wedding night or her maidenhood, she was still his wife, sanctified to belong to him alone, and another man had dared to intrude on her in his own home! How could he have even for a moment considered Yonatan's position that her violation was not as unethical or damaging as that of a virgin? And how could he have even for a moment considered Yonatan's suggestion that she seduced the man herself and lied about the nature of the encounter? Yitzhak loved his wife, he believed his wife, and he saw the pain in her eyes and knew she had to be telling the horrible truth. And now this darkness would prove that, even to Yonatan.

Yitzhak was unsure how long he had been sitting in the dirt talking to himself, but having come to this validating conclusion, he looked up to see that the world had brightened again. He glanced up toward the sky, careful not to look too closely at the sun and hurt his eyes, and he saw that the darkness still partially obscured the sun. Even if Yonatan had gotten to the Beit Midrash early and was so engrossed in his own study that he missed the dramatic darkness, surely if Yitzhak hurried over to him now, he could still point out what was left of the eclipse in order to prove his wife's truth.

When Yitzhak arrived at the Beit Midrash, he found Yonatan standing outside the door, waving his hands in front of his face like a wild man. His face was contorted in utter terror and he was blinking his eyes furiously.

“Yonatan, what’s wrong? What are you doing?” Yitzhak asked as he ran up to Yonatan and grabbed his flailing hands.

“Yitzhak? Is that you? I can’t see anything! All I can see are dark spots in front of my eyeballs. They seem to be floating, but they never quite move enough for me to see around them. There is light on the edges of my eyes, but I can’t seem to focus on the light, I can’t make out shapes, I ... I ...” Yonatan’s voice trailed off into a whimper as tears streamed down his face. “I was studying in the Beit Midrash early this morning,” he sniffled, “and I noticed through the windows that suddenly it was dark as night outside. So I walked out to see what was going on. No one else was here yet.”

Yitzhak could feel Yonatan’s hands start to agitate again, his anxiety rising palpably, so Yitzhak gripped harder in the hopes it would stabilize his friend.

“I looked up at the dark spot,” Yonatan continued softly. “The ring of light around the dark spot bothered my eyes a little, but it didn’t seem bright like the sun, I didn’t think it would harm me to keep looking. I was trying to figure out what it was, what was happening up there. It started to slowly feel brighter, the pain in my eyes grew sharp so I looked away.” He started crying again as he finished, “But when I looked away, the dark spot and its ring of light seem to follow my eyes. I can’t see anything else now.”

“Yonatan,” Yitzhak whispered. How could he say to his friend what he was really thinking now? When he had pointed out to his wife that letting a strange man into their home was a bad idea, it really upset her. He knew now that to tell Yonatan that looking into the sun, covered by darkness or not, was similarly a bad idea would elicit a similar reaction. Further, he couldn’t help but feel that if the darkness truly was brought upon them for his wife’s cries falling

on deaf ears, Yonatan's new blindness was his own particular punishment for not believing her story even after the fact when it was time for justice to be served. But he knew that he could not say this now.

"Come, Yonatan," Yitzhak said softly as he put an arm around his partner's shoulder. "Let's go sit inside while we wait for Rav and see what he has to say about all this."

Yitzhak gently led his friend into the Beit Midrash and guided him toward their usual table. He held his hand as he felt his way into his seat. Once seated, Yonatan folded his arms on the table, buried his head into the nest of his own body, and started to sob. Yitzhak stared helplessly at his closest peer, unable to do anything, unable even to sit next to him in his own usual seat. Today was not at all usual.

Thankfully, he didn't have long to wait and wonder what he should do. At that moment, the Rav walked. Never one to be surprised by anything, he saw Yonatan crying at the table, nodded to Yitzhak, and walked over to his traditional table at the front of the hall. Yitzhak followed him, and as the Rav lowered himself into his seat, Yitzhak leaned in closed and whispered, "Rav, Yonatan looked directly at the sun while it was blocked by the dark spot, and now he seems to be blind."

"I figured as much," Rav croaked.

"You did?! How could you possibly have guessed that was what was happening? Have you ever seen anything like that out there?" Yitzhak was still doing his best to whisper so that Yonatan would not hear them, but in his astonishment, his voice came out more like a hiss. He would never have imagined using such a tone with the Rav, but again he reminded himself, this is not a usual day.

