Aggadot from the Rabbis of the Talmud: Stories for Their Time and Ours

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Table of Contents

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Introduction

Contemporary Jews in liberal congregations have much exposure to Torah, but very little contact with rabbinic literature, particularly Talmud. In my experience teaching *parashat ha'shavuah*, I found that congregants were very used to navigating the gaps between the ancient cultural context and our own. Experience with sermons and *divrai Torah* over the years have taught them how to find connections between the text and our own time. Even though parts of the text are difficult and culturally not relevant (i.e. the sacrificial system in *Leviticus*), nonetheless, modern Jews have learned to extract elements that speak to them, and in the process can bridge between the ancient and modern settings in a way that makes the text accessible and interesting for them to discuss. Although most do not regard Torah as the word of God, they clearly identify it as central to the Jewish experience and they want to know more about how to connect to this book that is "our story".

This is not the case with Talmud, for many reasons. There has been little to no ongoing exposure to rabbinic literature; snippets of rabbinic wisdom are presented in sermons, but there is no "overall guiding perspective that students can keep in mind as they engage small parcels here and there"[1] . The literature itself is voluminous and is difficult to access even in translation. Furthermore, "rabbinic texts occupy a cultural space that is not part of most students' ordinary lives"[2]. Because the enterprise of *halakhah* may

[1] Rothstein (2009), p.4
[2] *Ibid.*

be foreign to many modern liberal Jews, rather than stimulating curiosity about rabbinic culture it may have the opposite effect. If they have rejected Orthodox Judaism as being irrelevant in their lives, why should they have interest in the culture and texts that created it? And yet, we modern Jews are the product of rabbinic Judaism – it is "our story" as much as Torah. Furthermore, in this day and age, when the Jewish people are so divided, familiarity with our texts can be a source of commonality that, hopefully, can help bridge some of these divisions.

Is it possible to find a way to teach Talmud in our congregations? Can we design adult education classes that will attract an audience as large as those that come to study the Torah portion? As I began to think about this topic, I realized that one barrier was my own separation from the culture of the Rabbis. I found myself getting angry at the Rabbis for their social attitudes, for example, for their treatment and assumptions about women. How could I explain and share my love for this tradition and this literature, when it often made me angry and I could not even explain my love for it to myself?

Levisohn has put forth a "menu of orientations" as a way to map out the underlying assumptions beneath the various ways that one could approach the teaching of rabbinic literature. They are not mutually exclusive – more than one of these orientations may be brought to bear when one is teaching – and they have helped me to define goals for myself, for how I would like to design a curriculum for teaching aspects of Talmud to adults. Levisohn's orientations are as follows[3]:

[3] Levisohn (2010), pp. 16-42

1	Torah/Instruction	Talmud study as a means of providing instruction and inspiration; truths about the world, human nature, God. This is how the "sermon snippets" mentioned above are most often used.
2	Contextual	Academic analysis using parallel texts, historical materials and methods, to understand how texts achieved their final form, and how that helps us to understand the text
3	Jurisprudential	How the Jewish legal system is constructed; the process of argumentation and how laws are established
4	*Halakhic*	The specific content of a law or laws, and how it developed
5	Literary orientation	Examines a specific text as an independent unit – its structure, literary devices, etc. – as a way to understand its meaning and to derive personal meaning from it.
6	Cultural orientation	Use of text as a window into rabbinic culture, their values and assumptions. Allows comparison with our own cultural values and assumptions.
7	Historical orientation	Talmud study as a means to understand the social, intellectual and political situations of the past.
8	*Bekuit* [Mastery] or Coverage	Exposure to as much of the Talmud as possible to get a big-picture understanding of the enterprise and its contents. This is the *Daf Yomi* approach.
9	Interpretive	Talmud study as a window into how the rabbis read and interpret Scripture (a *midrashic* approach)
10	Skills	Talmud study with a goal of teaching the basic skills, vocabulary, etc. needed to decipher the Talmud (the main approach in Talmud classes in rabbinical school).

My primary goal for teaching Talmud is to present Talmud, like Torah, as a way to uncover truths within Judaism that can be meaningful to a modern audience (Levisohn #1). The study of Talmud also should open up windows into the culture of the rabbis and invite comparison and contrast with our own culture (Levisohn #6). Furthermore, since the rabbis were concerned with prescribing a way of life, this approach will also introduce *halakhic* issues (Levisohn # 4), but it is not my intention to make the study of *halakhah* a central goal. Rather, I propose to study *aggadah*, the stories that the rabbis tell about themselves, as a window into Torah/instruction, culture orientation, and the associated *halakhah*. These stories are more accessible than the argumentation that is typical of *halakhic* discussions, and since they deal with human relationships, they may be a rich source of universal truths, which emerge from discussions of the culture of then and now.

Rubenstein, in his analysis of rabbinic stories[4], uses literary analysis, source criticism, and redaction criticism to enhance understanding of the stories and the world of the storyteller and redactors. The first two are methodologies that fit the description of Levisohn's "orientations", described above. Redaction criticism looks at where the story appears within the *sugya* – its relationship to *halakhic* discussions, and to other stories that may accompany it.

[4] Rubenstein (1999), p. 23

In this paper, I will explore a number of Talmudic stories in a way that I hope can be used to engage a modern adult education class into the rabbinic literature. Each story will be addressed in three major ways:

(1) Literary analysis: to empower modern audiences to look carefully at a piece of Talmud from a literary point of view. Most adults have had experience with this type of analysis in English literature. I will use analysis of the structure, rhetorical devices, etc., of the story as a tool for engaging the reader, and thereby opening them up to the other windows in which I wish to engage them.[5]

(2) Contextual analysis (also incorporating what Rubenstein refers to as redaction criticism): I will look at the placement of the story in context in the Talmud, and try to examine and understand how the story functions in its context. Is it the only such story? How is it similar or distinct in viewpoint from other stories surrounding it? Why is the story being told? What values are being expressed? Are there competing values on the table? What is bothering the rabbis? As a side-benefit of this contextual analysis, students will learn something about how the Talmud is organized.

(3) Cultural context: What are we learning about rabbinic culture from the stories being told? How are the issues that are raised similar or different to issues in our time? Are there *halakhic* issues that relate to the concerns of the story? What

(1) [5] On a personal note, this is the method by which I first encountered the stories of the Talmud. I had the good fortune to study Talmud *aggadah* in Israel with Professor Ari Elon. As we read these often opaque stories, Professor Elon had us focus on the characters, their emotions, and their motivations. These stories came alive for me, and so planted the seed that has developed into this paper.

truths or advice can the stories offer for our own time? Can we reimagine the story using modern day situations?

I want to say a few words about the stories that I have chosen to discuss. Because my aim was to look at rabbinic stories as a way to examine rabbinic culture and ours, and because of the large gap I perceived between the two, I found myself especially attracted to stories which internally demonstrated a conflict between values or norms. It seemed to me that these stories were especially well-suited to bridge to a discussion of values in their time and ours. These stories, with their internal tension, also would serve to counteract the misperception among many liberal Jews that rabbinic society was one of fixed norms, forever frozen in time. On the contrary, the rabbis of the Talmud struggled with their opinions and beliefs. They were not afraid to hold conflicting ideas simultaneously and were brilliant in their reinterpretation of *halakhah* in light of new circumstances.

Stories have the power to change the way we look at things. They move the context-free and universal to the context-sensitive and particular[6]; they take us from *nomos* (law as a model of how the world would look if it were redeemed or perfect) to narrative (the world as it is lived).[7] Discussing Jewish codes of law, Jill Jacobs notes:

[6] Cutter (2004), p. 75, [quoting Jerome Bruner]: "There are two irreducible modes of cognitive functioning. Each provides ways of organizing representation in memory and of filtering the perceptual world. One seeks explications that are context-free and universal, and the other seeks explications that are context-sensitive and particular."

[7] *Ibid, pp. 76-77.* Cutter explains Robert Cover's view of *nomos* or law as [quoting Cutter] ""the normative pattern which may recommend a way the world would look if it was redeemed, and the narrative may represent the world as it is lived." There is a tension between "the norm or fixed value against the dynamism of the narrative reality". This tension is what allows the law to grow and change.

> "In forcing the Talmud's legal material into a unified system of law, we gain coherency and structure, but lose the interplay between law and narrative that distinguishes the Talmud from other legal genres. This systemization of law also largely silences the minority voices that often appear only in the form of stories…Narratives, especially those that reflect minority voices, attempt to correct the assumptions and prejudices of a legal system crafted by a privileged and relatively homogeneous few."[8]

In the stories I have selected, we hear different voices. The rabbinic ideal of long periods of Torah study away from home is also examined from the point of view of the women who are left at home. The rabbinic norm of praying to save the life of a beloved rabbi is also examined from the point of view of his handmaiden, who sees how much he is suffering. Rabbinic theories formulated to explain the value of suffering are examined from the point of view of the one who is suffering.

These stories provide a platform from which to discuss issues that are not era-specific, but universal: the relationship between husbands and wives and how they negotiate roles, expectations, work-home balance; end-of-life issues - how to decide when to let a patient die; visiting the sick - how to act and what to say to one who is suffering. Finally, I have included a series of stories about coming to terms with one's own death.

[8] Jacobs (2006) p. 54

Chapter 1
Rav Rehumi
Spousal relationships: negotiating expectations

Thus, R. Rehumi who was frequenting [the school] of Raba at Mahuza[9] used to return home[10] on the Eve of every Day of Atonement. On one day he was so attracted by his subject [that he forgot to return home]. His wife was expecting [him every moment, saying] "He is coming soon[11], he is coming soon". As he did not arrive she became so depressed that a tear began to flow from her eye. He was [at that moment] sitting on a roof. The roof collapsed under him and he was killed.[12] [B.T. Ketubot 62b]

Literary analysis

This is a seemingly simple story that depicts a love triangle.[13] The characters are Rav Rehumi, his wife, and the subject of study to which he was so attracted, Torah. Rav Rehumi studied in one of the Babylonian academies, studying Torah *she b'kativ*, and Torah *she b'al peh* – the written and oral Torah. The story is both tragic and ironic, using irony and hyperbole to make its point. The name of the husband is Rehumi – from the root רחם, which in the *pi'el* means "to have compassion for, pity on". [14] He shows the very opposite of compassion towards his wife. Yonah Frankel points out the irony in the expression "coming to see her regularly on Yom Kippur" - as if a spousal relationship

[9] A town on the Tigris River noted for its commerce and its large Jewish population.
[10] He came home, and he came to his wife are both meant here – in the Talmud, "home" often is used to imply "wife" [Elon (1996), p. 172, note 23]
[11] *Lit.,* now
[12] *Lit.,* his soul rested.
[13] This analysis is largely based on the analysis of Ari Elon, in "Rehumi's Love Triangle" In Elon (1996), pp.81-84, and on my notes from the course I took from him.
[14] The root *rhm*, in Aramaic means to love. It may be an indicator of the "love" predicament in which Rav Rehumi finds himself – obligated to his wife, but enamored of his "mistress" the Torah.

that takes place but once a year could be considered "regularly"[15]. And not only does he only come to see her once a year, but he comes on *erev Yom Kippur*. Thus, at best, he has sexual relations with his wife once a year, before the holiday begins; once Yom Kippur begins he will spend all his time in prayer, and will not permitted to have sexual relations with his wife. His returning home on Yom Kippur assures that he follows the letter of the law – making amends with his fellow human being, here, his wife, before he makes amends with God - but he certainly does not do *teshuvah*, which would require a change in his future behavior. To the contrary, our text implies that he had become accustomed to this behavior. הוה רגיל implies habit, regularity. He has done it year after year, so that this has become his norm. His wife, too, has presumably become used to his behavior. We see her in eager anticipation of his arrival, השתא אתי השתא אתי, "he is coming soon; he is coming soon!" She knows what the routine is, she has expected him like this before; she is complicit in his behavior in that it has become normal for their relationship. One can imagine that this has happened gradually. Each year, perhaps, he has spent a little less time with his wife, and a little more time with Torah, and each year, his wife has tolerated this behavior, and the marital equilibrium has reset, until it has arrived at its present place, the annual Yom Kippur visit.

Then as in any good story, something happens to upset this homeostasis. This year, unlike previous years, Rav Rehumi's attraction for his subject, Torah, tips the precarious

[15] Boyarin (1993), p. 147, quoting Yonah Frankel

balance one step too far, beyond the point of his wife's tolerance, and חלש דעתה, literally, "her mind weakened". Elon says the following about this expression:

> "The expression, *halshah da'ata…*is a conspicuous motif in the stories of the Babylonian Talmud. The term refers to a weakening of the spirit, a state of deep depression connected with loss of control. Generally when the spirit of one of the heroes of these stories weakens, he becomes dangerous. We are all afraid of what he might do to us, since he has lost control over himself. That is the strength of the very weak, we are afraid of them."[16]

Rev Rehumi's wife loses the careful control she has had over herself; she has nothing more to lose. At this point אחית דמעתא מעינה, a tear comes from her eye. So that we can understand the power of this tear, Elon refers us to B.T. *Bava Metzia* 59a, a discussion of the following *Mishnah*:

> "Just as there is overreaching in buying and selling, so is there wrong done by words. One must not ask another, what is the price of this article, if he has no intention of buying. If a man was a repentant one must not say to him, "remember your former deeds". If he was a son of proselytes one must not taunt him, "remember the deeds of your ancestors", because it is written, 'you shall neither wrong a stranger, nor oppress him'. [17]

In the *Gemara*, Rav Hanina son of Rav Idi asks, "what is the meaning of the verse, 'you shall not wrong one another' [Lev 25:14]?" The conversation quickly turns to wives, and to tears.