“I have never seen this before, but I know it happens.” The Rav twirled his long beard around his fingers and looked up at Yitzhak. “Don’t you know the baraitot about the eclipses? Those who came before us have seen this, they knew what it was, and they come to teach us how to behave now that we find ourselves in this situation.”

“Yes, Rav, of course you are right.” Yitzhak paused, glancing over at Yonatan. He was no longer sobbing, but seemed to be trying to collect himself, taking deep breaths in between hiccups and back to waving his hands in front of his eyes. “Rav, I was actually just thinking about some of those baraitot earlier today, as I was waiting for the darkness to pass so I could continue on my way here,” Yitzhak said slowly. He waited to see if the Rav would give some sign of remembering their conversation yesterday. He was hoping that Rav, with all his insight and seeming omniscience, might finish his thought for him. Unfortunately, the Rav merely blinked at Yitzhak and gestured for him to continue.

“Well,” Yitzhak continued, “Our Rabbis taught, ‘On account of four things is the sun in eclipse: On account of a vice president of the Sanhedrin who died and was not mourned fittingly; on account of a betrothed maiden who cried out aloud in the city and there was none to save her; on account of sodomy, and on account of two brothers whose blood was shed at the same time.’ I think this darkness was brought upon us for the sake of my wife.” Yitzhak tented his fingers nervously, tapping his fingertips against each other. “I believe her story to be true, and I believe that she is deserving of justice,” he rushed through his last sentence, suddenly full of energy to protect his wife’s reputation and dignity.

The Rav nodded in passive agreement but said nothing. Yitzhak stood over him another minute. He looked over and saw that Yonatan seemed sufficiently calm. He was no longer crying



or hiccupping or waving his hands in front of his face. He was now sitting perfectly still, stony faced, staring straight ahead. Yitzhak could tell he was still upset, but had heard the other students starting to stream in and didn't want to look distraught in front of them.

As the other chavruta pairs start to fill the hall, however, of course they could tell that something was still off with this pair. It was not uncommon for them to find Yonatan sitting at their table alone, often in meditation or mumbling to himself and scratching out notes, sometimes even transcribing the teachings of the older sages they all had committed to memory. Although the tradition was to learn and teach the material orally, there was a growing trend among the students of the Beit Midrash to write things down. Rav turned a blind eye to this trend, though he knew it to be growing in other B'tei Midrash as well, as least in Sura if not in Eretz Yisrael as well. Perhaps Rav remained silent on the question of transcribing the tradition because he recognized that in spite of the merits of the Oral Tradition, people were forgetting much of the older teachings and a log of the way the current generation was putting together what they did know might be useful.

In any case, it was unusual for the students to walk in to find Yonatan alone at his table staring into space, and even stranger to see Yitzhak there on time, let alone early and speaking in whispers to the Rav. Yitzhak, aware of the increasingly full Beit Midrash, ascertained that the Rav was apparently not going to share any more thoughts at this time about the baraita and the eclipse, or how they might reflect Yitzhak's wife's situation. He went to sit in his regular seat next to Yonatan.

As soon as he felt Yitzhak's presence in the seat beside him, Yonatan turned slightly and muttered, "Is everyone here now?"

Yitzhak looked around before reply, “Not quite, but most. A lot of people walked in with their chavruta. They must have all been held up by the eclipse and found each other along the way.”

Yonatan nodded. “Can they tell something’s wrong with me?”

Yitzhak sighed, knowing he should tell his friend the truth. “Yes, Yonatan,” he said as gently as he could, “Many of them keep stealing looks over here. I think they know something is amiss here.” Yitzhak locked eyes with one of the younger students blatantly staring at them, and looked back at the lad with cold eyes until the other student sheepishly broke his gaze away. “But I wouldn’t worry about it too much, Yonatan,” he continued. “They were staring at us yesterday and you weren’t blind then. We’re just more interesting than the laws of Sukkot.”

Yonatan nodded slowly, and then abruptly shook his head, clearing his thoughts and flinging off his kippa simultaneously. “Alright then,” he said briskly, “let’s get started!”

Yitzhak leaned out of his seat to reach Yonatan’s kippa off the floor and carefully placed it back on his friend’s head, hoping he wouldn’t feel it. If he did, he didn’t acknowledge it, and began reciting the words of the Mishnah, “All the seven days a man must make the sukkah his permanent residence and his house his temporary abode. If rain fell, when may one be permitted to leave the Sukkah? When the porridge would become spoilt. The rabbis put forward a parable: To what can the spoiled porridge be compared? To a slave who comes to fill the cup for his master and he poured a pitcher over his face.” After he finished, Yonatan took a deep breath, as though he had forgotten to breathe through the whole recitation of the Mishnah passage.