[16] Elon (1996), p. 172, note 25.
[17] B.T. *Bava Metzia 58a*

> Rav said: "A person should be careful of wronging his wife, because, through her tear the calamity of her deception will come quickly"[18]. Rabbi Eleazar said, "from the day that the Temple was destroyed, the gates of prayer were locked, as is said, 'Also when I cry out, he stops up my prayer' [Lamentations 3:8]." But even though the gates of prayer are locked, the gates of tears are not, as is said, 'Hear my prayer, O God, and give ear to my cry – do not be silent in the face of my tears' [Psalms 39:13] . . .[19] R. Hisda said, "All the gates are locked except the gates of the wronged", as it is said, 'Behold, God stood on a plumb line wall, and in his hand a plumb line' [Amos 7:7]. . . R. Helbo said, "A person must be careful to observe the honor due his wife, because blessings rest on a man's home only because of his wife, as it is said, 'and he treated Abraham well, for her sake.' [Gen 12: 16] And thus did Rav say to the inhabitants of Mahuza "Honor your wives, that you may be enriched."[20]

It cannot be a coincidence that our story concerns a scholar who studies in Rav's academy at Mahuza, who wrongs his wife; her tears, in turn, lead directly to the calamity of his death. It certainly represents the views of the discussion in this *sugya*, and neatly summarizes them. However, in the Babylonian Talmud the story appears elsewhere - shortly we will see what role it plays in the context in which it has been placed.

But first we must finish the story that we have before us. We are told that Rav Rehumi was sitting on a roof. At the moment that his wife shed her long-held-back tears, he fell

[18] Translation based on Rashi's interpretation, which implies that her tear leads quickly to punishment of the one who has wronged her (see Elon p. 83)
[19] I have omitted a *machokchet* here, where Rav says that one who listens to his wife's counsel will descent into *Gehenna*, while Rav Pappa cites a conflicting statement – 'people say, If your wife is short, bend down and hear her whisper'! The *machlokhet* is resolved by saying that Rav refers to general matters, or religious matters, while Rav Pappa refers to household affairs or secular questions. However, the situation in our story would fall into the latter category.
[20] B.T. *Bav Metzia 59a*

off the roof to his death. We cannot take these events at face value; rather we are dealing with symbolic writing. Why does our story perch Rav Rehumi on a roof? The roof represents his psychological state – like the roof, he is neither in heaven, nor on earth, but betwixt and between. He cannot be fully with his beloved heavenly Torah, because of his obligation to his wife; he cannot be fully engaged in earthly matters, because heavenly matters pull him all too strongly. So our story places him symbolically in between – on the roof. This roof perch is precarious – and the calamity that a single tear brings is his fall – he crashes to earth and dies.

Contextual Analysis

From the literary analysis of this story, we can deduce that the rabbis of the Talmudic period struggled with finding an appropriate balance between two values - that of Torah study, which they saw as a vital part of their relationship with God, and that of obligation to earthly matters, specifically their obligation to their spousal relationship. The story tells us that the pull toward heavenly matters is great, but that neglect of earthy matters comes at substantial risk. This story seems to accept that the Torah is the object of love; the relationship to the wife is more an obligation. One can favor the former, as long as one doesn't ignore the latter. But where is the sweet spot between these two values for the rabbis of the Talmud?

To try to answer this question, we turn to the context of this story in the Talmud. It appears in the context of a discussion of *onah*, the obligation of a husband to regularly satisfy his wife sexually.

The *Mishnah* reads:

> If one takes a vow not to sleep with his wife; Bet Shammai say two weeks [maximum length of abstinence period], and Bet Hillel one week. Students may go away from their homes for study of Torah without permission for thirty days and laborers for one week. The *onah* [required frequency of sexual intercourse] is mentioned in the Torah[21]. For the *tayyalin*[22] it is every day; for laborers twice a week; for donkey drivers, once a week; for camel drivers one in thirty days; for sailors once in six months; these are the words of Rabbi Eliezer.[23]

The *Mishnah* is acknowledging a conflict of interest between the requirement of a man to work or study, and his responsibility to his wife. "For the *tayyalin* it is every day" would suggest that daily intimacy is the standard for what this *Mishnah* believes the wife needs or is entitled to; but mitigating circumstances are permitted to interfere with this, up to a point. In this interpretation, the time periods prescribed in the *Mishnah* would be minimal frequencies – one should try to be with one's wife as much as possible, taking into account the conflicting demands of study or a trade. It must be noted, however, that there is a stream of asceticism that runs through rabbinic literature that would wish to interpret these as maximum frequencies, at least when the conflicting value is the study of Torah, for example, "let not scholars be with their wives too frequently like roosters" [Berakhot 22a].[24]

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[21] *Exodus* 21:10 : "If he marries another, he must not withhold from this one שארה כסותה וענתה , usually translated as: "her food, her clothing or her conjugal rights".

[22] men of leisure; those who walk about; perhaps with no need to pursue an occupation, and so can walk about idly [Soncino explanation]. The Talmud text itself posits "day students" or "the pampered men of the west".

[23] B.T. *Ketubot* 61b

[24] Biale (1984), p. 132

In fact, it is the conflict between Torah study and husbandly obligation about which the Sages of the Talmud appear most conflicted. An occupation is seen as source of livelihood, which is valued on a different scale than intimacy, as is made clear in our *Gemara*:

> Rabbah bar Rav Chanan asked Abaye: A donkey driver wishes to become a camel driver [since the change decreases the frequency of *onah*, does he need his wife's permission?]. He [Abaye] said to him, "A woman prefers a *kav* [25] and intimacy over ten *kavs* and abstinence".[26]

In contrast, a man engaged in Torah study is in relationship to God. Thus, the conflict between the two values is much more difficult for the man, and the stakes higher for the woman – in the case of study, it is as if he has a mistress. It is not material matters that keep him away from his wife, but rather, a competing passion - his passion for Torah.

Regarding "*Students may go away from their homes for study of Torah <u>without permission for thirty days</u>* [emphasis mine] *…these are the words of Rabbi Eliezer*", the *Gemara* states:

> Rav Ada the son of Ahva said that Rav said: Those are the words of Rabbi Eliezer, but the Sages hold that the students may go away for the study of Torah <u>for two or three years[27] without permission</u> [emphasis mine]. Rava said that our Rabbis

[25] A measure of volume – here representing amount of material wealth [Schottenstein (2005)*Talmud Bavli Tractate Kesubos* Vol. 2), 62b (1) note 4
[26] *Ketubot* 62b
[27] "Two or three" is not understood as specific, rather it may be taken to mean "several" Boyarin (1993), p. 144, note 20)

> have relied upon Rav Ada the son of Ahva and indeed practice in accordance with his view.[28]

Thus, a later Sage amends the standard of practice toward the permissibility of a longer absence from home duties in order to study Torah. Boyarin understands this to be evidence for a change in social practice in Babylonia. [29] This is immediately followed by our story, which "is plausibly read as an index of ambivalence and opposition to this practice.[30] And so, Rav Rehumi's practice of staying away a year or more is deemed unsatisfactory, but this story is not allowed to stand alone. It is followed by a string of six more stories, all on the subject of the conflict between wife and Torah study.

It is not unusual for rabbinic stories to be arranged in groups of seven.[31] Stories in such story-cycles may take on shades of meaning that they would not have standing on their own.[32] Furthermore, the order of the stories may, itself, represent a rhetorical argument in the hands of the redactor that put together the *sugya*. it is Boyarin's thesis that the evolution of these stories represents a difference in practice in Palestine and Babylonia.

> [Baraita] On studying Torah and marrying a woman? He should study Torah and then marry, but if he cannot manage without a wife, he should marry and then study Torah. [Amoraic statements]: Rav Yehudah said that Samuel said: the

[28] B.T. *Ketubot* 62b
[29] Boyarin (1993), p. 146; it is Boyarin's thesis that the evolution of these stories represents a difference in practice in Palestine and Babylonia.
[30] *Ibid.*, p. 147
[31] Diamond (1995), p. 81 note 22, referencing R. Gordis "The Heptad as an Element of Biblical and Rabbinic Style, and Sh. Y Friedman "The Structure of the *Sugyot* in the Babylonian Talmud."
[32] Diamond (1995), pp. 76-77, notes 4 and 5, referring to the work of Eli Yassif

> *halakhah* is that he should marry and then study Torah. Rabbi Yohanan said: A millstone around his neck and he will study Torah! And they do not disagree; that is for us [Palestine] and that is for them [Babylonia]. [B.T. *Kiddushin* 29b]

In Palestine, where the norm was to study Torah prior to marriage, there was less need to justify a prolonged interval of separation between husband and wife than in Babylonia, where the norm was to marry and then go off to study Torah.

In the story-cycle which follows, we can discern a shift from an expectation that man's relation to his Torah study must remain in equilibrium with his relationship with his wife, to an expectation that favors Torah study, whether by recruiting the wife to subsume her own needs to it, or by making it clear to the husband that he may not put his wife first.

The stories may be found in their original language and in translation, in Appendix I.

1. Rav Rehumi (discussed above)

   In story 1 the characters are husband and wife. They have reached a private arrangement on the length of time the husband can be away at Torah study, which has set up an expectation on the part of the wife. Violation of that expectation results in deep emotional pain for the wife, and death for the husband. The message is that Torah study cannot supersede the husband's responsibility to meet his relationship obligation to his wife. Her feelings and expectations cannot be ignored.

2. Judah

   Story 2 follows story 1, after a short *halachic* interruption as follows:

> How often are scholars to perform their marital duties? Rav Judah in the name of Samuel replied: From the eve of *Shabbat* to the eve of *Shabbat* [that is, every *erev Shabbat*].[33]

The characters in story number two are husband and father-in-law. Judah follows the above ruling, studying all week and returning home.[34] When he, like Rav Rehumi, forgets to come home one week, the expectations that he is violating are societal expectations, as set up by the preceding *halakhah*, and emphasized by the fact that "when he would home [home] a pillar of fire would be seen preceding him" [a pillar of fire represents God's approval of his leaving his studies on *Shabba*t to return home[35]]. The father-in-law may represent the expectations of society, or perhaps the interests of his daughter, but unlike Rehumi's wife, his reaction is not complicated by personal emotional hurt. Rather he assumes that his son-in-law follows the rules, and when Judah doesn't appear, he assumes he is dead, and that very assumption results in Judah's death. The message is that society has set up a rule requiring a balance between wife and Torah, and one who violates the expectations of society cannot endure.

3. Rabbi [Judah ha Nasi]

In the third story, Rabbi arranges a marriage for his son. First, a woman is selected but dies before the *ketubah* is written, due to an unsuitable match between family

[33] B.T. *Ketubot* 62b
[34] that he is returning home to his wife to meet his conjugal obligations is understood, but not explicit
[35] Valler (1999), pp. 62-63

lineages.[36] A second betrothal is undertaken, and this is the focus of our analysis. The characters are Rabbi and his son. The new candidate for betrothal, who later becomes his wife, is spoken about, but she, herself does not speak. First, Rabbi's son.struggles with his own sexual needs, which are in conflict with the requirement to study. Upon his request, the plan to send him away to study before marriage is reduced first from 12 to 6 years, and then reduced again to allow him to marry her before he goes to study. He is embarrassed by his desires, but his father reassures him, and he marries and goes off for his 12 year stint, returning when it is over. His wife has become sterile during his absence. Rabbi considers having his son divorce her and take another wife, but he recognizes how unfair that would be to the wife. "That poor soul would have waited in vain" and "Should he take another wife, people will say 'that one is his wife, and this one is his mistress'". So he prayed for her, and she was healed.

In this story, the societal norm for leaving one's wife to study Torah has greatly expanded in length. We know this lengthy period has been deemed acceptable, because the man is not punished when he returns – he has not exceeded the expected time. As his pre-marital needs were acknowledged, so was the woman's sacrifice during the separation. Thus, the man has an obligation to her – he can't just leave and marry another. But although the text shows concern for the wife, Torah study now seems to take precedence over the marital relationship. All that the man owes his wife is not to ignore the sacrifice that she has made and to remain her husband when he returns.

[36] Valler (1999), p. 65, hypothesizes that the death serves to link the first pair of stories to the second pair of stories.

4. R. Hananyah ben Hakhnai

Characters are husband, wife [silent], and daughter [silent]. R. Hananyah [a married man] goes to study in the academy for a 12-year stint. His friend is getting married, but R. Hananyah is in a hurry to leave, and does not wait for him. When he returns, he has been away so long, he doesn't recognize his town. He sees a girl, who he learns is his daughter, and follows her home. His wife is busy with her daily tasks, and when she sees him, she dies of the shock. R. Hananyah prays for her "is this the reward of this poor soul?", and she revives.

This is clearly a companion piece to the previous story. In both, Torah study takes precedence over the marital relationship, but there is recognition of the hardship that the woman had to endure. However, the differences are telling. Rabbi's son left for his studies later than planned; R. Hananyah was in a hurry to go. Rabbi's daughter-in-law may have still had expectations – she was expecting to still be fertile on his return. R. Hananyah's wife expected nothing – in fact, she was shocked to see her husband. Torah study is yet a little more elevated in importance in this study, and the wife's suffering a little less, although she is still owed a debt by her husband.

5. R. Hama bar Bisa

The fifth story is the first where the wife will have a speaking part. Like the previous two stories, the husband leaves for 12 years. Yet, he is mindful of his wife and sends

word ahead to avoid shocking her upon his return[37]. She, in turn not only tolerates his absence, but subtly lends support to the Torah-learning enterprise by raising up his son (who he was not aware of) to continue the family tradition of scholarship. Here, for the first time, we have a woman who actively supports her husband's Torah study. She is proud to have scholars in her family. She is no longer a rival.

6. Rabbi Akiva

Now we have a story in which the expectations of the wife are fully aligned with those of the husband. It is a romantic fairy tale, where the wife actually flouts her rich father and gives up her inheritance in order to marry a poor shepherd. Her only betrothal condition is that he go off to the academy to study Torah. He returns twelve years later, extraordinarily successful, with twelve thousand disciples.[38] On return to his hometown, he overhears an old man berating his wife for living a life of "living widowhood". She replies, "If he would listen to me, he would study another twelve years".[39] R. Akiva returns immediately to the academy without revealing himself to his wife. Twelve years later, he returns with twenty-four thousand disciples. He gives his wife credit for his success – "leave her alone, mine and yours are hers!" Her father learns that the great man is Akiva, makes peace with his daughter, and gives Akiva half his wealth.

[37] This serves as a bridge to the previous story, just as the death of the first woman betrothed to Rabbi's son links to its predecessor.
[38] 1,000 disciples a year – a hyperbolic number meant to convey many disciples.
[39] Thus, she gives him permission to extend his studies, in accordance with the *halakhah* previously discussed.

In this fairy-tale romance, the Torah scholar is the hero, the wife is the prime-mover and encourager of Akiva to leave home to study Torah, for twice twelve years. The scholar is rewarded with disciples, the woman gets her grateful man, the father-in-law is impressed, everyone becomes rich, and all live happily ever after. And the wife's model of cheerful self-sacrifice is passed down another generation to her daughter – who marries Ben-Azzai, a scholar who initially eschewed marriage for himself, because he felt it would distract him from Torah.

About this story, Boyarin says:

> "the pattern of Rabbi Akiva's marriage . . . is being encoded in this story as a marriage ideal for Jews…it is self-understood and beyond question that what a Jewish wife desires is a husband learned in the Torah…It is this double effect – on the one hand, encoding a self-abnegation on the part of women, but on the other hand, rewarding that self-abnegation with great prestige – that enabled this story to have the normative effect that it had in Jewish culture. A formation that did not offer powerful social reward to women for behaving in this way could not have been as successful in achieving the hegemony that this role model for women did achieve among Jews. "[40]

That is the message for women. And to make sure that men, too, get the message that they can go ahead and study guilt-free, we have the little coda about Akiva's daughter marrying Ben Azzai which teaches, "There is no tension between marriage and lust for learning; all you need is the right kind of wife".[41]

[40] Boyarin (1993) pp 154-155
[41] *Ibid.,* p. 155

7. Rav Yosef

In the final story, the characters are Rav Yosef and his father. Rav Yosef's father sends his son to study Torah for six years, but he returns after only three, to be with his wife on the Eve of Yom Kippur. His father is furious – he accuses him "you have been reminded of your whore" or [a different version] "you have been reminded of your dove". They argue and neither eats the meal before Yom Kippur.

The story cycle ends with a man who dares to put his wife before Torah study. The Talmud offers two different reasons[42]: his wife is his whore – and he lusts after his illegitimate lover more than after Torah, his legitimate lover; or a gentler version – he simply loved his wife more than Torah. Either way, the father's extreme reaction tells us that society does not accept Rav Yosef's behavior; Torah study is the ideal, and there is no place for Rav Yosef's feelings toward his wife to interfere with his study. Thus, our story cycle begins and ends on Yom Kippur, and over this cycle, the societal norm with regard to the equilibrium of the relationship between husband and wife, and between man and Torah study has swung clearly in favor Torah study.

Shulamit Valler offers an analysis of this story-chain which focuses less on the societal pressures and is more concerned with the well-being of the individuals and of their relationship. She divides the first six stories into three dyads, as follows:

[42] Based on word-play: *zonah* = whore; *yonah* = dove

1. [Stories 1 & 2] When away from home, whether for long intervals (e.g. a year) or short (e.g. a week), one must not "forget one's domestic obligations completely or betray one's wife spiritually".
2. [Stories 3 & 4] Separation from home whether forced (husband reluctant to leave) or desired (husband eager to leave}, can result in disaster. But upon return home, showing sensitivity to wife's plight and feelings results in "atonement and reparation".
3. [Stories 5 & 6] When there is separation from home by consent, without "spiritual estrangement", the reason for the separation (here, Torah study) can be "a positive act that brings a reward."[43]

In my analysis, consistent with Boyarin, the order of the stories reflects increasing societal pressure in favor of separation of the couple, so that the husband can study Torah. Using Valler's structural division into dyads, I would summarize the societal pressures revealed by these stories as follows:

1. [Stories 1 and 2] : One must not violate personal or societal agreements about the length of separation from one's spouse to study Torah
2. [Stories 3 and 4]: Long separations to study Torah are the norm; but husband must acknowledge that this is difficult for the spouse
3. [Stories 5 and 6: The wife should support her husband in his studies, even if it involves a long separation. It is rewarding for her to do so.

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[43] Valler (1999), p. 54-76

4. [Story 7]: A man who shortens his studies to be with his wife should be admonished.

While the latter analysis sees in the order of the stories an increasing societal pressure to leave one's wife for long periods in order to study, Valler sees an increasingly positive view of the relationship between spouses in the context of the pressure of separation on the couple, moving from complete severance of the relationship, to difficult separation followed by return to an understanding relationship, to the working together of the couple, even through periods of separation, for a common purpose.

The modern reader

The modern reader may have difficulty with these stories on two levels: (1) genre and (2) the culture that the stories portray. With respect to genre: The calamitous outcomes presented in these stories - such as, a husband who falls off a roof to his death, a wife who dies of shock, and then is brought back to life - are so bizarre that they are likely to be dismissed by the modern reader, along with any value that the story might bring. Therefore, it is important to understand up-front that the genre is not history, or even historical fiction, but rather one of fable or fairy-tale. Indeed, the story of Rabbi Akiva and his wife is so similar in genre to the fairy-tales that we have grown up with in secular society that it can serve as a user-friendly illustration of how these stories should be approached.

The second barrier to the modern reader is the world of the rabbis that is portrayed. It is a man's world, in which the study of Torah is a value of utmost importance. Women are confined to the home, ever waiting for their husbands to come home. It is easy for the modern reader to become angry at the cultural inequalities, and, therefore, to dismiss any message that the stories may have to offer. In fact, it may be the very similarity in the role of women in rabbinical times, to that of women in our society of the 1950's and 1960's, which we have struggled to hard to leave behind, that is an important reason for our rejection of this material.

Before we look at the role of changes in cultural context on the message of these stories, let's define the universal elements that they contain. First, there is a relationship between two human beings, a marriage with needs and expectations both emotional and sexual. Second, there is a competing goal or "calling", which pulls one of the partners out into the world, away from the relationship. In our stories, it is the study of Torah. In our modern society it might be the fulfillment of a career, which is not only an occupation in order to earn a living, with its promise of material benefit to the couple[44], but is also a means of self-fulfillment and self-actualization for the person who is pursuing it, just as Torah study in the world of the rabbis is regarded as an act of self-fulfillment through the mastery of scholarly skills, and through forging a relationship with God. Finally, as in the days of the rabbis, our own society evolves over time, such

[44] A subject, as we have seen, that is also discussed in the *Gemara* to our *Mishnah* where it is noted that higher paying occupations (camel driver) may keep a husband away more than the lower paid donkey driver. Furthermore, in the Akiva story, Torah study is both a source of self-fulfillment and a source of wealth.

that societal expectations and pressures may weigh-in more heavily on one side or the other of these potentially conflicting values.

In the 1950's and early 1960's, society supported a marriage in which the husband worked, and the wife stayed home and managed the household. As the television show "Mad Men" so beautifully illustrates, this was an era where the man sought his self-fulfillment outside the home. He worked long hours, typically putting his career before his relationship with his wife. His career afforded opportunities for the couple to advance in wealth and social status, a potential benefit to both of them, but not without exacting a toll on the relationship.[45] Like Rehumi's wife, the stereotypical wife of this era often subjugated her own needs to that of her husband. He was fulfilled, but she often was home alone, endlessly waiting, sometimes relying on alcohol or Valium to help pass the time and dull the pain of his absence. Yet, society encouraged her in this role – women's magazines emphasized the material benefits that she would reap, and glorified the role of housewife. Stories not unlike the one we read of R. Akiva, encouraged the wife to act as helpmate, supporting her husband in his career so that they, as a couple, might achieve status and success. His success, therefore, was her success. If she had to subsume her life to his, there would be benefits that would make it all worth it in the long run.

In the 1970's, women rebelled. No longer was their husbands' success sufficient incentive for them to sacrifice their own self-fulfillment. I recall a couple I was friendly

[45] As the *Gemara* has noted, the wife might prefer that her husband be a donkey driver, than to be the higher paid camel driver who comes home less frequently.

with during my medical residency. He was working the intense every-other-night on-call schedule, always either working or sleeping, but enormously happy with what he was doing while his wife put off her own education to support him. One day, the couple took sailing lessons together, and she took charge of the rudder – exhilarated to be steering this boat by herself. Several weeks later, she made the decision to leave the marriage, and go to law school, so she could sustain some of that exhilaration in her own life. Another couple, both medical residents, appeared to be more synchronized in their expectations. Both were in fulfilling careers, both understood what 'hospital time' was like, and neither expected the other home when they were involved in a case. But societal forces still took a toll - the husband expected and needed someone who could look up to his status as physician, while his wife needed someone who could recognize her equal worth. With unequal expectations of each other, their marriage also floundered.

Our society has become more egalitarian in its understanding that both members need self-fulfillment in career, and in relationship. But still these values remain in competition. If both members of a couple are building careers, including traveling, when would they have the time to work on relationship? How would they negotiate conflicts? Would one partner be willing to give up his job, when the other had the opportunity to relocate for a major promotion? Would they consider living apart? How would they negotiate child-rearing? Who would take off when a child was ill? Would so much time spent apart weaken their emotional bonds, leading to each partner seeking to meet their emotional needs in other ways? Or could they find a way to

remain emotionally available to each other? In today's relationships, the conflicts between relationship needs and career needs remain a major life struggle. And even when couples negotiate solutions, societal pressures remain. Although both partners may be open to trying to find a balance between work and home, there is still a stigma attached to a husband who makes a lower salary than his wife, or who stays at home with the children while his wife works. Perhaps this, too, will change in time.

Also, society's definition of the relationship is changing. Marriage is no longer necessarily between a man and a woman. Gender expectations built into our definition of spousal roles are changing, but the basic conflict between the values of relationship, the self-actualization of each individual apart from the relationship continues, along with juggling the needs of the couple's children.

The stories provide a forum for exploration of these values in modern society, in addition to teaching us about the literature and cultural milieu of the Talmudic period.

Chapter 2
Rabbi Judah's Handmaid
Issues at the end of life

On the day when Rabbi died, the Rabbis decreed a public fast and offered prayers for heavenly mercy. They furthermore announced that whoever said that Rabbi was dead would be stabbed with a sword. Rabbi's handmaid ascended the roof and prayed: "The ones above desire Rabbi and the ones below desire Rabbi; may it be the will [of God] that the ones below may overpower the ones above". When however she saw how often he resorted to the privy, painfully taking off his tefillin and putting them on again[46], she prayed, " May it be the will [of God] that the ones above may overpower the ones below". As the Rabbis incessantly continued their prayers for [heavenly] mercy [*lit.* they were not silent], she took up a jar and threw it down from the roof to the ground. [For a moment] they remained silent, and the soul of Rabbi departed to its eternal rest. *The Rabbis said to Bar Kappara, "Go and see". He went, and finding that [Rabbi] was dead, he tore his cloak and turned the tear backwards. [On returning to the Rabbis] he began: "The angels and the mortals have taken hold of the holy ark. The angels overpowered the mortals and the Holy Ark has been captured." They asked him, "Has he gone to his eternal rest?" He replied, "You said it; I did not say it."* [B.T. *Ketubot* 104a]

Literary analysis

This story assumes a societal norm which is then overturned. We have seen this pattern before, in the story of Rav Rehumi, in the previous chapter. In that story, the assumed norm was the superior value of Torah study; the surprising turn around was that the

[46] *Lit*., "he would remove his tefillin and put them on again and thereby he would suffer".

pain and suffering of the wife who was deserted by the Torah scholar had the power to overturn that norm, resulting in punishment for the husband who tipped the balance one step too far toward Torah. In the story of Rabbi Judah's handmaid, there is also an accepted norm – everything possible must be done to preserve the life of Rabbi. Here too, it is turned around by pain and suffering, and here, too, the one who effects this reversal is one without power in the society, in this case doubly powerless - as a woman and a mere handmaid to Rabbi.

The story of Rabbi Judah's handmaid is set within a framework [italicized above] that makes the norm very explicit.

> *On the day when Rabbi died, the Rabbis decreed a public fast and offered prayers for heavenly mercy. They furthermore, announced that whoever said that Rabbi was dead would be stabbed with a sword.*

Rabbi is R. Judah ha Nasi, the compiler of the *Mishnah*. As he lay dying, the rabbis not only say personal prayers that he should not die, but they decree a public fast, involving the entire community in petitioning God to preserve the life of Rabbi. The story adds typical rabbinic hyperbole to make the norm absolutely clear – anyone who suggests that Rabbi is dead (thereby admitting a failure of their efforts), would be put to death by sword! This framework emphasizing the norm is continued at the end of the story. Rabbi has died, and Ben Kappara is sent to investigate to see whether this is indeed true. Learning the truth, he tears his clothes in mourning, but he hides evidence of the tear ["*he tore his cloak and turned the tear backwards"*]. He reports his finding only

obliquely, using metaphor, and when asked directly whether Rabbi has died, he still refused to answer directly, saying "You said it; I did not say it". This takes the reader back to the top frame – for, surely he fears that he will be put to the sword if he explicitly states that Rabbi is dead. Thus, the norm remains in place. The reality of the suffering and death of R. Judah, which we will examine more closely below, would seem not to displace the assumed norm that everything possible must be done to prolong the life of a man who was an important Sage and also was responsible for the welfare of the Jewish community with respect to the Roman authorities.

Now let us turn to the middle section of the story, which focuses on Rabbi's handmaid. At first, she prays along with everyone else that Rabbi will survive. It is interesting that she is on the roof. A *peshat* explanation may be that Rabbi's house is so filled with scholars praying on his behalf that the unimportant handmaid is relegated to a spot on the roof. But the roof may also represent a perch from where she has a bird's eye view of the totality of the situation – a better view than those caught up in the moment-by-moment details of assuring their prayers are effective. In addition, as in our Rehumi story, perhaps the roof represents a place that is neither fully earth nor heaven, but some place in between. The process of death is represented in this story as a battle between "those above" and "those below". The handmaid is the pivot between above and below, the one whose action causes a reset and reversal.

At one point in her prayers, Rabbi's handmaid notices how Rabbi is suffering. The smallest activities of daily living have become a burden to him, as, over and over again,

he must go to the privy, taking off his tefillin, strap-by-strap before he goes, and putting them on again strap-by-strap when he is finished. With just these few words, an almost Sisyphean image of suffering is created for the reader. No longer can the Rabbi perform his *biological* functions without suffering, but he also can no longer perform his *religious* functions without suffering[47]. In this brief image, both body and spirit are wrapped together, and we see a man whose life is filled with pain and devoid of meaning. At this point, the handmaid reverses her prayer*; "May it be the will [of God] that the ones above may overpower the ones below".* But to no avail; she is merely a woman, and her voice is only one against the chorus of prayers for the Rabbi's continued living. So she hurls down a jar from her position on the roof, and in the moment of silence caused contrarily by the noise of its shattering, the cacophony below ceases and Rabbi dies.