“I guess it’s a good thing we still learn and teach through oral transmission, eh?” Yitzhak joked. Yonatan didn’t respond. “I’m sorry, Yonatan,” Yitzhak sighed, “I didn’t meant to say

you'll never be able to read or write again. But just that ... every dark spot has a ring of light around it. You can't see now, but you can still study."

Yonatan gritted his teeth and asked in the usual manner of halakhic dialectical argumentation: "In what manner does a man make his house temporary and his sukkah his permanent home?"

Yitzhak could see that he could not goad Yonatan to talk about anything other than the laws of Sukkot, and continued in their usual manner of recitation and argumentation. "If he has beautiful vessels or divans, things that make his house feel like home, he should take them into the Sukkah. He should sleep there and eat and drink there, and pass his leisure time there," Yitzhak answered to Yonatan's robotic question.

"And how do you know that, Yitzhak?" Yonatan's voice was tinged with just a little more anger and derision than usual as they continued through dissecting the material.

"From what our rabbis have taught," Yitzhak looked up at the ceiling as he conjured up the teaching again in his mind, to further expound and explain with Yonatan the meaning of the Mishnah. "When Leviticus says, 'You shall dwell,' it implies 'in the same manner in which you ordinarily live.' Hence our rabbis said, 'a man make his house temporary and his sukkah his permanent home'."

"In what manner, though?" Yonatan pressed. Yitzhak wasn't sure what he was fishing for. "That he should eat and drink and pass his leisure in the Sukkah, as you say... And also that he should engage in profound study in his Sukkah!"

“Do you engage in profound study in your home, Yonatan?” Yitzhak inquired. They spent all day together at the Beit Midrash, he couldn’t imagine going home to further study! As he thought about the prospect of studying at home, and how his wife would admonish him for ignoring her, he felt his mind start to wander to her current condition. He had the sudden urge to leap up, run out of the study house, and drag her to the market place so she could identify for him the man that should be put to death for his actions. He forced himself to focus on their study. He closed his eyes, slowed his breath, and searched deep in his mental codices for a good argument against Yonatan’s claims for obsessive study.

“Ah,” Yitzhak exclaimed, proud of himself for thinking of a refutation to Yonatan, “But did not the great rabbi Raba say, ‘Scripture and Mishnah can be studied in the sukkah, but the reciting should be done outside the Sukkah.’” He leaned back and smiled in self-satisfaction.

“That’s not a challenge, Yitzhak,” Yonatan snapped, “One refers to reciting and one refers to profound study. You can profoundly study the Scripture and Mishnah, and even revise and transcribe, just as we do hear in the Beit Midrash, but you shouldn’t recite alone in the sukkah.” Yonatan sighed as Yitzhak’s face fell. “This was the case of Raba and Rami ben Hama when they were standing before Rav Hisda together,” Yonatan’s tone indicated that this was about to be one of his trademark smug ramblings, which Yitzhak always had trouble following. “Surely you’ve heard this story? They first studied together, and then they investigated the reasons behind the laws, just as we do. Raba said, ‘Drinking vessels may be kept in the sukkah, eating utensils must be taken outside the sukkah. A lamp may be kept within the sukkah, while some say that it must be kept outside the sukkah’; but there is no difference of opinion between them, the former referring to a large sukkah and the latter to a small one. You see, it’s the same as your argument, but it just doesn’t work. You’re comparing pomegranates and figs, Yitzhak.”

Yitzhak stared blankly at Yonatan. He thought about pointing out that no one had specified the size of the sukkot and that his insistence in the differences between “recitation” and “profound study” was also baseless. This was the sort of argumentation that Yitzhak couldn’t stand, because it didn’t actually seem to help clarify things. Yonatan was just trying to be right. But he knew that neither of them had the right answers. Raba was long dead and no one had written down his exact words, so there was no way to be sure one way or the other. They had to figure it out as best they could. This was why many students in their generation had started to write down their recitations and notes, so that the future students to sit in this Beit Midrash would know for certain what they had agreed upon. Although Yitzhak wasn’t sold on Yonatan’s solution here, he was in no mood to argue, and knew that Yonatan really needed a win right now. So he grunted some agreement and started to write down their words into Yonatan’s notes. His penmanship was sloppy, his writing out of practice and much harder to read than Yonatan’s, but it would have to suffice until Yonatan’s sight came back.