Sharzer notes the significance of the female character as the one who stands apart from the "competition" for Rabbi Judah; she is the only one in the story who truly cares about Rabbi. Sharzer contrasts the symbolism of her jar – female, womb-like, a metaphor for nurturing and caring - with the symbolism of the sword (the punishment for announcing the death of Rabbi), an obviously male symbol. [48] This adds another layer to the understanding of the norm of preserving the life of Rabbi at all costs as male, and its opposite as female.

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[47] Indeed, Sharzer suggests that his suffering may be due to the fact that his severe gastro-intestinal disease required him to spend so much time without his *tefillin*. Those *tefillin* bound him in an intimate relationship with God and he is suffering the loss of that intimacy. Sharzer (2011), p. 256.

[48] *Ibid.*, p. 257: this symbolism is consistent with Carol Gilligan's theory of the "masculine voice" in ethics which is concerned primarily with rules and abstract principles, and the" feminine voice" which pays more attention to the specific human situation in which a decision must be made and the relationships between the people involved (see Dorff [1998] p. 411)

Crane has pointed out that the structure of this story is chiastic, a structure often seen in rabbinic stories. In this literary structure, the elements of the story are reflected across the dramatic turning point of the story. Following Crane's analysis, the story could be charted as follows:[49]

A) One who tells of Rabbi's death will be punished by death

B) Prayer: that "those below" overpower "those above" re: R. Judah

C) Witnessing Rabbi's suffering: handmaid sees a different reality

D) Prayer: that "those above" overpower "those below" re: R. Judah

E) **Action: Interruption of those below causes silence**

d) During silence: "those above" overpower "those below"; R. Judah dies

c) Witnessing Rabbi's death: ben Kappara sees a different reality

b) Those above [angels] overpower those below [mortals] re: R. Judah

a) One tells of Rabbi's death without being punished by death

[49] Crane, J. (2013). This format is based on Crane's analysis, but I have renamed the sections for clarity and correspondence with my translation.

Contextual analysis

This story is found in the *Gemara* on a *Mishnah* that deals with the responsibility due to a widow who does not wish to move from her husband's house, by the heirs[50] to the husband's estate. Much of the *Gemara* is taken up with *aggadot* concerning the dying Rabbi Judah ha- Nasi. As he makes preparations for death, he calls for his sons to come to him. He tells them to show due respect to his wife [their step-mother], which is likely the connection of these tales to the *Mishnah*. He goes on to stipulate other conditions that he would like to see occur at the time of his death – he would like his light, table, and bed to remain in position, and he would like to have his servants who attended to him in life also do so in death. He calls together the Sages of Israel to appear in front of him, and gives them instructions for his funeral arrangements and mourning period. He asks them to limit mourning, and to open the academy again after thirty days. He also arranges for those who will succeed him at the academy. Finally he gives advice to his sons, according to their needs:

> 'I desire the presence of my younger son'. R. Shimon entered into his presence and he entrusted him with the rules and regulations of wisdom. 'I desire the presence of my elder son', he said. When R. Gamliel entered he entrusted him with the rules and regulations of the Patriarchate. He said to him, 'My son, conduct your patriarchate with men of high standing and cause bile among the students [keep the scholars under a severe discipline].[51]

[50] e.g. sons of the father, but not the mother.
[51] B.T. *Ketubot* 103b

Thus, our story is placed in the larger context of an elderly sage who was aware that his remaining life was limited and who was busy putting his affairs in order. Although his instructions were sometimes a little wistful (like keeping all his possessions unchanged, so he would be comfortable in case he would want to visit after death), for the most part they were extremely practical and important[52]. Furthermore, he was able to acknowledge his feelings of loss in the face of his impending death.

> "When Rabbi fell ill, R. Hiyya entered and found him weeping. He said to him, 'Master, why do you weep?' …He [Rabbi] said to him, 'I cry for [my impending separation from] the *Torah* and *mitzvot*'.[53]

Rabbi acknowledged his own dying, even though his colleagues, in our story that follows, do not.

The Modern Reader

The story of Rabbi's handmaid has played, and continues to play a significant role in Jewish bioethical discourse. Indeed, issues around death and dying are of critical importance to the modern reader, and we need to see what lessons for today can be derived from the *Talmud's* depiction of the death of Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi and other sages.

Jewish bioethics is a decision-making process for health-related issues that is informed by the Jewish tradition. For the most part, this process has followed the *halakhic*

[52] Perhaps there was even a practical reason for keeping his possessions unchanged, so that his family would not need to make major changes in the home upon his death.
[53] B.T. *Ketubot* 103b

process, applying legal principles to a specific case. In this system of "case-law", the endeavor has often been "to determine what past authorities would say about contemporary problems if they were alive today."[54] Newman argues, rather, that contemporary Jewish ethics should be conceived "as a dialectical relationship in which finally no sharp distinction can be made between our voices and theirs [sages of the past]."

Rabbinic sources may be so far removed from our modern technological society that one may be concerned that "the texts themselves are not providing clear guidance, but are rather being twisted to mean whatever a particular rabbi or judge wants them to mean."[55] Nonetheless, Rabbi Dorff supports the case-law process:

> "If a decision is going to be Jewish in some recognizable way, it must invoke the tradition in a serious, not perfunctory, way. One can do this without being devious or anachronistic if one does not pretend that one's own interpretation is its originally intended meaning (its *peshat*) or its only possible reading."[56]

I will illustrate with an example related to our subject of death and dying. Regarding the dying person, Jewish law, according to the *Shulchan Aruch*[57], states:

> "A person on the deathbed [*goseis*] is like the living in every regard…One does not bind his cheeks or stop his orifices…One does not move him or wash him…until the moment that he dies…Whoever touches and moves him, that one commits murder. Rabbi Meir would compare him to a candle which is flickering;

[54] Newman (1995), p. 156
[55] Dorff (1998), p. 413
[56] *Ibid.*
[57] One of the most important Codes of Jewish Law, written by Yosef Caro in the 16th century, with glosses by the Rema, Rabbi Moses Isserles). A law code is a systematic arrangement of Jewish law, derived from the Talmud, which remains its ultimate source document.

> should a person touch it, it immediately goes out. Thus it is forbidden to accelerate a person's death…Such a person may not be moved, and it is forbidden to put the keys to the house under the head of a person in this state in order to cause the person to expire.
>
> However, if there is anything which causes a hindrance to the departure of the soul, such as the presence near the patient's house of a knocking noise such as wood chopping or if there is salt on the patient's tongue; and these hinder the soul's departure, then it is permissible to remove them from there because there is no act involved in this at all but only the removal of an impediment."[58]

This clearly provides *some* guidance on appropriate care of the dying – on one hand, each moment of life is precious and nothing should be done to hasten death; on the other hand, it is permitted to remove an impediment to death. But this is not enough to guide us in this technical age. How do we define the period of *goseis*, traditionally a period of active dying lasting no longer than 72 hours, in our day, when we have the technology to extend life for long periods of time? When do we consider our medical interventions (ventilator, ICU, antibiotics, feeding tube) part of supporting life, and when do we consider them an impediment to death? Different *poskim* have come to different decisions on these matters.

Although *aggadah* is not generally used to derive law, our story of Rabbi Judah's handmaid has been used as an additional source to inform our Jewish understanding of a bioethics for modernity . Specifically, the ongoing prayers of the rabbis have been compared to life-support – the ventilator that is keeping the person alive. For the

[58] Shulchan Aruch, *Yoreh Deah* 339:1

person with no chance for recovery, the cessation of prayer may be seen as "pulling the plug" on the ventilator, removing what has become an impediment to death.

This use of *aggadah* is similar to the use of the *halachah*. As expressed by William Cutter:

> "Here is a rule or a principle, and over there is a circumstance. Is the circumstance over there like the circumstance which the original rule-maker had in mind? Is a respirator, in other words, like the woodchoppers' chopping or the Rabbis' praying?"[59]

But Cutter suggests a much broader use for narrative, making it a tool not only for bioethicists, but for anyone who can find something in it to help them with their own struggles:

> "A fuller use of story or narrative as an independent form of speech represents the second function of speech: the giving of construction to reality. From that construction new meanings develop, and sometimes multiple meanings emerge. In this sense of speech, a partnership is always implicit between author, auditor or reader. And once these separate parties become partners, one must expect multiple interpretations. This is due to the nature of language which is always multivalent, and the nature of the reception, the way in which people hear or read … the passage may have various meanings for different auditors or for the same auditor at different times."

In fact, it is this multivalent characteristic of the language of story that allows the modern reader to interact with rabbinical stories in general, tapping into those aspects

[59] Cutter (1994), p. 70

of the story that can be brought out of its rabbinic context to address the reader's own outlook, culture and concerns.

Drawing on and adding to Cutter's work[60], I present some different ways the modern reader can interact with this story to provide some guidance in a situation where they might be grappling with the dying of a loved one. The story can serve as a stimulus to bring underlying issues out into the open.

1. Different characters in the story, like different characters in the life of a dying patient, may have different views on an issue. Characters in the story can be seen to represent different people in the patient's life. There may be disagreements among the people involved about the best course for the patient. As with the handmaid versus Rabbi's students, these disagreements may involve characters at different levels of power – for example: the patient's physician vs. a nurse or the family; an older sibling vs. a younger sibling; a daughter who is a physician vs. the rest of the family, etc. Different tactics might be used for assuring one's point of view is recognized, depending on the situation.
2. In the story, the norm or expectation is to continue prayer in order to keep Rabbi Judah alive. Similarly, the hospital or an individual physician may have a prevailing norm, such as: to preserve life at any cost, or, conversely, to minimize health care costs, to free up resources for younger seriously ill patients, to increase organ

[60] Cutter (1994), pp. 80 - 81

donation, or to encourage the signing of "Do Not Resuscitate" orders on elderly patients admitted to the ICU with underlying critical disease.

3. The motives of individuals may need to be examined. In the context of the story, each of Rabbi Judah's colleagues may have had his own reason to pray for the life of their teacher. For example, with his death they would be deprived of the benefit of his scholarship or protection from the Roman government. Perhaps Rabbi's handmaid sees that they have allowed their own personal needs to make them blind to the needs of the patient.[61] This, too, happens in families, and is often a cause for disagreement among members about the proper course of action. During the course of an illness, financial burdens and burdens for care of the patient do not always distribute equitably among family members. In addition, each family member may bear different psychological burdens, such as guilt, or other unresolved issues with the dying patient. All of these may affect their handling of end-of-life decisions.
4. The story raises issues of, and can therefore foster discussions of, the meaning of life. Is <u>any</u> short period of additional life meaningful, or does ongoing suffering render life meaningless?
5. The story can illustrate how a decision about the care of a loved one may evolve over time. Rabbi's handmaid originally agreed with the prevailing view that Rabbi's life should be prolonged, and she participated in the prayers for his longevity. It was only with the passage of time, after she had continued to carefully observe the

[61] Knobel (2007), p. 177

patient and was able to witness his ongoing pain and suffering, that she came to change her mind, and therefore her prayer. And it was only when this new prayer was ineffective that she adopted a new course of action. Likewise, families may be able to temporarily postpone a decision until the situation clarifies itself.

6. The story can raise issues of medical futility. If a treatment merely prolongs life, but has no chance of curing the underlying fatal illness, should it be continued? Dorff considers this medical futility argument in his analysis about the permissibility of discontinuing antibiotics and even artificial nutrition and hydration in a patient with an underlying fatal illness.[62] In the context of our story, Knobel suggests that "once the rabbis' prayers no longer constitute therapy in any meaningful sense, they become a form of abuse and torture."[63]
7. What does it mean that the handmaid took an action that caused silence, which, in turn resulted in Rabbi's death? What does this say about the relationship between taking an active decision, and letting nature take its course? This question has played out in deliberations in Israel regarding the use of the concept of discrete vs. continuous care as the basis for withholding treatment. [64] Specifically, some believe that although it is not permissible to disconnect a ventilator from a patient, it is permissible to put the ventilator on a timer, and make a decision each time it turns off whether or not to turn it on. A decision to discontinue continuous care could be seen as actively causing the death of the patient, while converting the situation to

[62] Dorff (1990)
[63] Knobel (2007), p. 178
[64] Ravitsky (2006), pp. 109;112-116

discrete care would allow a decision to be made to refrain from re-implementing a treatment if it is deemed futile, and then letting nature take its course. We might ask: how much of this dying business is in the hands of people to decide, and how much is left in the hands of God? In his discussion of the Rabbi Judah's handmaid story, Knobel, points out that, ironically, God is powerless to terminate Rabbi's life as long as the other rabbis continue to pray.[65]

8. What does it mean that the handmaid does not pray directly for the Rabbi's death? Rather, her prayer is oblique – she only prays for heaven's success vis-à-vis human desires.[66] Perhaps this indirect approach could be of assistance to someone who is feeling guilty for praying for the death of a loved one who is suffering. If the loved one could pray instead for an end to the pain and suffering, the "decision" of whether the patient goes on to live pain-free, or whether it is death itself that relieves the suffering, is taken out of the hands of the one who prays, and is put into God's hands.

[65] Knobel (2007), p. 178
[66] Crane (2013)

Chapter 3
Is Your Suffering Dear to You?
Visiting the Sick

1. *Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba fell ill. R. Yohanan entered and said to him, "Is your suffering dear to you?" [R. Hiyya] said to him: "Neither this [suffering] nor its reward." [R. Yohanan] said to him, "Give me your hand." [R. Hiyya] gave him his hand and [R. Yohanan] stood him up [and restored him to health].*

2. *Rabbi Yohanan fell ill. R. Hanina entered and said to him, "Is your suffering dear to you?" [R. Yohanan] said to him, "Neither this [suffering] nor its reward." [R. Hanina] said to him, "Give me your hand." [R. Yohanan] gave him his hand, and [R. Hanina] stood him up [and restored him to health].* Why? Let R. Yohanan stand himself up! They say: 'A prisoner cannot free himself from prison."

3. *Rabbi Elazar fell ill. R. Yohanan entered and saw that he was lying in a dark room. [R. Yohanan] exposed his arm and light filled the house. He saw that R. Elazar was crying, and said to him: "Why are you crying? If [it is] because you did not study much Torah, we learned: 'One who brings a substantial [sacrifice] and one who brings a meager one [have equal merit] as long as one directs his heart toward Heaven.' If [it is] because of [unsufficient] sustenance, not every person merits two tables. And if [it is] because of children, this is the bone of my tenth son. [R. Elazar] said to [R. Yohanan], "I am crying over this beauty of yours that will decompose in the earth. [R. Yohanan said to him, "Over this one can certainly weep." And both wept.*

   Meanwhile, [R. Yohanan] said to him, Is your suffering dear to you? [R. Elazar] said to him, "Neither this [suffering] nor its reward." [R. Yohanan] said

to him, "Give me your hand." [R. Elazar] gave him his hand, and [R. Yohanan] stood him up [and restored him to health]. [B.T. *Berachot* 5b]

Literary analysis

Here we have a series of three stories, or rather, one story told three times, and spanning three generations[67]. In the first and last story, R.Yohanan, the middle generation, visits one (R. Hiyya bar Abba), and another (Rabbi Elazar) of his students, who are ill. In the middle story, it is Rabbi Yohanan himself who falls ill, and is visited by *his* teacher, R. Hanina. The first telling introduces the core story. R. Yohanan visits his student, discusses his suffering, and then heals him through the comfort of human touch. The second story is exactly the same, but now it is R. Yohanan who is ill. The *stam* of the *Gemara* wants to know why he can't muster up the strength to heal himself, since he clearly has the power to heal others. The answer: "a prisoner cannot free himself from prison" – that is, one who is imprisoned in suffering must rely on others to get him out of it. In the third retelling of the story, R. Yohanan visits another of his students who is ill. Here, there is an introductory section before the core story is introduced. R. Yohanan makes an initially misguided attempt to console the patient, but ends up being able to share in the very human feeling about how fleeting the beauty of life is. The repetition of the core story after this serves to reiterate the theme of the importance of shared humanity, which is further emphasized by the ties that bind from

[67] Weiss (2011), p. 109

generation to generation, across three generations of Rabbis. Rabbi Yohanan, who has known deep suffering, is the" link between the generations".[68]

As with the stories discussed previously in this paper, there is a subversive quality to these stories. The repeated question, "Is your suffering dear to you?" suggests an assumption by the rabbinic culture that it should be so, an assumption that is rejected by the one who is suffering. Because this question seems so odd to the modern Jewish reader[69], it is necessary to look at the context of these stories, where the issue of the meaning of suffering for the rabbis is examined in more detail.

Contextual analysis

These stories are found in the *Gemara* to the first *Mishnah* in *Berachot*, which enquires of the proper time to say the evening *Sh'ma*. Rabbi Yitzhak claims that reciting the *Sh'ma* in bed keeps away demons, deducing this from the verse "and the sparks fly upward"[70]. Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish offers a different interpretation of this verse – the sparks are not demons but suffering, and Torah study is an antidote. Indeed, according to R. Yohanan, it is the neglect of Torah study that brings on affliction and suffering.

This is a fanciful *midrashic* interpretation, where the sparks are demons, and "fly" refers to Torah. The full verse is, "For man is born to mischief just as sparks fly upward". In the Book of Job, this is spoken by Eliphaz, a friend who is trying to comfort the suffering

[68] *Ibid.*
[69] I suspect that some Christian readers, used to the concept of suffering as redemption, might not think it quite so foreign.
[70] Job 5:7.

Job by offering an explanation for his suffering. 'Surely', he would say,' this suffering must be deserved. Although you are a righteous man, you are only human, and humans are not perfect. Thus, you must have done *something* wrong. There *must* be a rational explanation for your punishment at God's hands'. Job, from the midst of his suffering, does not accept this explanation. He is angry at God for his suffering, and at his friend for offering words of reproof. In the Book of Job, the point of view moves between that of the visitor and that of the sufferer. We see how the throes of suffering wreak havoc upon theory – the theoretical reasons for suffering cannot withstand the horror of the reality of suffering. This is very much the topic of our *sugya.*

The rabbis also struggled with the central problem of theodicy – that suffering is not limited to those who transgress, but the righteous suffer as well. Thus:

> *Rava, some say Rav Hisda, said: If a person sees that suffering befalls him, he should examine his deeds….If he examine his deeds and did not find [transgression], he may attribute [his suffering] to neglect of Torah study…If he did not find this to be so, he will know that these are afflictions of love, as it is stated: "For whom God loves, He rebukes* [71]*".* [72]

Here, the rabbis seek to understand the meaning of afflictions of love. Surely if God is afflicting one he loves, one who has done no wrong, there must be a reward for one who accepts and must bear such an affliction. What is this reward? Different suggestions are considered: earthly reward: "that he may see his children and lengthen

[71] Proverbs 3:12
[72] B.T. *Berachot* 5a

his days"; or spiritual reward: "suffering cleanses a person's entire body", bringing freedom/atonement from sin, and reward in the World-to-Come.

The rabbis then try to define the nature of an affliction of love. Surely, suffering that interferes with Torah and prayer cannot be an affliction of love! But the *Gemara* says even afflictions that do interfere can be afflictions of love. Next, R. Yohanan asserts, "Skin disease and [suffering due to] children are not afflictions of love."[73] This statement is particularly poignant coming from R. Yohanan, who speaks from a personal place of suffering – he lost ten of his own children. With respect to skin disease, the *Gemara* agrees that it cannot be considered an affliction of love, because of the aspect of separation from society that makes this affliction so hard to bear[74]. But despite, or rather because of R. Yohanan, the *Gemara* includes the death of children as an affliction of love, since through his experience ("the bone of my tenth son"), Rabbi Yohanan was able to console others. (*Tosofot* explains that he consoled others by showing them that there is an element of intimacy with God that exists in suffering.[75]) Therefore, it may be considered to be an affliction of love. It is at this point in the *sugya* that the stories described above are presented.

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[73] Although Job is not mentioned here, it is interesting that both skin disease and loss of children were the manifestations of Job's suffering. His skin disease is described as *shahin*, boils, which do not cause him to separate ritually from society, and his friends still come to visit him. The skin disease in our *sugya* is described as *negaim*, which are signs of *tz'arat* [often translated as leprosy], a disease which requires complete social isolation until healed (see *Leviticus* 13:3 *"nega tz'arat hu").*

[74] Separation due to the visibility of the disease, causing those who see it to put distance between themselves and the sufferer, as well as due to the aspect of ritual impurity related to the disease [B.T. Berachot 5b].

[75] Steinsaltz, (2012), p. 29. The *Gemara* concludes that it is the inability to conceive children that R. Yohanan had in mind when he said "Skin disease and children are not afflictions of love."

And so we see that the question, "Is your suffering dear to you?" subverts the norms established in the *Gemara's* theoretical discussions of suffering. When the question is posed to the one who suffers, it is no longer academic. The answer, "neither this [suffering] nor its reward", makes it clear that none of the theoretical, theological reasons for suffering are of any consolation whatever to the one who is actively suffering.

The Modern Reader

> *Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place."*[76]

The *sugya* and its stories can be used to facilitate a discussion about suffering. It allows the one who is in full health to begin to think about what it might be like to put himself in the shoes of the person who is suffering. It can provide some guidance for the critically important *mitzvah* of *bikkur holim*, visiting the sick.

The *Gemara* notes that suffering may interfere with Torah study and with prayer. Indeed, the person who is suffering may be distracted from almost anything outside themselves.[77] Dealing with pain, whether physical or spiritual, can take up so much energy that there is nothing left. Anyone who has spent time with a suffering person

[76] Sontag (1977),p. 3
[77] Weiss (2011), p. 114

knows that the visitor is called upon only to *give* of himself – he cannot expect the suffering person to *give back* even the slightest bit. This may be difficult for the visitor, and it is important that he seek the spiritual support he needs from others, when engaged in this holy work.

The stories remind us of the power of human touch. There was a time that the laying on of hands was an integral part of the practice of medicine. Without X-rays and scans, physical diagnosis was dependent on touch, and the patient derived some comfort from this, as a secondary effect. Studies have supported the benefits of touch to the ill. For example, one study showed that "massage appeared to have an immediate beneficial effect on pain and mood among patients with advanced cancer. And both massage and 'simple touch' (that is, touching without the kneading that goes with massage) resulted in improvements in pain and quality of life over time, without the need for an increase in pain medications."[78] In my opinion, one of the reasons for the rise of alternative medicine in recent years is the desire on the part of patients to recapture the intimacy of the healing process, which has been lost with the increase in technology and decrease in laying on of hands in modern medicine. The one who is suffering is alone in the 'kingdom' of their illness. The touch of a hand reminds him in a non-verbal way that

[78] Kuttner (2008). This study had limitations – the "usual care" [no extra touching] group was not randomized, and observers were not blinded – but it is at least suggestive of the positive effects of simple touch and massage in these suffering patients. (See also a review of this article in : http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/overcoming-pain/200809/the-laying-hands-makes-comeback

he is part of humanity, that he has not been abandoned, and perhaps, that when he is ready there is someone who can take him by the hand and lead him back.

Sometimes, the person is not ready to take hold of that hand. In the third story, R. Elazar was lying "*b'bayit afel"* – in a house of darkness. The sickroom is often a place of physical darkness, as the person tries to sleep, and a place of spiritual darkness, of loneliness, depression, and loss of hope of recovery. When R. Yohanan entered, he rolled up his sleeve and light filled the room; the light may be seen to represent R. Yohanan's beauty and his good robust good health, the polar opposite of R. Elazar's illness and depression. By that light, R. Yohanan saw that R. Elazar was crying. The light illuminated the "dark place", creating a way to communicate between the kingdom of suffering and the kingdom of health. Perhaps, R. Elazar was crying all along and now R. Yohanan can see the crying and can try to connect with it. Perhaps R. Elazar only begins to cry when he sees the contrast between his physical state and that of R. Yohanan, who is not only healthy, but known for his great beauty. In the latter case, does a visit make things worse, exacerbating the depression? I would say no, if it provides an opportunity for the ill person to deal with his feelings. Thus, when a visitor spends much of his visit speaking of all the pleasant activities that are going on in his own busy life, he must be sensitive to the effect of such a conversation on the patient. Some patients may want to keep up with what is going on outside the walls of their sick room, but others might become quite upset at what they are missing. The visitor must be prepared to stop, and listen to what the patient is feeling.

R. Yohanan, who had suffered greatly himself, should have been better able than most to put himself in the position of the one who is suffering, and yet, he still could not fully understand the specific suffering of the one before him. He erred by trying to guess R. Elazar's feelings, rather than simply asking about them. He guessed, and then offered his misguided consolations. Are you concerned you have not studied Torah enough? – it's okay, your intention was there. Are you concerned because you are poor? – surely you are rich in some aspects; you can't expect to have everything. Are you concerned about your children? Surely, I have suffered more than you! These latter are not consoling words at all. Rather they amount to "it could be worse", and have the effect of invalidating R. Elazar's suffering at a time that he feels most isolated and most needs validation of his feelings. During a patient visit, this kind of attempt at consolation might cut off communications altogether. The patient no longer feels comfortable trying to share his feelings.

Rehuma Weiss, unwilling to accept that R. Yohanan would be so insensitive as to say "my suffering has been more than yours" suggests, rather, that he is offering himself as an example of someone who has suffered greatly, but nonetheless has found a way to go on living.[79] Even so, a person in the throes of her suffering or anguish of a loss may not be ready to hear that it is possible or necessary to move on.

Fortunately, in our story, R. Elazar persisted in trying to explain the source of his depression – his acute sense of the loss of the beauty, and recognition of the

[79] Weiss (2011), p. 123

ephemerality of life.[80] At that point, R. Yohanan was able to truly listen, and to validate his friend's feelings. "Over this, it is certainly appropriate to weep. And they both wept." With his feelings validated, R. Elazar is now able to accept the hand of his friend.

This short story both shows us how difficult it is to sit with a patient in the place where he is, and models for us unhelpful as well as helpful behavior for being with one who is suffering.

[80] This feeling is beautifully expressed in a quote from a very different source of wisdom, The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying, by Sogyal Rinpoche: "When we finally know we are dying, and all other sentient beings are dying with us, we start to have a burning, almost heartbreaking sense of the fragility and preciousness of each moment and each being, and from this can grow a deep, clear limitless compassion for all beings." (As quoted in Yalom (2008), p. 115

Chapter 4
Facing Death

1. *R. Se'orim, Rava's brother, while sitting before Rava, saw that he was dying. He [Rava] said to him [his brother], 'Tell him [the Angel of Death] nor to torment me.' He replied, 'Are you not his intimate friend?' Said Rava, 'Since my mazal [fate] has been delivered to him he takes no heed of me.' He [R. Se'orim] said to him [Rava], 'Show yourself to me in a dream [after your death].' He showed himself and when asked: 'Did you suffer much pain?', he replied: 'As from the prick of the cupping instrument.'*
2. *Rava, while sitting before R. Nahman, saw that he was dying. Said he [R. Nahman] to him [Rava]: 'Tell him [the Angel of Death] not to torment me.' He replied, 'Are you not a person of importance?' Said R. Nahman, 'Who is esteemed, who is regarded, who is distinguished [before the Angel of Death]?' He [Rava] said to him [R. Nahman], 'Show yourself to me in a dream [after your death].' He showed himself and when asked: 'Did you suffer much pain?', he replied: 'As little as removing a hair from milk; and yet were the Holy Blessed One to say to me, 'Go back into the world as you were, I would not wish to do so because the fear of it is great.'*
3. *R. Eleazar was eating some terumah when he [the Angel of Death] appeared to him. He [R. Eleazar] said, 'Am I not eating terumah and is that not designated as holy?" The moment passed [and R. Eleazar did not die].*

4. *He [the Angel of Death] appeared to R. Sheshet in the marketplace. He [R. Sheshet] said, '[Shall I die] in the marketplace like an animal? Come to the house.'*
5. *He [the Angel of Death] appeared to R. Ashi in the market place. He said, 'Grant me thirty days and I will review my studies, for you yourselves [the angels] say, 'Happy is one who comes here [to Heaven] with his studies in hand.' He [the Angel of Death] returned on the thirtieth day. He [R. Ashi] said to him, 'What's the urgency?' He replied, 'Huna b. Nathan is close on your heels and no sovereignty encroaches upon the sphere of another even to a hair's breadth.'*
6. *He could not overcome R. Hisda, as his mouth was never silent from reviewing his studies. So he [the Angel of Death] went and sat on the cedar of the house of study. The tree cracked; R. Hisda ceased his studies and he [the Angel of Death] overcame him.*
7. *He could not gain access to R. Hiyya. One day he disguised himself as a pauper and knocked at R. Hiyya's gate, saying, 'Bring me out some bread'. Members of R. Hiyya's household brought out some bread to him. He said to [R. Hiyya], 'Don't you, sir, have compassion for the poor? Why not have compassion for me? He [the Angel of Death] revealed himself to him, showing a fiery rod, and R. Hiyya yielded himself to him.* [B.T. *Moed Katan* 28a]

Literary Analysis

This is a series of seven stories in which individual rabbis confront their own deaths. Threes and sevens are commonly used rabbinical literary devices, and we have seen a series of seven before, in our stories about the rabbis and their wives in the first section of this paper. Here, the series of seven is divided into three main sections, as described by Diamond in his analysis of these tales.[81] In Diamond's analysis, stories 1 and 2 deal with the pain of dying, stories 3, 4, and 5 are about bargaining with death, and stories 6 and 7 he calls "Death, the trickster". I would label the latter category "The inevitability of death", thus keeping the focus on human concerns, rather than the personified "Angel of Death". Diamond notes that the arrangement of the stories is important – death "slowly takes on greater and greater substance as the narrative progresses."[82] In the first set, the characters speak about death, in stories 3 and 4, Death becomes a presence, but does not speak. In story 5 Death speaks, in 6 he acts surreptitiously, and in 7 he is fully revealed – speaking and acting. From the point of view of the person who is dealing with death, the stories move from fear of death, to bargaining with death, and finally to acceptance - as R. Hiyya reconciles himself and submits to death.