After he finished writing, Yitzhak said, “Great, we’ve determined what the Mishnah means in its first verse. Next, ‘If rain fell.’ What does that come to teach us?” The corners of Yonatan’s mouth twitched up, in the closest thing to a smile that Yitzhak had seen on him all day. Although he was happy to see his friend’s spirit improved, he knew that it meant another long winded answer was coming.

“A Tanna taught, ‘When porridge of beans would become spoilt’.” Yonatan recited proudly. “Now, that means – ”

Yitzhak jumped in before Yonatan could start in with his blathering. “A story goes that Abaye was seated before R. Joseph in a sukkah. The wind blew and brought down wood chips

from the sukkah ceiling,” Yitzhak started to gesture with his hands, pantomiming the winds and woodchips coming down into the porridge, but then he remembered that Yonatan couldn’t see him anyway and he dropped his hands into his lap. “R. Joseph said to them, ‘Remove the vessels for me hence.’” Yitzhak continued in a more subdued tone, aware once again of the unfortunate events of the day. “Abaye said to him, ‘But have we not learnt, “When porridge of beans would become spoilt”?’ He answered him, ‘For me, who am fastidious, this is like the porridge becoming spoilt’. So you see,” Yitzhak again felt certain of himself and allowed his own smirk return to his face now as he finished, “When one may be permitted to leave is on a person-to-person basis. Some may be able to withstand heavy rain, and enjoy some wet porridge, while others will consider their porridge ruined if even the dry winds blow.”

Yonatan pursed his lips for a moment. Yitzhak thought he might be upset that he had cut him off. They argued all the time and usually they each had no trouble conceding to the other when each had made good points. Sometimes the debates would continue endlessly, and they could spend the entire day on a single verse of Mishnah. Occasionally, they’d even need to signal down the Rav or group up with another chavruta to garner new views and fresh evidence for their own points, but they always kept it friendly and professional. They always came to an agreement eventually or at least agreed to disagree. Yonatan didn’t usually make faces like the one he was making now.

Suddenly his face broke out into a smile. “Alright, Yitzhak,” he exclaimed and reached his hand out to slap Yitzhak’s back. It took some flailing and a momentary re-pursing of the lips, but he found Yitzhak’s back eventually, booming: “Good use of our sages to illustrate a point.

I'm sold on that!" He rubbed his hands together and said, "So, moving on: the parable. Who spilled on whom?"

Yitzhak was furiously scribbling down the previous notes as Yonatan was speaking. He surprised even himself as he heard himself reciting a baraita as if from out of thin air, "Come and hear: 'The master poured the pitcher over his own face and said, "I have no desire for your service.'" Our Rabbis taught, similarly," Yitzhak found the next teaching he had memorized as a young student immediately called to his mind and he saw his bridge to bring this conversation into the one he'd really want to be having all day, "In another baraita, 'When the sun is in eclipse, it is a bad omen for the whole world.' This may be illustrated by a parable just like the one in our Mishnah. To what can this be compared? To a human being who made a banquet for his servants and put up for them a lamp. When he became angry with them he said to his servant, 'Take away the lamp from them, and let them sit in the dark'. In doing so, he put himself in the dark as well."

Yonatan cocked his head to the side a bit as he contemplated this shift in parables. "Hmmm," he rumbled, "Interesting thought, Yitzhak."

"Yonatan, I've been trying real hard to stay with you on this Sukkah Mishnah, but we can't ignore the omen of the solar eclipse. In the Mishnah, the parable comes to teach that the man who tosses water on his own face to spite the servant who brings it to him to drink is like the one who quickly concedes his porridge is spoiled and does not enjoy the mitzvah of the sukkah. Likewise, the man who is committed to remove the light from the servant with whom he is angry plunges himself and his whole court into darkness," Yitzhak held his hands open in pleading, even knowing that Yonatan couldn't see them. He couldn't help it; his whole body

yearned to have Yonatan understand what he was saying, to fully hear this and concede this point. “When we are self-indulgent and do not fulfill the will of God, we douse ourselves with water, we plunge ourselves into darkness. If we follow the will of God, including protecting the innocent and heeding to their cries, then we have no need to fear such omens.”

Yonatan turned to face Yitzhak. “Yes,” he murmured slowly. “I think I see what you mean...”