[81] Diamond (1995), pp.76 -92; much of the analysis in this section will be drawn from Rabbi Diamond's analysis.
[82] *Ibid.,* p. 89

Contextual analysis

This series of stories is set in the *Gemara* of a *Mishnah* concerning mourning practices. The *Gemara* continues on this subject and then changes topics, to discuss death itself – first the deaths of Moses and Miriam, who are said to have died by the Divine kiss, and of Aaron. Then there is a discussion as to how perceptions associated with death differ depending on whether death came suddenly or after an illness, and according to the age of the one who died. About death after illness, it is said, "one day is reckoned as being hustled away, two days it is precipitous, three days, reproof, four days rebuff, and five days is the ordinary death of all men." About death according to age, it is said, "fifty years – *karet*; sixty – hand of heaven; seventy – death of the hoary head; eighty – death of a vigorous man", and, "what we learned [about dying from illness] applies only when one has not attained the 'age of strength' [eighty], but if one has attained the 'age of strength' a sudden death is dying by the kiss. Finally, Rava states that [length of] life…depends not on merit, but upon *mazal*, i.e., fate. He gives as his examples two saintly rabbis, one who lived to ninety-two and the other who died young – at age forty. It is at this point that our story series begins.

The Modern Reader

"No one here gets out alive." - Jim Morrison

Every human being must confront death; it is the most universal of subjects. Thus, even though the rabbis of the Talmud grappled with death in their own time and culture, this struggle of the individual to come to terms with death transcends cultural barriers. It is

an existential issue.[83] There is much for the modern reader to find here, both in the *Gemara* that precedes the story series, and in the stories themselves.

The rabbis compare an unexpected death, where it seems one is "hustled away" to death after an illness which is "the ordinary death of men". A precipitous, unexpected death is anything but ordinary. There is no time for preparation by the dying person or those he leaves behind. There may have been no time for reconciliation, no time even for good-byes. Those left behind may be reeling, not only with the burden of their sudden, unexpected loss, but with the loose ends that need to be dealt with, both practical - where are the important documents?, what should be done with the business?, how will I ever learn to handle the finances?; and emotional – I never told him how proud I was of him; he never told me how much he loved me; I haven't called in ages; I didn't know I would never get the chance to talk with her again. One who dies after a long illness[84], who is realistic about his prognosis, who has a family that is willing and able to speak of the possibility of death, can accomplish much in practical planning and emotional reconciliation, which will ease both his final days, and the lives of those who he leaves behind.

Like the rabbis, we react differently to death at a young age than to death in the elderly. When young people die, surely it does feel like the heavy hand of Heaven, like *karet* – indeed we speak of a young life being cut-off. We search for reasons, we rant against heaven's judgment, we become afraid for ourselves – for if there is no order to death,

[83] Yalom (2008), p. 201, defines existential issues as ultimate concerns (Paul Tillich) or the "givens" of existence.
[84] I have taken the liberty of not taking "five days" literally.

then this reminds us that we are all vulnerable at any time – if it is *mazal*, not merit, then there is nothing that we can do that will keep us safe. About the elderly, those who reach 'the hoary head' or 'the age of strength'[85], we say that they have lived a full life; we are comfortable that their time has come; we wish them a speedy death, without pain. For the elderly, pneumonia has long been called the "old man's friend"[86]. Like "dying by the kiss", pneumonia was seen as a relatively quick and painless way for those who had come to the end of their life to depart.

Let us now move to the stories.

The first pair of stories each involves Rava. In story 1, it is Rava who is dying, and in story 2 Rava is visiting his dying mentor, R. Nahman. One would like the stories to be reversed[87], so that R. Nahman's experience of death can inform that of his student Rava, lessening his fear. Perhaps the illogical arrangement of the stories is purposeful, and is meant to move us to conclude that every person faces his own death separately and cannot learn from the experience of another. The addendum to the second story supports this conclusion. Although there was no pain in R. Nahman's dying, he says, "I would not wish to [go back into the world] because the fear [of death] is very great". Thus, one cannot even learn not to fear such a vast unknown from one's *own*

[85] Today ninety is the new eighty, or even seventy, as more and more people live to be centenarians.
[86] Attributed to Sir William Osler, M.D. (1849-1919). For patients suffering from stroke or other debilitating chronic illnesses, pneumonia might allow them the dignity of a quiet death, often in their sleep.
[87] Diamond (1995) cites alternative manuscript versions that either reverse the stories or substitute R. Hisda for Rava in the second story (see Diamond, p. 81, notes 23, 24, 26)

experience of a painless death – all the more so one cannot learn this from someone else.

Regarding the pain of death, I think the metaphors are instructive. "Like removing a hair from milk" seems quite painless, similar to 'the Divine kiss' experienced by Moses and Miriam[88]. To me this metaphor also conveys a sense of removal of something that doesn't belong in the milieu that it has been bathing in. Could this be an allusion to the restoration of the soul back to where it has come, after its temporary sojourn in this world? Although Judaism is very much a religion of *this* world, the idea of an immortal soul which exists in another realm before birth and after death, is also a part of Jewish thought. This may be of consolation to some, helping to allay the fear of death.

Rava's story is different. He compares the pain of death "as from the prick of the cupping instrument". Unlike the previous metaphor, this doesn't seem painless. Elsewhere in the Talmud, this metaphor is used to describe pain experienced by women during sexual intercourse, according to the testimony of several women: "like hot water on a bald head", "like the prick of the cupping instrument/blood-letting lancet", "like hard crust on the palate"[89]. This suggests mild discomfort, neither a painful nor an altogether pain-free experience. Rava's choice to compare the discomfort of dying with that of a medical treatment raises another issue of relevance to the modern reader. Patients often must determine how much suffering they are willing to bear in order to forestall death, and when they are ready to relinquish this resistance. For example, a

[88] The gentlest means of dying, see Diamond (1995), p. 83, footnote 36.
[89] *Ketubot* 39b

man I know has been battling pancreatic cancer for several years. From the beginning, he knew that the prognosis was not good, and he has carefully worked to put his affairs in order. He has been clear all along that his goal was to have as much time with his loved ones as possible, and toward that end was willing to be very aggressive in his treatment. He sought out a surgeon who would be aggressive and perform extensive surgery, in order to give the chemotherapy the best chance of keeping the cancer at bay. When the cancer returned despite these efforts, he continued to submit to an extremely noxious weekly regimen to prolong his time with loved ones. It is only in the last few weeks that the balance between the intolerability of the regimen and that of death has been reset, and he has begun to refuse treatments. This set point is different for every individual, and only the individual can determine when he has reached it. Ideally, the medical team will work in partnership with the patient, providing the information and support necessary for ongoing re-evaluation of what the patient (not just his disease!) requires.

Another point expressed in both of these stories is that it doesn't matter if you are "a person of importance" or "an intimate friend", or neither of these; death is an equal-opportunity player. We know that this is ultimately true. And yet, position, wealth, or 'who you know', can provide advantages in many aspects of life, including access to health care. Mortality rates at any given age are higher in poorer populations. These stories can provide a jumping-off point for a discussion on social justice issues around health care, including Obama-care and health policy in the United States.

In each of the second set of stories, a rabbi bargains with the Angel of Death. In the first, R. Eleazar is eating *terumah*, food which has been sanctified for use by the *Kohanim*. If he dies while eating it, his corpse would render the *terumah* unclean. Diamond sees this reasoning as typically rabbinic, that is, the Angel of Death is defeated by clever argument.[90] The rabbi is successful – he avoids death, at least at that moment; we don't learn what happens to him next. Diamond sees this as an example of bargaining, the third stage (after denial and anger) in Kubler-Ross's analysis of death and dying. However, I see it more as denial. The rabbis seem to be telling themselves that they can defeat death if they are clever enough in their rhetoric, the very skill most important to them in their work in the academy. A modern day example might be a physician who thinks he can defeat death (his own, or his patients') because of his medical knowledge. This can result in overly aggressive or futile treatment, or rationalizing away his own symptoms.

In the second story, the Angel of Death appears to R. Sheshet in the marketplace. R. Sheshet wants to delay death long enough for a change in venue – to move from the public marketplace to the privacy of his home. Although there is an element of bargaining for time in this story, the major focus is the preference for a private death over a public death. The poignant plea, "shall I die in the market like a beast?" reflects the feelings of patients of today, who do not want to die in the hospital. The depersonalization of modern medicine - dying surrounded by machines and tubes, by

[90] Diamond (1995), pp. 84-85; *terumah, which is holy, must not be rendered impure by exposure to death. Since the Kohen's death would render it impure, surely he must not be allowed to die.*

medical staff who know their disease but not who they really are, who may infantilize them, or ignore their needs – patients often feel like they are dying "in the market like a beast". The hospice movement is increasing in popularity, with its emphasis on death with dignity, often at home, surrounded by loved ones. Rather than continuing to fight a futile battle for a few more days of time, hospice is about accepting the time that is left, and dealing with it on one's own terms – "come to the house!"

It is the last story that most fully captures the bargaining stage as described by Kubler-Ross. Again, the Angel of Death appears to a rabbi in the marketplace. But now the issue is not venue but time. R. Ashi asks for a stay of execution of 30 days, "and I will review my studies, for you yourselves say, 'Happy is one who come here [to Heaven] with his studies in hand." This is classic bargaining. Kubler-Ross likens it to a child who volunteers to do some tasks around the house, hoping her parents will then allow her to do something she wants to do.

> "The terminally ill patient uses the same maneuvers. He knows, from past experiences, that there is a slim chance that he may be rewarded for good behavior and be granted a wish for special services. His wish is most always an extension of life, followed by the wish for a few days without pain or physical discomfort."[91]

R. Ashi's promise is typical, in that he chooses something that he is sure that the angels (and God) will approve of. Kubler-Ross notes that many patients she has interviewed

[91] Kubler-Ross (1997), p. 94

promised “a life devoted to God” or promised to deal with something that they have felt guilty about in the past.[92]

In our story the Angel of Death returns, as promised, on the thirtieth day. R. Ashi tries to negotiate for more time. “What’s the urgency?” he demands. This story perfectly mirrors a story Kubler-Ross tells in her book. A patient’s son was getting married, and it was his mother’s fervent wish to have the doctor sustain her life long enough for her to attend the wedding. Against all odds, she was able to leave the hospital, elegantly dressed, and be present at the wedding. When she returned to the hospital, happy but exhausted, she turned to Dr. Kubler-Ross, and said, “Now don’t forget I have another son!”[93] For R. Ashi, and for all those who bargain for time, there is never a good time to die.

The story’s addendum makes it clear that there is a limit to the negotiating that mankind can do. There is a greater scheme – a schedule that the Angel of Death is required to keep. If R. Ashi were to live longer, then R. Huna would not be able to head the academy before his own death intervened. R. Ashi must step aside; here, as in our modern world, there comes a time when the old guard must allow room for their successors. There is a natural order in life, and death is part of that order.

The first story of the last set (story # 6) is reminiscent of the story of Rabbi Judah’s handmaid. In that story, uninterrupted prayer had the power to postpone death; here R. Hisda’s ceaseless studying possessed a similar power. In this story, we have another

[92] *Ibid.,* p. 95
[93] *Ibid*. Diamond cites this story in his article, p. 85

window into the values of the rabbis – there, the importance of prayer, here that of learning. In order for the Angel of Death to take R. Hisda, it was necessary for him to engineer an interruption in R. Hisda's studying. The sudden sound of the crack of a cedar beam in the *Beit Midrash*[94] had the same effect as the sudden sound of the crash of Rabbi's maidservant's fallen jar. In R. Hisda's story, the norm of the power of studying is overturned by Death itself. Studying is important, powerful even, but not so powerful as to be able to ward off the inevitability of death.

In this story, it is not clear whether R. Hisda was studying explicitly to ward off death, or if his constant studying was a sign of his passionate engagement for learning. Perhaps he was so engrossed in his life of study that he did not think about his own death. Death sneaked up on him, nonetheless, and took him by surprise. Or, perhaps, he studied incessantly precisely *because* of a fear of death – relying on its powers to keep death at bay. I think this can inform a discussion about how we deal with our own mortality.

There are some people who think they can evade death by avoiding all risk. Perhaps they avoid airplane travel, perhaps they don't even venture outside their homes, or perhaps they are over-vigilant about their health or the health of their loved ones. In pediatrics, there is a pattern of parental behavior called "the vulnerable child

[94] Diamond (1995), p. 86, footnote 10. Diamond interprets the cedar as a cedar beam in the House of Study, per Steinsaltz. Diamond also notes the connection of the upright cedar to persons that are upright in their behavior, and analogizes R. Hisda to a supporting pillar of the House of Study. Upon his death, the support is lost (Diamond pp. 88-89, footnote 54).

syndrome"[95]. It usually occurs when their child has escaped a serious illness or death, (or is perceived to have done so because of a maternal history of difficult pregnancies, or the child represents for the parents a significant person from the past who has died, etc.). Such a child may be perceived as sickly, and his parents severely limit his permitted activities, and overprotect him to an abnormal degree. As a result, the child cannot separate from his parents, worries about his body, and goes on to have school problems and underachievement. The parents' constant vigilance and fear of death creates a person who cannot engage well in life.

Some people have the opposite reaction, acting as daredevils – thumbing their nose at death. I am reminded of several young boys with hemophilia that I have treated. Despite the fact that they are at risk of significant bleeding from the smallest bump, with its attendant joint damage or potential intracranial bleeding, they are more physically active and take more chances than their normal peers. Or consider the physician working at a rehabilitation center with young men severely damaged in motorcycle accidents, who insists on commuting to work by motorcycle. This, too, I think is a reaction to anxiety about death – spitting in the face of death. Finally, there are those who simply go on with life, fully engaged, not thinking of death until it surprises them unawares.

In the final story, R. Hiyya has managed, somehow - we are not told how, to evade death. The Angel of Death appears in the form of a pauper, requesting some bread. When R. Hiyya doesn't appear, Death accuses him of failing to be charitable. "Don't

[95] Aylward (2003), pp. 33-34

you, sir, have compassion for the poor? Why not have compassion for me?" Diamond points out the aptness of the metaphor – Death, like a pauper, is always hungry[96], always needy, but often avoided by those who are busy living, or tightly clinging onto their lives.

Dylan Thomas tells us: "Do not go gentle into that good night; rage, rage against the dying of the light." According to Kubler-Ross's stages of death, we deny, we become angry, we bargain, we get depressed. In this story, Death asks for our understanding. He is merely the instrument of the way God has created the world. In asking for compassion, he is asking for Kubler-Ross's final stage - acceptance. The end of this story does not sugar-coat death. The Angel of Death finally reveals himself not as a meek pauper, but holding a rod of fire. Nonetheless, R. Hiyya shows no fear, nor does he prepare to struggle. Rather, he realizes that his time has come, and he yields himself to Death. This is how Kubler-Ross describes this final stage:

> "If a patient has had enough time (i.e. not a sudden unexpected death) and has been given some help in working through the previously described stages he will reach a stage during which he is neither depressed nor angry about his "fate". He will have been able to express his previous feelings, his envy for the living and the healthy, his anger at those who do not have to face their end so soon. He will have mourned the impending loss of so many meaningful people and places and he will contemplate his coming end with a certain degree of quiet expectation….Acceptance should not be mistaken for a happy stage. It is almost void of feelings. It is as if the pain had gone, the struggle is over, and there

[96] Diamond (1995), p. 88

comes a time for 'the final rest before the long journey' as one patient phrased it."[97]

One final comment on this story series. I find it interesting that the Angel of Death is not mentioned by name in any of these stories. Our first pair of stories begin, "Tell *him* not to torment me," and this is confusing enough to merit a note in Rashi's commentary to tell us that the pronoun refers to the *malakh ha mavet* – the Angel of Death. Throughout these seven stories only pronouns are used in referring to the personification of death. There are many places in the Talmud where the Angel of Death is mentioned explicitly.[98] However, here, in this extended series of stories which consider man's relationship to his own death, the Angel of Death is never called by name. It reminds me of the Harry Potter series, where the deadly villain Lord Voldemort[99], is never referred to by name, but rather as "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named". In our own lives, too, there is a tendency to avoid use of the word 'death'; we use other euphemisms instead – 'my aunt passed away', 'I lost my mother last year', rather than stating outright – 'she died.' I think that the avoidance of direct mention in the rabbinic story series, as well as in modern society, spotlights both the fear associated with death, as well as its universality - despite the lack of naming, we all know what is going on here.

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[97] Kubler-Ross (1997), pp. 123-124

[98] This term appears both in theoretical discussions of death, including passages describing the Angel of Death and how he goes about performing his function (e.g.,B.T. *Avodah Zarah* 20b) or use of the term to simply mean death, as in legal discussions involving the death of an animal (B.T. *Baba Metzia* 36b). There are several versions of the R. Hisda story, all of which explicitly mention the Angel of Death. One, in B.T. *Makkot* 10a, first mentions the Angel of Death, and then goes on to call him "he". It is possible that our story is merely a copy of that story, taken out of its framework, and therefore accidently lacking explicit mention of the Angel of Death, but that does not explain why the other stories do not mention him by name. Thus, I propose that this was done on purpose by the redactors of this *sugya*.

[99] *Mort* = death (French)

Conclusion

In this thesis, I set out to explore ways to engage modern readers in Talmud study through the use of *aggadah.* The stories I chose, and the analysis in this paper demonstrate the following:

1. The rabbis of the Talmud struggled with issues that are universal and timeless, for example: achieving balance between work and home in a marriage, dealing with pain and suffering, and the inevitability of death.

2. Opposition of values within an individual story or within a story series gives voice to multiple points of view.

3. Societal norms and expressed values may be called into question by the specific situation presented in a story, or conversely, stories may evolve to reflect changes in societal norms.

4. Close analysis of the stories, both as literary units and in the context that the story or story-series appears in the Talmud, help us better understand the norms and values at play.

5. This understanding can help us explore our own attitudes toward these issues, and provides a platform for discussion of individual and societal values in our own time and culture.

6. In doing so, we can reclaim the Talmud as an important part of our Jewish heritage which can be relevant to our modern context.

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Appendix I: Texts Cited

Chapter 1
Rav Rehumi : Spousal relationships: negotiating expectations (B.T. *Ketubot* 62b-63a)

1.

כי הא דרב רחומי הוה שכיח קמיה דרבא במחוזא, הוה רגיל דהוה אתי לביתיה כל מעלי יומא דכיפורי. יומא חד משכתיה שמעתא, הוה מסכיא דביתהו השתא אתי השתא אתי, לא אתא, חלש דעתה אחית דמעתא מעינה, הוה יתיב באיגרא, אפחית איגרא מתותיה ונח נפשיה.

Thus, R. Rehumi who was frequenting [the school] of Raba at Mahuza used to return home on the Eve of every Day of Atonement. On one day he was so attracted by his subject [that he forgot to return home]. His wife was expecting [him every moment, saying] "He is coming soon, he is coming soon". As he did not arrive she became so depressed that a tear began to flow from her eye. He was [at that moment] sitting on a roof. The roof collapsed under him and he was killed.

2.

עונה של תלמידי חכמים אימת? אמר רב יהודה אמר שמואל: מע"ש לע"ש. (תהלים א') אשר פריו יתן בעתו - אמר רב יהודה, ואיתימא רב הונא, ואיתימא רב נחמן: זה המשמש מטתו מע"ש לע"ש.

יהודה בריה דר' חייא חתניה דר' ינאי הוה, אזיל ויתיב בבי רב, וכל בי שמשי הוה אתי לביתיה, וכי הוה אתי הוה קא חזי קמיה עמודא דנורא. יומא חד משכתיה שמעתא, כיון דלא חזי ההוא סימנא, אמר להו רבי ינאי: כפו מטתו, שאילמלי יהודה קיים לא ביטל עונתו. הואי (קהלת י') כשגגה שיוצא מלפני השליט ונח נפשיה.

What is the conjugal obligaton of Torah scholars? Rav Yehuda said in the name of Shmuel: From Sabbath eve to Sabbath eve. "…that yields its fruit in its proper time." Rav

Yehuda said, and some say it was Rav Huma, and some say it was Rav Nachman: This refers to one who has marital relations from Sabbath eve to Sabbath eve.

Yehudah the son of R. Hiyya and the son-in-law of R. Yannai would go and sit in the academy [Beit Rav]. Every Sabbath eve at twilight he would come home. When he would come, a pillar of fire would be seen preceding him. One day his studies engrossed him. When the sign [of his return] was not seen, R. Yannai said to them "Turn over his bed, for if Yehudah were alive, he would not have neglected his conjugal obligations". It {R. Yannai's remark] was "like an error proceeding from a ruler" and he [Yehudah] died.

3.

רבי איעסק ליה לבריה בי רבי חייא, כי מטא למיכתב כתובה נח נפשה דרביתא. אמר רבי: ח"ו פסולא איכא? יתיבו ועיינו במשפחות, רבי אתי משפטיה בן אביטל, ורבי חייא אתי משמעי אחי דוד.
אזיל איעסק ליה לבריה בי ר' יוסי בן זימרא, פסקו ליה תרתי סרי שנין למיזל בבי רב. אחלפוה קמיה, אמר להו: ניהוו שית שנין. אחלפוה קמיה, אמר להו: איכניס והדר איזיל. הוה קא מכסיף מאבוה א"ל: בני, דעת קונך יש בך, מעיקרא כתיב: (שמות ט"ו) תביאמו ותטעמו, ולבסוף כתיב: (שמות כ"ה) ועשו לי מקדש ושכנתי בתוכם. אזיל יתיב תרתי סרי שני בבי רב. עד דאתא איעקרא דביתהו. אמר רבי: היכי נעביד? נגרשה, יאמרו ענייה זו לשוא שימרה נינסיב איתתא אחריתי, יאמרו זו אשתו וזו זונתו בעי עלה רחמי ואיתסיאת.

Rabbi arranged [a match] for his son in the house of R. Hiyya. When it came time to write the ketubah the maiden died. Rabbi said, "Heaven forbid that there is a disqualification. They sat down and investigated the families. Rabbi was descended from Sephatiah the son of Avital whereas R. Hiyya descended from Shimi the brother of David.
Rabbi went to arrange [a match] for his son in the house of R. Yose ben Zimra. They agreed to give [the groom] twelve years to go and study in the academy. They passed [the bride] before [the groom]; he said to them, "Let it be six years". They passed her

before him. He said to them, "Let me first bring her [to the huppah] and then I will go. He was embarrassed before his father. [His father] said to him, "My son, the mind of your Maker is within you. Initially it is written: You will bring them and implant them". But in the end it is written:"They shall make a sanctuary for Me and I will dwell among them". He went and sat for twelve years in the academy. By the time he came back, his wife had become sterile. Rabbi said, "What shall we do? Should he divorce her? They will say 'this poor [soul] waited in vain'. Should he take another wife? They will say, 'that one is his wife and that one is his mistress.' [Rabbi] entreated [God] to have mercy on her, and she was healed.

4.

רבי חנניה בן חכינאי הוה קאזיל לבי רב בשילהי הלוליה דר"ש בן יוחאי, א"ל: איעכב לי עד דאתי בהדך, לא איעכבא ליה. אזל יתיב תרי סרי שני בבי רב. עד דאתי אישתנו שבילי דמתא ולא ידע למיזל לביתיה. אזל יתיב אגודא דנהרא, שמע לההיא רביתא דהוו קרו לה: בת חכינאי, בת חכינאי, מלי קולתך ותא ניזיל. אמר: ש"מ, האי רביתא דידן, אזל בתרה. הוה יתיבא דביתהו קא נהלה קמחא, דל עינה חזיתיה, סוי לבה פרח רוחה. אמר לפניו: רבש"ע, ענייה זו זה שכרה? בעא רחמי עלה וחייה.

R. Hananyah son of Hakhinai was leaving for the academy toward the end of R. Shimon ben Yokhai's wedding celebration. [R. Shimon ben Yokhai] said to him "Wait for me until I can come with you". [R. Hananya ben Hakhinai did not wait. He went and sat for twelve years in the academy. By the time he came the streets of his town were changed and he did not know how to go to his house. He heard [them] call out to a certain maiden: 'Daughter of Hakhinai, daughter of Hakhinai fill your jug and come so we may go!" He said, "This maiden is evidently ours. He followed her. His wife was sitting sieving flour. She raised her eyes and saw him. Her heart realized and her spirit departed. He said before [God] "Master of the Universe! Is this the reward of this poor [soul]. He entreated [God] to have mercy on her, and she came back to life.

5.

רבי חמא בר ביסא אזיל יתיב תרי סרי שני בבי מדרשא. כי אתא, אמר: לא איעביד כדעביד בן חכינאי, עייל יתיב במדרשא, שלח לביתיה. אתא ר' אושעיא בריה יתיב קמיה, הוה קא משאיל ליה שמעתא, חזא דקא מתחדדי שמעתיה, חלש דעתיה, אמר: אי הואי הכא הוה לי זרע כי האי. על לביתיה, על בריה, קם קמיה. הוא סבר, למשאליה שמעתתא קא בעי, אמרה ליה דביתהו: מי איכא אבא דקאים מקמי ברא? קרי עליה רמי בר חמא: (קהלת ד') החוט המשולש לא במהרה ינתק - זה ר' אושעיא בנו של רבי חמא בר ביסא.

R. Hama bar Bisa went and sat twelve years in the academy. When he came back he said, I will not do as the son of Hakhinai did. He entered and sat down in the [local] study hall. He sent [a message] to his house [that he had returned]. His son, R. Oshaya, came and sat before him. [R. Oshaya] asked him about a Talmudic teaching. [R. Hama] saw that [R. Oshaya's] studies were sharply honed. He felt disheartened. He said, "Had I been here I would have had offspring like this". R. Hama entered his house. His son entered. R. Hama stood up before him; he thought that he wanted to ask him about Talmudic teachings. His wife said to him, "Is there a father who stands up before his son!" Rami bar Hama applied the verse to him: "The three-ply cord is not easily severed". This refers to R. Oshaya, son of R. Hama, son of Bisa.

6.