Yitzhak felt this was the moment to finish his argument, to convince Yonatan of what he was so certain, and hopefully gain Yonatan’s support in proceeding toward justice for his wife. “Yonatan,” Yitzhak spoke quietly and urgently, “another baraita says, ‘On account of four things is the sun in eclipse: On account of a vice president of the Sanhedrin who died and was not mourned fittingly; on account of a betrothed maiden who cried out aloud in the city and there was none to save her; on account of sodomy, and on account of two brothers whose blood was shed at the same time.’ I think that darkness this morning was brought upon us for the sake of my wife.”

“And you think I was blinded by the ring around the eclipse because I didn’t believe her?” Yonatan said slowly.

Yitzhak looked at his friend sheepishly. Yonatan’s eyes suddenly widened. “Yitzhak, I ... I can see again!”

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“I can’t believe we’re giving up the whole day of study for this,” Yonatan grumbled. “We could have at least gone to the Beit Midrash for a couple of hours this morning. Don’t you



usually go to the market in the afternoon, anyway?” He asked Yitzhak’s wife, “Surely if we came home after lunch to follow you, our odds of finding the man would be just as good.”

The three of them were standing around the dining table in Yitzhak’s home. Yonatan had come over immediately following breakfast and his morning prayers, at the time he would have started for the study house. They were devising a plan for the men to catch the attacker and bring him to justice.

Yitzhak’s wife glanced nervously at Yitzhak. She was not used to Yonatan’s obsessive studiousness and was clearly worried that he was having second doubts about the whole thing. Yitzhak put his arm around his wife and looked pointedly at Yonatan. Yonatan shifted uncomfortably, both because of Yitzhak’s intense stare and because of the rarity of seeing a husband and wife actually touch in front of another person. He knew this meant he had touched a nerve.

“Yonatan,” he said, “We don’t know anything about this man. You and I have heard no word about a new merchant from Eretz Yisrael, and there has been no new gossip from the Holy Land around the Beit Midrash. Surely this man has lied about who he is, and we have no other recourse.” He pulled his arm away from his wife and threw his hands up to the ceiling. “For goodness sake, Yonatan, even the Rav agreed this was a good idea!” He walked toward Yonatan and put his hands on his friend’s shoulders, looked him square in the eyes and said, “It is for this that you have been given your sight again.” Yonatan nodded and the three of them set out for town.

Yitzhak and Yonatan slowly crept through the market place. They were following Yitzhak's wife, careful to keep their distance. They were hoping that if she looked alone, the mystery man who had attacked her would approach her again. They three had agreed upon a signal earlier that day. If she identified the man for them, the chavruta would apprehend him and bring him to the authorities for judgment.

"Yitzhak, do you really think my temporary blindness and the return of my sight is really all because of your wife?" Yonatan asked his partner as they paused by a cart of earthenware, waiting for Yitzhak's wife to move ahead a bit farther.

"Of course I do, Yonatan," Yitzhak replied without taking his eyes off his wife. "Why would I lie about that?"

Yonatan picked up a clay jar from the cart and began tracing the designs engraved along the perimeter of the jar. "Well..." He stammered, "I'm, well, it's not that I still don't believe your wife or that I really regret missing today's study to be here now, I'm just..." He put the jar back down on the cart and turned to face his best friend. "I just still think that there are other ways to understand the Halakha on all this."

He put his hands up as though to stop Yitzhak from interrupting, but Yitzhak had not made any attempts to speak yet. Instead, he glanced quickly at Yonatan, and immediately turned back to keep his gaze trained on his wife. "I just mean, what if we didn't have the eclipse of the sun yesterday? What if we had it, but we hadn't been studying that exact passage from Masekhet Sukkah that made you think of the parable that brought us to the baraita about the eclipse and the unheeded cries of a woman? How would we have known how to fall on this issue, Yitzhak?"

“Yonatan,” Yitzhak said, still looking at his wife, intent on not losing track of her in the throngs of people. “Even when we studied Ketubot the day before the eclipse, we recalled that Rava, our same Rava whom you quoted to determine the proper way to inhabit a sukkah, teaches us that any intercourse which involves compulsion, no matter the circumstances, is still considered an attack.” Noticing that his wife had started to move a little farther, Yitzhak put his hand on Yonatan’s elbow and gently pulled him along as they kept up their tailing. “We agreed in our discussion about that law,” Yitzhak continued, “that regardless of how my wife came to be in the terrible situation with this man, she is to be considered innocent.”

Yonatan sighed deeply, his shoulders sagging, his steps dragging. “It’s not just this issue. It’s not just about your wife’s innocence.” Yitzhak beckoned for him to pick up his pace a bit. Yonatan squared his shoulders, straightened his back, and walked on with his friend. “I’ve been feeling concerned lately about our habit of writing down the old teachings and our additions. It’s called the Oral Law for a reason, Yitzhak. What if we’re interpreting it wrong? What right do we have to be the ones to write it down?”

For the first time in this conversation, Yitzhak actually looked at his friend. “But you’re the one who does all the writing, Yonatan,” he said in surprise. “Where’s all this coming from?”

“I began writing things down because I just wanted to take notes,” Yonatan explained. “But I get the sense that some of the others are writing down their chavruta discussions because they want to be remembered. They want the Oral Law as we have it now to be remembered better than we and all the students before us have remembered it so far. But what if we’ve remembered falsely? What if we all already missed our chance to get it right and now we’re just recording how wrong we are?”

Yitzhak stopped and turned to face Yonatan, though both were sure to keep the corners of their eyes trained on Yitzhak's wife. "Yonatan, how can we be wrong or right about any of this?" Yitzhak said tenderly. "Remember the stories of our sages. The true holiness of studying Oral Law is in the studying itself, in determining the meanings for our own times."

Yonatan made a face. He was always skeptical of Yitzhak's views. The law was the law! Yitzhak knew what his partner was thinking. They'd had similar conversations before, although this was the first time Yonatan was expressing doubts in his own ability to understand the absolute law believed in.

"Yonatan, think about the story of Rabbi Eliezer. He knows the absolute law regarding the susceptibility of the oven to ritual defilement? The rest of the rabbis disagree with him, and even after the Voice from Heaven comes to tell all the sages that the law should be in accordance with what Rabbi Eliezer," Yitzhak recounted. "Rabbi Joshua still rejects Rabbi Eliezer's ruling and declares, 'The law is not in Heaven!' And what does the Holy One, Blessed be He, do in response?"

"He laughs in joy," Yonatan nodded and smiled as he responded.

He turned back toward his wife and continued strolling through the shuk. Yonatan followed. The pair put their arms around one another's shoulders, leaning into each other as they walked on.

"These and these," Yitzhak began.

"Are the words of the ever-living God," Yonatan finished.

*Afterword: Who are Yonatan and Yitzhak?*

Yonatan and Yitzhak are completely fictional characters. We will never know the names or much about the lives of the Stammaim. Their very label is “the anonymous ones”. But thanks to David Weiss Halivni, we are at least now aware of their existence, time period, and role in the construction of the Talmud. The characterization of Yitzhak’s wife is intentionally one dimensional, and the resolution of her quest for justice or the paternity of her baby is left open on purpose. Ultimately, she is not what matters in the story. Not only because the intention of the story is to illustrate the relationship of the chavruta and the creation of the Babylonian Talmud, which were entirely masculine roles, but also because the historical time period, like most historical time periods, was ruled by patriarchy and women were secondary characters even in their own lives. In history as much as in the story, she would likely have been a tool to drive forward certain necessities of the reality-building for the men.

When I set out to write this story, I did not have much in mind for the plot. All I knew was that the idea of a new set of rabbis we knew nothing about begged for fictionalized narrative, in the mode of *As a Driven Leaf* (Milton Steinberg, 1939) and *Rashi’s Daughters* (Maggie Anton, 2005). Since no such book already existed for me to read, I knew I had to create it. The idea of centering the plot on the rape of Yitzhak’s wife was inspired by an interdisciplinary study of the laws of the rodef at a school retreat, and it served to create some drama that would be

more interesting than showing the rabbis and students debating the laws of prayer choreography or rabbinic ordination.

In researching further rabbinic teachings about rape beyond the rodef laws of Sanhedrin, I discovered the baraita Yitzhak quotes three times throughout this story, embedded in Sukkah 29a. The Gemara quotes the Mishnah and teases out further explanation of law in question and answer mode, before completely devolving in a sequence of baraitot about eclipses and other bad omens. The sugya is a clear example of the Stam construction: pieces of what teachings they already had, stitched together with their own questions inserted to help the flow make sense, some of it still seeming quite out of place. We can now only speculate on what they were thinking about that led to this somewhat confusing sequence of statements. That is what I've done here: speculate and tried to insert some meaning into the sugya, and projected backwards to give Yitzhak's life some meaning from the Oral Law.