ר"ע רעיא דבן כלבא שבוע הוה, חזיתיה ברתיה דהוה צניע ומעלי, אמרה ליה: אי מקדשנא לך אזלת לבי רב? אמר לה: אין. איקדשא ליה בצינעה ושדרתיה. שמע אבוה אפקה מביתיה, אדרה הנאה מנכסיה. אזיל יתיב תרי סרי שנין בבי רב. כי אתא, אייתי בהדיה תרי סרי אלפי תלמידי. שמעיה לההוא סבא דקאמר לה: עד כמה
קא מדברת אלמנות חיים? אמרה ליה: אי לדידי ציית, יתיב תרי סרי שני אחריני. אמר: ברשות קא עבידנא, הדר אזיל ויתיב תרי סרי שני אחריני בבי רב. כי אתא, אייתי בהדיה עשרין וארבעה אלפי תלמידי. שמעה דביתהו הות קא נפקא לאפיה, אמרו לה שיבבתא: שאילי מאני לבוש ואיכסאי, אמרה להו: (משלי י"ב) יודע צדיק

נפש בהמתו. כי מטיא לגביה, נפלה על אפה קא מנשקא ליה לכרעיה, הוו קא מדחפי לה שמעיה, אמר להו: שבקוה, שלי ושלכם שלה הוא. שמע אבוה דאתא גברא רבה למתא, אמר: איזיל לגביה, אפשר דמפר נדראי. אתא לגביה, א"ל: אדעתא דגברא רבה מי נדרת? א"ל: אפילו פרק אחד ואפי' הלכה אחת. אמר ליה: אנא הוא, נפל על אפיה ונשקיה על כרעיה, ויהיב ליה פלגא ממוניה. ברתיה דר"ע עבדא ליה לבן עזאי הכי. והיינו דאמרי אינשי: רחילא בתר רחילא אזלא, כעובדי אמה כך עובדי ברתא.

R. Akiva was a shepherd for Ben Kalba Savua. [Ben Kalba Savua's] daughter saw that he was modest and fine. She asked him, "If I become betrothed to you, will you go to the academy?" He said to her "Yes." He betrothed her in secret and she sent him away [to the academy]. When her father heard he threw her out of his house and made a vow prohibiting her to benefit from his possessions. [R. Akiva] went and sat twelve years in the academy. When he returned, he brought twelve thousand students with him. He heard a certain old man saying to [his wife], "Until when will you lead a life of living widowhood?" She answered him, "If he would listen to me, he would sit [in the academy] another twelve years." [R. Akiva] said [to himself] "I am acting with [her] permission."He went back and sat another twelve years in the academy. When he returned he brought twenty-four thousand students with him. He wife heard and she went out to meet him. Her neighbors said to her "Borrow [suitable] articles of clothing and dress yourself." She said to them, "A righteous one knows his animal's soul." When she reached him she fell on her face. As she was kissing his foot, his attendants pushed her away. [R. Akiva] said to them, "Leave her alone! What is mine and yours belong to her." Her father heard that a great man had come to town. He said, "I will go to him. Perhaps he will annul my vow". He came to [R. Akiva]. [R. Akiva] said to him, "Did you make the vow with the intent [that it would apply even if your son-in-law became a great man]?" He replied, "even [if he knew] one chapter [of Mishnah] or one halakhah [I would not have vowed]. [R. Akiva] said to him "I am he." [Ben Kalba Savua] fell on his face and kissed him on his foot. And he gave [R. Akiva] half his possessions. The

daughter of R. Akiva did the same with Ben Azzai. And this is that which people say, "A ewe follows a ewe".

7.

רב יוסף בריה דרבא שדריה אבוהי לבי רב לקמיה דרב יוסף, פסקו ליה שית שני. כי הוה תלת שני מטא מעלי יומא דכפורי, אמר: איזיל ואיחזינהו לאינשי ביתי. שמע אבוהי, שקל מנא ונפק לאפיה, אמר ליה: זונתך נזכרת? איכא דאמרי, אמר ליה: יונתך נזכרת? איטרוד, לא מר איפסיק ולא מר איפסיק.

Rav Yosef son of Rava was sent by his father in the academy before Rav Yosef. They agreed to give him six years [after his marriage for his studies]. When three years had passed and the eve of Yom Kippur approached, he said "I will go and see the members of my household." His father heard. He took a utensil [weapon] and went out to meet him. He said to [his son] "You have been reminded of your harlot?" Some report: He said to [his son] "You have been reminded of your dove?" They got involved [in a disagreement]. Neither this master ate the concluding meal [before Yom Kippur] nor that master ate the concluding meal.

Chapter 2

Rabbi Judah's Handmaid: Issues at the end of life (B.T. *Ketubot* 104a)

ההוא יומא דנח נפשיה דרבי, גזרו רבנן תעניתא ובעו רחמי, ואמרי: כל מאן דאמר נח נפשיה דר', ידקר בחרב. סליקא אמתיה דרבי לאיגרא, אמרה: עליוני' מבקשין את רבי והתחתוני' מבקשין את רבי, יהי רצון שיכופו תחתונים את העליונים. כיון דחזאי כמה זימני דעייל לבית הכסא, וחלץ תפילין ומנח להו וקמצטער, אמרה: יהי רצון שיכופו עליונים את התחתונים. ולא הוו שתקי רבנן מלמיבעי רחמי, שקלה כוזא שדייא מאיגרא [לארעא], אישתיקו מרחמי ונח נפשיה דרבי. אמרו ליה רבנן לבר קפרא: זיל עיין. אזל אשכחיה דנח נפשיה, קרעיה ללבושיה ואהדריה לקרעיה לאחוריה, פתח ואמר: אראלים ומצוקים אחזו בארון הקדש, נצחו אראלים את המצוקים ונשבה ארון הקדש אמרו ליה: נח נפשיה? אמר להו: אתון קאמריתו ואנא לא קאמינא.

On the day when Rabbi died, the Rabbis decreed a public fast and offered prayers for heavenly mercy. They furthermore, announced that whoever said that Rabbi was dead would be stabbed with a sword. Rabbi's handmaid ascended the roof and prayed: "The ones above desire Rabbi and the ones below desire Rabbi; may it be the will [of God] that the ones below may overpower the ones above". When however she saw how often he resorted to the privy, painfully taking off his tefillin and putting them on again, she prayed, " May it be the will [of God] that the ones above may overpower the ones below". As the Rabbis incessantly continued their prayers for [heavenly] mercy [lit. they were not silent], she took up a jar and threw it down from the roof to the ground. [For a moment] they remained silent, and the soul of Rabbi departed to its eternal rest. *The Rabbis said to Bar Kappara, "Go and see". He went, and finding that [Rabbi] was dead, he tore his cloak and turned the tear backwards. [On returning to the Rabbis] he began: "The angels and the mortals have taken hold of the holy ark. The angels overpowered the mortals and the Holy Ark has been captured." They asked him, "Has he gone to his eternal rest?" He replied, "You said it; I did not say it."*

Chapter 3
Is your suffering dear to you?: Visiting the Sick (*Berachot* 5b)

1.

רבי חייא בר אבא חלש, על לגביה רבי יוחנן. אמר ליה: חביבין עליך יסורין? אמר ליה: לא הן ולא שכרן. אמר ליה: הב לי ידך יהב ליה ידיה ואוקמיה.

Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba fell ill. R. Yohanan entered and said to him, "Is your suffering dear to you?" [R. Hiyya] said to him: "Neither this [suffering] nor its reward." [R. Yohanan] said to him, "Give me your hand." [R. Hiyya] gave him his hand and [R. Yohanan] stood him up [and restored him to health].

2.

רבי יוחנן חלש, על לגביה רבי חנינא. אמר ליה: חביבין עליך יסורין? אמר ליה: לא הן ולא שכרן. אמר ליה: הב לי ידך יהב ליה ידיה ואוקמיה. אמאי? לוקים רבי יוחנן לנפשיה - אמרי: אין חבוש מתיר עצמו מבית האסורים.

Rabbi Yohanan fell ill. R. Hanina entered and said to him, "Is your suffering dear to you?" [R. Yohanan] said to him, "Neither this [suffering] nor its reward." [R. Hanina] said to him, "Give me your hand." [R. Yohanan] gave him his hand, and [R. Hanina] stood him up [and restored him to health]. Why? Let R. Yohanan stand himself up! They say: 'A prisoner cannot free himself from prison."

3.

רבי אלעזר חלש, על לגביה רבי יוחנן. חזא דהוה קא גני בבית אפל, גלייה לדרעיה ונפל נהורא. חזייה דהוה קא בכי רבי אלעזר. אמר ליה: אמאי קא בכית? אי משום תורה דלא אפשת - שנינו: אחד המרבה ואחד הממעיט ובלבד שיכוין לבו לשמים ואי משום מזוני - לא כל אדם זוכה לשתי שלחנות ואי משום בני - דין גרמא דעשיראה ביר. אמר ליה: להאי שופרא דבלי בעפרא קא בכינא. אמר ליה: על דא ודאי קא בכית, ובכו תרוייהו. אדהכי והכי, אמר ליה: חביבין עליך יסורין? אמר ליה: לא הן ולא שכרן. אמר ליה: הב לי ידך, יהב ליה ידיה ואוקמיה.

Rabbi Elazar fell ill. R. Yohanan entered and saw that he was lying in a dark room. [R. Yohanan] exposed his arm and light filled the house. He saw that R. Elazar was crying, and said to him: "Why are you crying? If [it is] because you did not study much Torah, we learned: 'One who brings a substantial [sacrifice] and one who brings a meager one [have equal merit] as long as one directs his heart toward Heaven. If [it is] because of [insufficient] sustenance, not every person merits two tables. And if [it is] because of children, this is the bone of my tenth son. [R. Elazar] said to [R. Yohanan], "I am crying over this beauty of yours that will decompose in the earth. [R. Yohanan said to him, "Over this one can certainly weep." And both wept.k Meanwhile, [R. Yohanan] said to him, Is your suffering dear to you? [R. Elazar] said to him, "Neither this [suffering] nor its

reward." [R. Yohanan] said to him, "Give me your hand." [R. Elazar] gave him his hand, and [R. Yohanan] stood him up [and restored him to health].

Chapter 4
Facing death (*Moed Katan* 28a)

1.

רב שעורים אחוה דרבא הוה יתיב קמיה דרבא, חזייה דהוה קא מנמנם. אמר ליה: לימא ליה מר דלא לצערן - אמר ליה:מר לאו שושביניה הוא? - אמר ליה: כיון דאימסר מזלא - לא אשגח בי. אמר ליה: ליתחזי לי מר. איתחזי ליה. אמר ליה: הוה ליה למר צערא? אמר ליה: כי ריבדא דכוסילתא.

R. Se'orim, Rava's brother, while sitting before Rava, saw that he was dying. He [Rava] said to him [his brother], 'Tell him [the Angel of Death] nor to torment me.' He replied, 'Are you not his intimate friend?' Said Rava, 'Since my mazal [fate] has been delivered to him he takes no heed of me.' He [R. Se'orim] said to him [Rava], 'Show yourself to me in a dream [after your death].' He showed himself and when asked: 'Did you suffer much pain?', he replied: 'As from the prick of the cupping instrument.'

2.

רבא הוה יתיב קמיה דרב נחמן, חזייה דקא מנמנם. אמר ליה: לימא ליה מר דלא לצערן. - אמר ליה: מר לאו אדם חשוב הוא? - אמר ליה: מאן חשיב, מאן ספין, מאן רקיע? - אמר ליה: ליתחזי לי מר. איתחזי ליה. אמר ליה: הוה ליה למר צערא? אמר ליה: כמישחל בניתא מחלבא. ואי אמר לי הקדוש ברוך הוא זיל בההוא עלמא כד הוית - לא בעינא, דנפיש ביעתותיה.

Rava, while sitting before R. Nahman, saw that he was dying. Said he [R. Nahman] to him [Rava]: 'Tell him [the Angel of Death] not to torment me.' He replied, 'Are you not a person of importance?' Said R. Nahman, 'Who is esteemed, who is regarded, who is distinguished [before the Angel of Death]?' He [Rava] said to him [R. Nahman], 'Show yourself to me in a dream [after your death].' He showed himself and when asked: 'Did

you suffer much pain?', he replied: 'As little as removing a hair from milk; and yet were the Holy Blessed One to say to me, 'Go back into the world as you were, I would not wish to do so because the fear of it is great.'

3.

רבי אלעזר הוה קאכיל תרומה, איתחזי ליה. אמר ליה: תרומה קא אכילנא, ולאו קודש איקרי? חלפא ליה שעתא.

R. Eleazar was eating some terumah when he [the Angel of Death] appeared to him. He [R. Eleazar] said, 'Am I not eating terumah and is that not designated as holy?" The moment passed [and R. Eleazar did not die].

4.

רב ששת איתחזי ליה בשוקא, אמר ליה: בשוקא כבהמה? איתא לגבי ביתא.

He [the Angel of Death] appeared to R. Sheshet in the marketplace. He [R. Sheshet] said, '[Shall I die] in the marketplace like an animal? Come to the house.'

5.

רב אשי איתחזי ליה בשוקא, אמר ליה: איתרח לי תלתין יומין, ואהדרי לתלמודאי. דאמריתו: אשרי מי שבא לכאן ותלמודו בידו. ביום תלתין אתא, אמר ליה: מאי כולי האי? - קא דחקא רגליה דבר נתן, ואין מלכות נוגעת בחבירתה אפילו כמלא נימא.

He [the Angel of Death] appeared to R. Ashi in the market place. He said, 'Grant me thirty days and I will review my studies for you yourselves [the angels] say, 'Happy is one who comes here [to Heaven] with his studies in hand.' He [the Angel of Death] returned on the thirtieth day. He [R. Ashi] said to him, 'What's the urgency?' He replied, 'Huna b. Nathan is close on your heels and no sovereignty encroaches upon the sphere of another even to a hair's breadth.'

6.

רב חסדא לא הוה יכיל ליה, דלא הוה שתיק פומיה מגירסא. סליק יתיב בארזא דבי רב, פקע ארזא ושתק ויכיל ליה.

He could not overcome R. Hisda, as his mouth was never silent from reviewing his studies. So he [the Angel of Death] went and sat on the cedar of the house of study. The tree cracked; R. Hisda ceased his studies and he [the Angel of Death] overcame him.

7.

רבי חייא לא הוה מצי למיקרבא ליה. יומא חד אידמי ליה כעניא, אתא טריף אבבא, אמר ליה: אפיק לי ריפתא. אפיקו ליה. אמר ליה: ולאו קא מרחם מר אעניא? אההוא גברא אמאי לא קא מרחם מר? גלי ליה, אחוי ליה שוטא דנורא, אמצי ליה נפשיה.

He could not gain access to R. Hiyya. One day he disguised himself as a pauper and knocked at R. Hiyya's gate, saying, 'Bring me out some bread'. Members of R. Hiyya's household brought out some bread to him. He said to [R. Hiyya], 'Don't you, sir, have compassion for the poor? Why not have compassion for me? He [the Angel of Death] revealed himself to him, showing a fiery rod, and R. Hiyya yielded himself to him.